

The Quest for Stability in the Karabakh Conflict

CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE AND POLITICAL CONTAINMENT

PONARS Eurasia Memo No. 188

September 2011

Sergey Minasyan

Caucasus Institute, Yerevan

Introduction

The current situation around the Karabakh conflict leads to pessimism concerning the prospects for a speedy resolution based on mutual compromise. The latest meeting of Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents with the mediation of their Russian counterpart, held in Kazan on June 24, 2011, was a failure. The sides retain totally contrasting approaches to resolution of the conflict and are not ready for compromises of any kind. The maximum concessions that each side could conceivably make are far less than the minimal requirements of the opposing side. As well, the “basic principles” put forth by the mediating Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) satisfy neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan. Moreover, the party whose fate is most under discussion, the unrecognized republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, remains outside the negotiation format, another obstacle to its success. The international community is not pleased with this lack of progress, but views the continuation of negotiations in itself as a positive development, justifying the long-term activity of the Minsk Group while maintaining a fragile peace on the frontline.

Under these circumstances, however, Azerbaijan is left with only one set of possibilities for changing the status quo: threatening to start a new war, increasing a regional arms race based on its oil and gas revenues, and maintaining a permanent state of tension on the frontline. While some believe that Azerbaijan’s military rhetoric does not pose a realistic threat to Armenia, others take Baku’s threats seriously. Although external actors frequently declare a resumption of hostilities to be inadmissible, their authority may be insufficient to ensure the prevention of a new outbreak of hostilities. In this situation, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh seek to apply their own methods for maintaining stability in the conflict zone.

Indeed, given the improbability of reaching a compromise solution even in the mid-term, the most important goal in the Karabakh conflict should be exactly this: preservation of stability. The context is reminiscent, at a micro-level, of the Cold War, in

which stability served to prevent a war between two superpowers trapped in bipolar confrontation. This stability was made possible by the use of two complementary restraining policies: military deterrence and political containment, both of which can be fully applied to the Karabakh conflict.

Deterrence and Containment

In international relations, *deterrence* implies restraining an opponent by threatening to cause irremediable damage. During the Cold War, deterrence concerned the (mutual) restraining potential of nuclear weapons, while in the case of the Karabakh conflict, it implies restraint through conventional weaponry.

Containment, on the other hand, was used during the Cold War to characterize political and economic measures aimed at thwarting an opponent's implementation of foreign policy, in particular the Soviet Union's propagation of communist ideology, political influence, and economic engagement in different regions of the world. In the case of the Karabakh conflict, the concept of containment involves a mix of political and diplomatic measures with the involvement of third countries and great powers, aimed at maintaining stability and preventing a resumption of hostilities in the conflict zone.

More War? Conventional Deterrence and Military Obstacles

Since the threat of renewing military operations is heard only in Baku, a policy of deterrence is used primarily by Armenians to prevent a resumption of hostilities in Karabakh. Basically, Armenia seeks to "increase the price of war" by targeting objects of energy production and transportation infrastructure in Azerbaijan. To do so requires weapons capable of delivering effective "anti-value" strikes against sensