

The Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

This contribution is an attempt to analyse the background and dynamics of the Azeri-Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. It focuses particularly on the genesis of Azeri and Armenian nationalisms in relation to the conflict. It also undertakes a concise analysis of international involvement in the conflict. Finally, it discusses potential ways of resolving the conflict, both peacefully (with an emphasis on OSCE-mediated efforts) and via military means.

Background to the Conflict

When the conflict known as the Armenian-Tatar war¹ broke out in 1905, few could foresee that the ethnic tension it caused would still be an active force in the Caucasus a hundred years down the line. The clashes, which began in oil-rich Baku and spread more or less spontaneously into the areas shared by both Armenians and Azeris, initially had socio-economic causes. The masses of Azeri poor, provoked by Russian governors pursuing a classical divide-and-rule policy, attacked their neighbours, prosperous Armenian craftsmen and traders, whom they perceived to be unscrupulous exploiters. Abandoning a nearly thousand-year history of peaceful co-existence, the first hostilities between the two ethnic groups claimed nearly ten thousand victims.

It was a turning point. Growing Armenian popular revolutionary nationalism, which, in the aftermath of the pogroms of 1894-1896, gradually acquired a distinctly anti-Ottoman character, was enriched by a vision of the enemy in the form of the "Azeri Turk" and took on a lasting anti-Turkic and anti-Islamic cast. Following the 1915 Armenian massacres/genocide,² tens of thousands of desperate and furious refugees flooded into Russian (Caucasian, eastern) Armenia, at least a third of whose inhabitants were, however, ethnic Azeris, who traditionally controlled the fertile agricultural land. The slightest

1 Unlike the Armenians, who have always had a clearly defined ethnic identity, there was always a degree of uncertainty concerning the ethnic identity and self-consciousness of those now known as Azeris, as was also the case with other Turkic peoples. In the not-too distant past, they have variously been referred to as Azerbaijani/Transcaucasian Tatars (Tsarist era), Turks (partly an autoethnonym; official ethnonym in the 1920s and 30s); Muslims (partly an autoethnonym; official ethnonym 1918-1936), and Azerbaijanis (1918-1920; 1936/1937 to the present).

2 Armenians are convinced that it was a planned genocide that claimed the lives of approximately 1.5 million of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Ankara officially rejects the term genocide, but does admit that the deaths of as many as 300,000 Armenians were partly caused by deportations organized by the Young Turks. However, it also partly ascribes these casualties to the civil war that was raging in Anatolia at that time and claimed the lives of a similar number of Turkish civilians. Turkish sources differ significantly on this matter.

incentive would now be enough to spark a renewed Armenian-Azeri conflict. In the aftermath of the two Russian revolutions and various complex local developments, the independent Armenian Republic was established in 1918. It was ruled by the ultranationalists of the Dashnak Party, who soon started an extensive campaign against their own Azeri (and Turkish) population, which was further intensified following the invasion of Armenia by the Kazım Karabekir Paşa's Turkish forces during the Turko-Armenian war (1920). Ethnically motivated killings and ethnic cleansing claimed the lives of thousands of people, mostly of Turkic origin, who were accused of supporting their Turkish compatriots. Tens of thousands of them were forced to flee.³ At this point, a territorial aspect was added to the ethnic conflict as the newly established republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia entered into a bloody war (1919-1920) over a number of disputed territories with mixed Armeno-Azeri populations: Zangezur, Nakhichevan, and of course, Karabakh. As a consequence of the civil war following the Karabakhi Armenian uprising against Baku in 1918, as well as hunger and epidemics, Karabakh lost one fifth of its population.

The ultimate end of the war, in which both sides achieved short-lived successes, came only with the occupation of first Azerbaijan and then Armenia by the XI Red Army in 1920 and 1921, respectively. In 1921, the central government in Moscow forced the leader of the Azeri communists Nariman Narimanov to accept the transfer, or – as Armenians claim – the return, of Nakhichevan, Zangezur, and Karabakh to Armenia. Shortly thereafter, however, Narimanov revoked his decision, and, a few months later, the Moscow leadership committed itself in the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Brotherhood and Friendship (Moscow Treaty, 1921), despite the futile protests of Armenians, to giving Karabakh and Nakhichevan to Azerbaijan. In 1923-1924, a completely new territorial unit which had never before existed was established within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic – the Nagorno-Karabakh (Russian for Mountainous Karabakh) Autonomous Region, which consisted of approximately half of the historical territory of Karabakh. Over 90 per cent of the inhabitants of the Autonomous Region were Armenians.

The Moral Arguments of Both Sides

The thaw in Cold War relations in the late 1980s ended another phase of peaceful coexistence between Armenians and Azeris during which peaceful relations had prevailed both within and outside Nagorno-Karabakh despite a

3 At this point, it should be noted that in the 20th century (in the 1920s, and in 1947 and 1965) additional tens of thousands of ethnic Azeris were forced to leave Armenia for Azerbaijan. Simultaneously, a process of Armenianization, or, as Armenians claim, re-Armenianization of originally majority Azeri/Turkic toponyms was carried out on the territory of what is now Armenia. The vast majority of archaeological monuments bearing witness to the Azeri/Turkic presence in Armenia were also destroyed.

certain degree of suspicion and tension. In fact, the official Soviet ideology of “friendship among nations” imposed severe restrictions on any public debate of former Azeri-Armenian violence. Moreover, the proximity of cultures and traditions ensured that there were few conflicts in day-to-day relations between the two groups. This is documented by the relatively high rate of intermarriage, especially in the cosmopolitan city of Baku, which had a substantial Armenian minority.

The final years of the ailing USSR saw the emergence of attempts by local intelligentsias to construct new national identities free of the ideological clichés of the Soviet era. As these were constructed during the period of escalation of the Karabakh conflict, the two tended to become intertwined: The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was rewritten as a national epic and the opponent became characterized as the “eternal enemy”. The very idea of national renaissance became directly linked with retaining Karabakh (for Azeris) or regaining it (for Armenians). It is for this reason that the conflict is so very bound up with questions of identity. Indeed, realizing their exclusive and unquestionable “historical rights” to the ethno-political domination of Karabakh became the key element in the post-Soviet “restoration of justice” for both Armenians and Azeris.

According to the Armenian historiographic tradition, the history of the autochthonous Armenian ethnic community goes back three thousand years. In contrast, Azeris are considered to be descendants of “barbaric” Turkic nomads, who arrived “somewhere from Altay” in the relatively recent past. They are therefore seen as to be “guests”, with no moral right to claim a territory of their own in the Caucasus. The martial principalities of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh in Armenian) became for the Armenians – for whom the loss of state sovereignty (the fall of the Kingdom of Cilicia in 1375) is still a painful memory – the only part of “Great Armenia” “where a tradition of national sovereignty was preserved unbroken until the late medieval period”.⁴ Even in the years 1919-1920, despite considerable Azeri military successes, the “unconquerable bastion” of Nagorno-Karabakh was never completely captured. Even the establishment of the Azeri/Turkic Khanate of Karabakh in the mid 18th century is described in terms of inner-Armenian fratricidal (feudal) treason.

On the Azeri side, there is clear evidence in recent years of a desire to backdate the Turkic presence in the South Caucasus to a period before the eleventh century (the Seljuk theory, which is generally accepted) to the sixth or seventh century (the Khazar theory). According to a third theory, the “Albanian theory”, which seems to have been incorporated into the contemporary state ideology of Azerbaijanism, Karabakh fell within the territory of the Caucasian Albanians, an autochthonous Caucasian-speaking people, who were Islamicized and later largely Turkified with the arrival of the Turkic

4 Patrick Donabedian, *Ancient and Medieval Karabakh*, in: Christopher J. Walker (ed.), *Armenia and Karabakh: The Struggle for Unity*, London 1991, p. 79.

tribes and therefore played an important role in the ethnogenesis of the Azeri people. According to this view, the Karabakh Armenians were originally (Caucasian) Albanians, who, in the early middle ages, accepted Christianity from the Armenians, thereby assuming a Gregorian and Armenian identity. Considering the Azeris to be the descendants of the majority Albanians (as well as of Turkic tribes) is seen as giving them a natural claim to Karabakh, which was an integral part of the various Turkic (Azeri) state entities from “time immemorial”.⁵ Modern Azeri historians also use the fact that, following the Russian conquest of the region (1801-1828), St. Petersburg, appreciating the proven loyalty of Armenian Christians, set out to form an “Armenian Province” by transferring hundreds of thousands of Turkish and Persian Armenians to the Khanates of Yerevan and Nakhichevan (the area now increasingly called Western Azerbaijan). These areas had been governed for centuries by Khans and Beys who belonged to the Azeri majority. Further tens of thousands of Armenians, mainly from Persia, were moved into the territory of the former Khanate of Karabakh. These events were later to be used to support the myth of Armenians as “treacherous and ungrateful guests”.

Chronology of Escalation

The ideological and power vacuum associated with the demise of the USSR, together with the inability or unwillingness of the central government to prevent conflicts, led to the local Soviet organs losing credibility and the emergence of nationalistic associations (the Azerbaijan Popular Front, APF, and the Armenian Karabakh Committee) who used the Karabakh issue as a convenient way to gain popularity and – consequently – power. The rhetoric of the nationalists, their efforts to prove their “true patriotism”, devotion to the national interest and determination to pursue it (in contrast to the local Communist party bosses, who traditionally looked to Moscow) left little space for negotiation and compromises.

In the late 1980s, the dissatisfaction of the Karabakh Armenians with the policy of the Autonomous Region’s gradual Azerbaijanization not only corresponded with the concerted lobbying of the Armenian intelligentsia in Kremlin, but was to a great extent actively spurred on by the latter. These intellectuals formed the Karabakh Committee, which focused on the revocation

5 The increasingly popular ideology of Turkism claims as Azeri important regional states, which were originally founded and/or directed by local Turkic tribes or dynasties such as the Seljuk, Ak Koyunlu, Kara Koyunlu, Safavid, Afshar, and Qajar dynasties. These days, therefore, mention is frequently made of the “Azerbaijani State of the Qajars”, etc. More than anything, this view allows the Azeris to assert that they have enjoyed continual rule over Karabakh, claiming, for instance, that the Karabakh Khanate belonged to the Azerbaijani State of the Qajars at the start of the 19th century rather than being a vassal of Persia.

of “Stalin’s” decision to transfer Karabakh and Nakhichevan to Azerbaijan.⁶ Given the unprecedented growth of nationalism, even a marginal problem such as the refusal of Baku to include Armenian history in the Karabakh school curriculum became a major site of conflict. As Dean Pruitt and Jeffrey Rubin noted, “What starts out as a small, concrete concern, tends, over the painful history of an escalating exchange, to be supplanted by grandiose and all-encompassing positions and by a general intolerance of the other party.”⁷

The conflict itself was triggered off by clashes in the village of Char-dakly, to the north of Nagorno-Karabakh, where the local Armenian majority refused to accept the appointment of an Azeri as leader of the local *sovkhos* (state farm). The news reached Yerevan swiftly, where an environmental demonstration with thousands of participants was rapidly transformed into a rally to support the “unification of Artsakh”, attracting many more participants in the process. The expulsion of ethnic Azeris from Armenia and Karabakh (as well as of some Turkophone Muslim Kurds) began, accompanied by violence and plundering. On 26 February 1988, bloodshed was officially reported for the first time, with two Azeri youths being killed during clashes near Agdam. In the following three days, Azeri refugees from Armenia, together with criminals that had allegedly been released early from prison, organized pogroms against the local Armenians in Sumgayit near Baku with the culpable passivity of the Soviet troops. The Sumgayit events both conjured the ghosts of the past and echoed with the newer ideological constructs forged by the Armenian nationalists, who had pioneered the Karabakh movement. Another taboo was breached on 24 April of the same year during the rally in Yerevan to mark the anniversary of the Armenian genocide (an annual event since 1965), at which the “Azeri Turks” were publicly identified with the Ottoman Turks. Confirmed in their conviction of the need for self-defence and supported by the diaspora, the Armenians began swiftly to form armed units.

In 1989-1990, the conflict escalated still further: Armed clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions intensified and the number of victims grew. Armenian and Azeri gunmen were now going as far as to attack local Soviet troops or to negotiate with their commanders to secure weapons and ammunition. On 28 November 1989, Moscow dissolved the direct ad-

6 According to the last Soviet census, which was taken in 1989, the population of Nagorno-Karabakh was 76.9 per cent Armenian (145,500 persons) and 21.5 per cent Azeri (40,600 persons), who were concentrated mainly in the city of Shusha/Shushi (Shusha is the Azeri name, Shushi the Armenian) and its surroundings. This represents a substantial increase in the number of Azeris compared with the previous census. In Nakhichevan, thanks to the expulsion of the Armenians in the 1920s and 30s, the Azeris represented nearly 100 per cent of the population at the time of the break up of the USSR. The fear of “suffering the same fate as the Nakhichevan Armenians” cultivated by the Yerevan activists was a key mobilizing factor for the Karabakh Armenians. Many Armenians never accepted the *de facto* settlement and, in 1936, 1947, and 1965, they appealed to Moscow to return Karabakh to Armenia.

7 Dean Pruitt/Jeffrey Rubin, *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate and Settlement*, New York 1986, p. 64.

ministration of the Autonomous Region, which had been established a year previously, thus documenting its inability to cope effectively with the escalating conflict. On 1 December, the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR unilaterally declared Nagorno-Karabakh part of the republic.

The events in Karabakh were used to mobilize the Armenian and Azeri publics. In Armenia, the All-Armenian Movement (AAM) was formed through the unification of the Karabakh Committee with other nationalist groups. It succeeded in establishing itself as the strongest parliamentary party in the elections of May 1990.⁸ In Azerbaijan, however, the tension between the alternative power-centre of the increasingly popular APF, led by the pan-Turkist nationalist Abulfaz Elchibey, and the official pro-Kremlin Communist government, headed by Ayaz Mutalibov, remained. Starting from 11 January 1990, the APF organized mass protest meetings in Baku to denounce the passivity of the republic's authorities over the Karabakh issue. The demonstrations attracted hundreds of thousands of participants, and also saw public calls for independence. On 13-14 January, a fanatical crowd started to attack the local Armenians, leaving some one hundred people dead; there was absolutely no response from the Soviet troops stationed there. On 20 January, however, the Soviet army took this massacre as a pretext for entering Baku, where it shot dead more than 130 Azeri civilians and severely injured several hundred others.

The sudden dissolution of the Soviet Union removed the last obstacle on the way towards the full escalation of the conflict. In fact, while the Armenians succeeded in building up an effective fighting force during the final years of Soviet rule, the Communists' ongoing grip on power in Baku effectively prevented any such attempts. On 31 August 1991, in the euphoric aftermath of the farcical putsch attempt by Communist hardliners in Moscow, Azerbaijan declared independence. On 2 September the Karabakh Armenians also declared independence, which they underscored by means of a swiftly organized referendum, in which 99 per cent of the (Armenian) population voted for full sovereignty. "Reciprocally" the Azeri parliament abolished the autonomy of Karabakh, which, however, had no further real influence on developments.

By the winter of 1991-92, full-scale war had already broken out. The capture of the Azeri-inhabited town of Khojali, which is located on the strategic road from Stepanakert (the capital of Karabakh) to Agdam, during the night of the 25-26 February led to much brutality, including many cases of torture, rape, and execution. Of the town's approximately 8,000 inhabitants 613 were killed, and more than 1,000 injured – mostly women, children, and

8 The power of the Communist party increasingly began to wane following the accession of the leader of the AAM, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, to the position of chairman of the Armenian Supreme Soviet (August 1990) and his convincing victory in the presidential elections in October 1991.

the elderly.⁹ “In the capture of Khojali and the subsequent attacks on the other Azeri towns and villages, entire units of the 366th Regiment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) took part, though in theory their task was actually to prevent large-scale violent confrontations.”¹⁰ Such brutality was most likely aimed at scaring the population and played a key role in the successful ethnic cleansing of the occupied territories in the years to come.

The news from Khojali shocked the Azeri public; the parliament forced President Mutalibov to resign. However, he returned to the presidency after a month of virtual anarchy, remaining in office until May, when he was forced to flee following a *coup d'état* staged by the APF. Abulfaz Elchibey then became president. Another change of government came about when the forces of Armenia and Karabakh captured the mostly Azeri-inhabited town of Shusha. Known as “the heart of Karabakh”, and situated on a massive rock, Shusha is the region’s historical capital and has a profound place in the national feelings of both Armenians and Azeris, as well as significant strategic importance for the defence of the area. The almost simultaneous seizure of the Lachin corridor – the part of Azerbaijan proper that connects Karabakh with Armenia – solved the logistic problems of the Armenian side once and for all and played a key role in the further course of the war.

After they had defeated the Azeri attack in the northern part of Nagorno-Karabakh in summer 1992, the united Karabakh and Armenian forces conquered nearly the entire territory of the self-proclaimed republic. In the spring of the following year, they also occupied several regions of Azerbaijan proper that have a majority Azeri (Fizuli) or mixed Azeri/Kurdish (Kelbajar) population. In Resolution 822 of 30 April 1993, the UN Security Council demanded unsuccessfully that Armenian forces retreat from Kelbajar, since there was no threat to Armenian-inhabited areas. By not withdrawing, the Armenians were aiming to strengthen their bargaining position for future peace talks with Azerbaijan.

9 26 February has been recognized as the day to commemorate the genocide of Khojali, and has become a corner-stone of anti-Armenian sentiment, a sort of Azerbaijani equivalent of the Armenian 24 April. Officially, however, 31 March was proclaimed the official day of the Azerbaijani genocide: It was on this day in 1918 that 15,000 Azeri civilians were killed by Russian Bolsheviks and Armenian nationalist Dashnaks in street fighting and massacres in Baku.

10 Svante Cornell, Nagorno-Karabakh: Dynamics and Prospects for Resolution, in: Dmitriy Furman (ed.), *Azerbaijan and Russia: Societies and States*, Moscow 2001, p. 445 (in Russian; author’s translation). No discussion of the Russian military involvement in the conflict is complete without mentioning “Operation Ring” (“*Koltso*”), which began in the spring of 1991. The Moscow-directed operation was carried out by Soviet army troops and the elite forces of the Azerbaijani ministry of the interior. As the result of the operation, thousands of Armenians living in the Shaumyan and Geranboy districts north of Nagorno-Karabakh were expelled and their homes plundered. This operation was conceived as a peculiar “reward for loyalty” from the Kremlin to the Azeri Communists, but was stopped following the failure of the August putsch in Moscow and the rise of Yeltsin’s democratic forces to power in Russia.

In June 1993, an Azeri colonel, Süret Hüseynov, initiated another *coup d'état* when he moved his "private army" out of their barracks in Gyanja and towards Baku. They were strengthened by arms and ammunition belonging to the Russian 104th Paratroop Regiment. Elchibey fled to his native village. However, he called upon his Nakhichevan compatriot Heydar Aliiev, the former leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, a former member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR, and a KGB general, to come to the capital. In a move worthy of General de Gaulle, Aliiev immediately returned to Baku and, with the blessing of Kremlin, made a deal with Hüseynov, who received the posts of prime minister and minister of defence. Aliiev himself became president of the parliament and thus head of the republic, pursuing policies of national consolidation, establishing a proper army, and repairing Azerbaijan's catastrophic international standing.

Meanwhile Armenian forces took full advantage of Azerbaijan's internal chaos and, with little resistance from the demoralized Azeri troops, successively occupied Agdam, Horadiz, Kubatly, Jabrail, and Zangelan, reaching the Azerbaijani-Iranian border at the river Arax, which led the Iranian army to put on a show of strength by crossing the river. Terrified of ethnic cleansing and other brutalities, local villagers fled even before the Armenian troops reached their territory; hundreds of people died on high mountain paths from starvation and hunger. UN Security Council Resolutions 853, 874, and 884 followed in July, October, and November 1993, requesting in vain that the Armenian troops withdraw immediately and unconditionally from the occupied territory. In the winter of 1993-1994, the hastily formed Azerbaijani army engaged in a full-scale attack on the entire perimeter of the front, only to fail after some initial successes. At this stage, neither side had enough strength left to continue with offensive operations. Hence, on 12 May 1994, an armistice was signed in Moscow that has lasted ever since. Nevertheless, snipers, mines, and occasional artillery duels continue to cost the lives of two to three hundred soldiers and civilians each year.

The war claimed at least 30,000 victims (of whom around 7,000 were Armenians) and created around 1,100,000 displaced persons (of whom at least 800,000 were Azeris). Seven districts of Azerbaijan proper were occupied (Lachin, Kelbajar, Agdam, Fizuli, Kubatly, Jabrayil, and Zangelan), amounting to 14 per cent of Azerbaijani territory. The economies of both countries were ruined. Armenia is still being blockaded by Azerbaijan and Turkey, while Nakhichevan is blockaded by Armenia. Due to permanent migration, the population of Armenia was reduced to two to 2.5 million.

International Responses

Given its timing, geographical location, and significance for regional security, the Karabakh conflict was bound to make major waves in international

diplomacy. From the very beginning, the Russian reaction was decisive. The Russian ministry of interior's initial lack of interest in developments along Russia's southern borders was accompanied by relatively autonomous activities on the part of various Russian institutions, particularly the ministry of defence and the commanders of the local military bases. However, Russia's approach was not as chaotic as it might seem at the first glance. As Jan Wanner observed, "Already in May 1992, a strange series of accidents occurred. Following Azerbaijan's refusal to join the Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security and its withdrawal from the CIS, the Armenians decided in the space of a few days to undertake an offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. This resulted in the occupation of Shusha and the opening of the Lachin corridor to Armenia."¹¹ Elchibey, who was responsible for the radical shift in Azerbaijani policy, firmly rejected both the establishment of Russian military bases on the territory of the republic and the presence of Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh. Moreover, at the same time, he initiated what became known as the "deal of the century" – an agreement with leading Western oil companies on the exploitation of Azerbaijan's enormous oil reserves, which was signed in London at the end of June 1993. Interestingly, that oil deal excluded any participation of Russian (and Iranian) companies. This represented a serious threat to Moscow's interests in the vast Caucasian and Central Asian region, and it was in this context that Hüseyinov's troops marched on Baku as mentioned above, which led to the replacement of the inflexible Elchibey with the seemingly pro-Russian Aliiev, who swiftly returned his country to the CIS and even talked about the possibility of establishing Russian military bases on Azerbaijani soil.

The establishment of five independent Turkic states in the South Caucasus and Central Asia in the early 1990s was a cause of great optimism in Ankara. The original attempt to maintain stable relations with Armenia was soon replaced by the necessity of supporting "Azeri brethren" in their fight against Armenians, with public opinion having a highly significant impact on the rhetoric and thinking of the authorities.¹² There were, however, also pragmatic reasons for Turkey to keep its very close ties with Baku, as they ensured access to the oil-rich Caspian Sea and to Central Asia. Intriguingly, when Armenia was evidently preparing an attack on Nakhichevan in 1992, Ankara threatened to use the provisions of the Soviet-Turkish Kars Treaty (1921), which charges it with ensuring Nakhichevan's security, and dispatched armed forces to the Turkish-Armenian border in a show of force. The international tension around the issue of Karabakh reached its peak when the

11 Jan Wanner, Russian Politics and the Caucasus Region, in: Bohuslav Litera/Luboš Švec/Jan Wanner/Bohdan Zilynskyj (eds), *Russia? Mutual Relations of the Post-Soviet Republics*, Prague 1998, p. 120 (in Czech; author's translation).

12 For instance, shortly after the fall of Kelbajar, the former Turkish President Turgut Özal claimed, that "it is high time we showed Armenia our teeth". Since Robert Kocharyan's seizure of power in 1998, both the Armenian government and the diaspora have concentrated on achieving international recognition of the Armenian genocide (1915), which has resulted in a further worsening of Turkish-Armenian relations.

Commander-in-Chief of the Joint Armed Forces of the CIS, Marshal Yevgeniy Shaposhnikov, threatened Ankara by saying that Turkish military intervention would lead to “World War Three”. In the following years, in an attempt to ensure normal relations with Moscow, Ankara limited itself to supporting Azerbaijan on the international stage, enforcing the economic blockade of Armenia, and sending Turkish military instructors to the Azeri army or teaching Azeri officers in Turkish military academies.

The rapid worsening of Armenian-Turkish relations swiftly revived Armenia’s fears of being an “island of Christendom” encircled by hostile Muslim-Turkic powers. In fact, it became clear that Armenia, with fewer than three million inhabitants, sandwiched between Turkey (65 million) and Azerbaijan (seven million), faced uncertain prospects to say the least in the case of a major conflict. In this situation, political and military co-operation (in fact, integration) with Russia appeared unavoidable. As a result, the massive Russian 102nd military base was built near the Armenian-Turkish border. According to information leaked to the media at the end of the 1990s, Armenia received Russian military assistance worth one billion US dollars between 1996 and 1998, including state-of-the-art SS-300 air defence systems, MiG-29 fighters, etc. This trend is said to have continued in subsequent years.

For Tehran, the establishment of an independent Azerbaijan north of Iran’s own region of Southern Azerbaijan provoked serious security concerns, as approximately one third of Iran’s 70 million inhabitants are ethnic Azeris. Iranians feared that the existence of a powerful and oil-rich Azerbaijan on its north-western borders with close ties to Turkey (and, as Iran saw it, also to the USA and Israel) would strengthen the separatist aspirations of Iranian Azeris. These fears were highlighted by the unfortunate proclamations of President Elchibey, according to whom the “unification of Azerbaijan is a matter of five years at most”. This background led to a paradoxical state of affairs in which Shi’a Iran gave *de facto* support to Christian Armenia in the war against Shi’a Azerbaijan, while, under pressure from the Azeri community and the pro-Islamistic public, the pragmatic government in Teheran tried to portray itself as an independent arbiter and mediator. In this way, a strategic Russo-Irano-Armenian triangular alliance was formed in the 1990s with the intention of isolating Azerbaijan, containing Turkey, and minimizing US influence in the Caucasus-Caspian region.

US policy during the first third of the 1990s was characterized by a lack of interest in the war-torn region, which was perceived as a legitimate domain of Russia. The powerful Armenian (and Greek) lobby was thus able to substantially shape American policy-making in relation to the Karabakh conflict and Azeri-Armenian relations in general. In October 1992, section 907 of the Freedom Support Act passed by the US Congress identified Azerbaijan as the aggressor in the conflict and banned the provision of aid to Azerbaijan until it raises its blockade and ceases from the use of force against Karabakh and Armenia. However, since 1994, when the repeatedly postponed “deal of the

century” was finally signed in Baku with substantial participation on the part of American and British oil companies, Washington’s approach has gradually been changing. In the same year, the South Caucasus was also declared a “zone of vital US interests”. Throughout the 1990s, the Clinton administration improved its ties with Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia, in order to build up an alternative route for the transport of Caspian hydrocarbons that would avoid Russian territory (the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil-pipeline project). In an attempt to ensure the uninterrupted flow of oil from the Caspian Sea and to limit Russian influence in the region, the USA now principally aims at achieving a rapid solution of the Karabakh conflict.

*The Peace Process*¹³

Immediately following their formal proclamations of independence, Armenia and Azerbaijan joined the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), as it was then. The CSCE thereupon formed the Minsk Group consisting of 13 participating States, whose task was to deal with the settlement of the Karabakh conflict. This was the first conflict in which the UN delegated a mediation mandate to a regional security organization. Although the efforts of the CSCE/OSCE can be considered a failure in retrospect, it is clear that it, more than any of the individual mediators – Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, the USA, etc. – succeeded in providing the necessary forum for ongoing negotiations. The OSCE’s failure can be explained by its initial lack of knowledge of the region and the absence of an appropriate conflict resolution framework, on the one hand, and by the radically different standpoints of the conflict parties – Armenia, Karabakh, and Azerbaijan – on the other. A further negative factor was the policy of non-co-operation with the Minsk Group pursued at times by Russia in an effort to promote its own interests.

Although the various parties to the conflict were repeatedly close to reaching a compromise in the course of thirteen years of negotiations, rapid developments on the battlefield (1993) and internal political changes in one country (1998, Armenia) eventually prevented its implementation.

Armenia’s baseline in the negotiations is the right of a nation to self-determination. It claims that since the conflict is between Azerbaijan and the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh,¹⁴ the negotiations should be carried out be-

13 This brief chapter makes no pretence of containing a complete chronological portrayal of the OSCE’s peace efforts in the Karabakh conflict, but aspires rather to present an overview of the key OSCE-mediated negotiation efforts.

14 This proclamation conflicts with the well known facts of Armenia’s military mobilization and the direct participation of the Armenian army in the Karabakh conflict. Given Yerevan’s strategic interests, it is curious that Armenia has never recognized the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh and has not sought unification, though the ruling of the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR of 1989 on the incorporation of the Nagorno-Karabakh was never repealed.

tween Baku and Stepanakert. Officially, Yerevan claims that it merely represents the Karabakh side in the peace talks and stresses that any final settlement of the conflict must be approved by Karabakh; Armenia itself assures that it will agree with any solution accepted by Stepanakert.

In 1998, President Robert Kocharyan established the basic principles of the negotiations: a) the right to self-determination of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh; b) security guarantees for the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, which entails the maintenance of a strong army and close ties with Armenia; c) the necessity – a consequence of b) – of permanent Armenian control of the strategic Lachin corridor.

In contrast, Azerbaijan evokes the principle of territorial integrity and points to the fact that the Armenian nation has already realized its right for self-determination in the form of the Armenian state. Baku insists that it was at war with Armenia (the cause of the war being Armenian military aggression and the occupation by Armenia of Azerbaijani territory), and categorically refuses to recognize Stepanakert (meanwhile restored to its original Azeri name of Khankendi) as a subject in negotiations, since doing so would mean recognizing the legitimacy of the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh and hence the legitimacy of its demands. Being a multi-ethnic state, Azerbaijan also fears that any substantial concessions to the Armenians would serve as a bad example that would encourage other ethnic minorities inhabiting the areas adjacent to the Russian and Iranian borders (Lezgins, Avars, Talysh) to mobilize their separatist tendencies and might eventually even lead to the disintegration of Azerbaijan as such.

In 2001, the position of the majority of the Azeri population, as well as apparently of Baku itself, was summarized by the representatives of the main political parties as follows: a) Nagorno-Karabakh should be granted (potentially extensive) self-government within the framework of the Azerbaijani state (ensuring the vertical relationship between Baku and Stepanakert/Khankendi); b) the seven occupied Azerbaijani districts must be returned; c) the secure return of Azeri refugees to those districts and to Shusha must be ensured; d) Baku seeks a peaceful resolution of the conflict. However, should the negotiations fail, it insists on its right in accordance with the UN Charter and international law to preserve its territorial integrity, using force if necessary.

The success of the negotiations is hampered to a large extent by the discrepancy between the short-term optimistic expectations of Azerbaijani diplomacy and the reality. Baku quite correctly sees Caspian “oil diplomacy” as a means of creating an international environment favourable to the Azeri position in the negotiations with Yerevan. Key components of this are to limit the influence of Russia, Armenia’s key ally, on developments in the South Caucasus and to ensure Washington’s goodwill, for Washington has the power to make the position of Armenians more flexible. The (partial) success of this approach can be seen in the fact that Yerevan and Stepanakert were

forced by the international community to withdraw their initial demand for the full independence of Karabakh. Together with the vision of billions of dollars in oil profits, this success reduces the willingness of Baku, even though it is the defeated party, to recognize the bleak situation on the ground and the necessity of compromise. For its part, the Armenian side, which achieved a clear military victory and is currently in control of Karabakh and the neighbouring occupied territories, is generally unwilling to make concessions of the kind envisaged by Baku, though it understands the need for compromise.

A key obstacle to resolving the conflict is the fact that it is a conflict of values. While conflicts of interest can be resolved by finding a mutually advantageous economic arrangement, value-related conflicts are rooted in the belief systems and identities of the parties involved and a compromise is therefore difficult or impossible to achieve. Against the background of an ongoing security dilemma (although an armistice was agreed, no peace treaty has been signed), both governments are attempting to keep public support mobilized; state propaganda thus revolves around past grievances and cultivates a culture of hostility and obstinacy. This is particularly true of Azerbaijan, where a strong sense of humiliation and dishonour is widespread throughout society in the aftermath of the military defeat in Karabakh. In these circumstances, the willingness to make concessions, an unavoidable aspect of any compromise, could be perceived as defeatism and a betrayal of the national interest, and this could be misused by ambitious populist opposition parties in both countries.¹⁵ Both parties have thus tried to ensure that the negotiations are carried out in the utmost secrecy; since 1999, when Baku and Yerevan began to be involved in bilateral talks, very little information has been leaked to the public. The consequent lack of (reliable) information, however, only strengthens the anxiety and uncertainty in both Azerbaijani and Armenian societies.¹⁶

15 The resignation of Levon Ter-Petrosyan illustrates this point. In the face of deepening geopolitical isolation and a catastrophic economic situation, the pragmatic Armenian president was willing to accept the OSCE-mediated proposal for a peace settlement (see the section on the stage-by-stage approach below), but was forced to resign by pressure from the main political parties, important members of the government, the diaspora, and the public in early February 1998. The subsequent presidential elections were won by Robert Kocharyan, a native of Nagorno-Karabakh, a former prime minister and president of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the prime minister of Armenia prior to Ter-Petrosyan's resignation.

16 Among other topics, the talks also discussed plans for the exchange of territory, e.g. the 1992 Goble Plan, which proposed the transfer of the Lachin corridor to Armenia in exchange for the Megri corridor, which connects the Azerbaijani "heartland" with Nakhichevan. This plan was rejected by Armenia as "asymmetrical" because it would mean the loss of Armenia's common border with friendly Iran in exchange for territory that it already controlled. Nevertheless this option evidently remained on the table in further talks (in the form of ensuring free communication between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan or as part of a broader plan). Another scenario was the so-called Northern Cyprus variant, i.e. the establishment of a *de facto* independent or quasi-independent state based on the reality "on the ground" with all the attributes of statehood (territory, inhabitants, an army, a flag, etc.), but unrecognized by the international community. In general, however, proposals of this

The Military Option

From time to time, the Azeri side evokes the possibility of a military solution to the conflict, possibly in order to place pressure on the Armenians or to remind its own public of the unsettled issue. The desire for revenge on the part of a defeated state is understandable. Nonetheless, this does not change the fact that such proclamations spoil the atmosphere of mutual trust necessary for the success of any peace talks. Furthermore, one might say that from a purely pragmatic standpoint, the renewal of the war is hardly an option for Baku at present. Advance forces of the Karabakh army are located a mere 30 kilometres from the town of Yevlakh (and not much further from Gyanja, Azerbaijan's second largest city). Yevlakh is a key station on the way to Georgia and the West, and the US-backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which is under construction, passes through it. The capture of this strategic node – whether provoked by Baku or not – would be the easiest way to compromise long-term Azeri expectations. One also has to remember that the Armenian army remains the most powerful in the South Caucasus.¹⁷

In the post-war period, Nagorno-Karabakh became a regular fortress, encircled by multiple lines of defence as well as minefields. A first-rate highway was built between Yerevan and Stepanakert using money received from the Armenian diaspora. This allows the immediate transport of military equipment from Armenia and – something that cannot be excluded – from the 102nd Russian military base. Given the quality and quantity of the military equipment that both countries – but especially Armenia – have at their disposal, another war would be a bloody and total one. Stepanakert, Yerevan, and Baku would face a risk of rocket attacks. In all likelihood, Nakhichevan would also be drawn into the conflict, which would lead to the intervention of Turkey and consequently also that of Russia and Iran. The internationalization of the conflict could provoke a dangerous regional war. It seems, therefore, that Baku cannot realistically hope for a military solution in the next ten to 15 years, though it cannot exclude the military option for the more distant future and continues to invest a considerable percentage of its oil profits in armaments.

kind are seen as likely to lead to instability, militarism, and to make the region more vulnerable to external interference. They are therefore seen as conflicting with the true interests of both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

17 See, for instance, Svante Cornell/Roger McDermott/William O'Malley/Vladimir Socor/S. Frederick Starr, *Regional Security in the South Caucasus: The Role of NATO*. A policy paper produced by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University, Washington 2004, pp. 34-49.

The Stage-by-Stage Approach

In the autumn of 1997, the “Minsk Trio” (France, the USA, and Russia) suggested the stage-by-stage approach. Based on the Lisbon principles,¹⁸ it aims at the gradual resolution of the conflict. According to this plan, the Armenian troops were to retreat from all the occupied territories with the exception of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the blockade of Armenia was to be lifted. The Azeri refugees would then be allowed to return to their homes and the security of the region would be ensured by the stationing of international peacekeeping forces. Only then would the key talks on the status of Karabakh be carried out. Azerbaijan declared it was ready to tolerate the continued effective existence of a Karabakh army (which however would be reduced to a national militia following the completion of the talks), constitution, government, flag, and almost all other attributes of statehood, on the condition that the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh would remain formally part of Azerbaijan. While Baku agreed to the plan, Stepanakert firmly rejected it, as it would entail the loss of its trump card before the key talks on the status of Karabakh had even begun, but also because Stepanakert rejects any proposal that presupposes a vertical relation between Karabakh and Baku. The willingness of the Armenian president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, to accept this approach led to his resignation. The stage-by-stage approach is generally supported by Baku.

The Package Deal

The package approach aims to reach a single, general agreement on all the issues to be decided in order to enable their immediate solution. Clearly, no such general agreement has been reached so far. One of the best known and most debated of the package-approach proposals was the “common state” approach formulated by Russian diplomats Yevgeny Primakov (the former minister of foreign affairs) and Boris Pastukhov in the autumn of 1998. The advantage of their plan – which was also its weakness – was the way it sought to avoid the use of such key terms as “autonomy”, “independence”, and “territorial integrity” both in the talks and in the text of documents. These terms, which are associated with the question of identity, carry considerable emotional baggage and tend to act as major stumbling blocks in negotiations. For the authors of the project, vagueness about these key concepts was to

18 At the OSCE’s Lisbon Summit in December 1996, 53 of the OSCE’s participating States including the USA – the exception was Armenia – confirmed the principle of territorial integrity as a basic element of Armenian-Azeri talks on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Lisbon declaration clearly states that “[the] legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh [should be] defined in an agreement based on self-determination which confers on Nagorno-Karabakh the highest degree of self-rule within Azerbaijan”. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Lisbon 1996, Lisbon Document 1996, Annex 1, Statement of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 1997, Baden-Baden 1998, pp. 419-446, p. 430.

serve the purpose of getting the sides to the negotiating table and focusing more on matters of fact. However, by allowing for multiple interpretations, the high level of abstraction could not provide a firm foundation for negotiations and eventually led to another breakdown in the negotiating process.

The “common state” approach essentially proposes making Nagorno-Karabakh an “associated state”. (The same confederative or quasi-federative principle was proposed by Moscow for the talks between Georgia and Abkhazia and Moldova and Transdnistria). Under this model, a separatist unit may “freely” associate with the centre. However, as a corollary, it must also be equally “free” to secede (horizontal relations between Baku and Stepanakert). Baku therefore rejected this proposal as a serious departure from both the letter and the spirit of the Lisbon Summit, although Yerevan and Stepanakert expressed their willingness to negotiate. Even in the current talks, Yerevan continues to defend the associated states model and the package approach. According to some observers, Moscow’s proposal was motivated mainly by the desire to preserve the status quo of “neither war nor peace”, which served Moscow’s interests in the Caucasus region in general and in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in particular.

At the time of writing, the Armenia-Azerbaijan talks are in a deadlock. Baku has reproached the Minsk Group for its passivity, repeated its threats of military action, and – with regard to what it alleges amounts to a complete lack of progress – has suggested restarting negotiations “from scratch”. Yerevan rejected this proposal, which it claims would waste all that has been achieved in negotiations so far.¹⁹ According to the limited information that is available on the behind-the-scenes talks, the unwillingness of the Azeri side is caused by the plans currently being promoted by the OSCE to offer Karabakh a level of self-rule virtually indistinguishable from full independence. In fact, the mediators now are facing the extremely difficult task of finding a synthesis between the position taken by Baku, which evokes the Lisbon principles and appears to be refusing to even talk about the “package” and “common state” approaches, and the polar opposite standpoint of Yerevan. The debates naturally centre around the status of Karabakh and the ownership of the Lachin corridor. At present, however, the total veil of secrecy over the talks leaves an analyst with a minimum of concrete information and a glut of often mutually exclusive speculations.

19 In fact, when Yerevan called on the new Azeri president, Ilham Aliiev, to “accept the agreements from Paris and Key West” [author’s note – in 2001], Aliiev reacted, saying: “There were and there are no agreements. This is yet another fabrication of the Armenian side.” Similar diplomatic duels between Baku and Yerevan have become rather frequent in recent years. This is mainly a result of the fact that whichever side wishes to justify forthcoming concessions will attempt to prepare national public opinion by claiming that the other side is planning its own – as a rule larger – concessions. This results in the government about whom the allegations are made swiftly issuing categorical denials in order to reassure its own public.

Conclusion

A basic axiom of peace studies says that it is not the recognition of some abstract good that causes the parties in a conflict to seek to resolve their differences peacefully, but rather the realization that there is no alternative to peace. It has recently become evident that both Armenians and Azeris have seen the sense of contributing to the search for a peaceful solution. Indeed, an enduring peace is necessary for long term economic growth and to secure a stable climate for foreign investment in the region, whose geopolitical and global economic importance is increasing. This is becoming particularly clear to Armenia, which has been excluded from a number of ambitious regional projects as a result of the conflict with Azerbaijan and whose current military superiority is not autonomous but largely depends on Moscow's support. In this particular conflict, a peace settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not only an issue for the governments of the two main antagonists, but must also be acceptable to the key external actors, i.e. the USA and Russia in particular. Any agreement therefore has to take into account the often contradictory geopolitical interests of the major powers, which further complicates the process of finding a permanent solution.

Unfortunately, both the Armenian and the Azeri peoples are at present effectively hostage to their respective governments, which, in order to preserve popular support, are pursuing a strategy of cultivating hatred towards the opposite side. This has resulted in raising a new generation of people who refuse to accept any compromise.²⁰ As a consequence, the governments have significantly reduced their own space for manoeuvre: Were a compromise to be reached, it would be extremely difficult to sell it to the public.

If present trends continue, the public's maximalist expectations entertained by the will continue to rise. The only things that could stop this would be if the balance of power in the region changes dramatically in the foreseeable future (for instance if Russia becomes unwilling or unable to further guarantee the security of its South Caucasian ally) so that one side can achieve its aims regardless the will of the other party, or a substantial shift in value systems.

People's memories of the war and the bloodshed and suffering it brought are still vivid. They have therefore put jingoism behind them, and

20 According to recent opinion polls, only one per cent of Armenians are prepared to make substantial concessions towards Azerbaijan in the Karabakh issue, approximately 50 per cent of Azeris do not agree with making any concessions towards the Armenian side, and approximately 40 per cent of Azeris support only "insignificant" formal concessions, such as (some degree of) autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh in the framework of an independent Azerbaijan (in reality, the restoration of the pre-war state of affairs). More importantly, only around 0.7 per cent of Karabakh Armenians accept any form of submission of Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of both Azeris and Armenians would prefer to see the conflict resolved peacefully. Some analysts claim that an effective way for the regimes to prepare the public for major concessions would be to invent a threat of war.

despite the state propaganda the only true wish of the common people is to live in peace, stability, and prosperity. Older people, in particular, can still remember times of peaceful Armenian-Azeri coexistence. Examples of friendly relations and co-operation between representatives of the two nations found everywhere apart from in their home countries (in Russia, Europe, and elsewhere) demonstrate the paradox that, despite “national animosity”, hatred is not the dominant emotion at the level of individuals. In this context, it is important to remember that “only” 30,000 people were killed as a result of the Karabakh war, compared to the 250,000 in Bosnia or the 100,000 in Chechnya. The fact that fewer people are directly involved in the conflict through their blood relations is of considerable importance in the Caucasus.

Public opinion has to be properly prepared for a future compromise deal, and an atmosphere of reconciliation and forgiveness must thus be nurtured. Only true and honest compromise can underpin a stable and lasting peace. A victory for one side – though fairly unlikely at present – would be short lived and volatile, as it would certainly cause the emergence of a new wave of resentment and calls for revenge from the (temporarily) defeated party.

Hence, what is now most needed is consciousness-changing “national therapy”. As Ronald Grigor Suny notes, “The way people think about themselves is a human construction built up over time [...] If [identities] are constructed, they in fact may not be able to be *deconstructed*. We cannot forget everything that has happened. We cannot start all over again. But they can be, if not deconstructed, if not eliminated, they can be *reconstructed*. They can be thought of in new ways.”²¹ Clearly, such a process would require dozens of years, and, more importantly, considerable political will, to establish a solid foundation for lasting peace.

21 Ronald Grigor Suny, transcript of a podium discussion. Suny’s constructivist-modernistic perspective is presented in: *Negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh: Where Do We Go From Here?*, Caspian Studies Program, Harvard University, summary and transcript of a podium discussion, pp. 4 and 15 (emphasis in original and added).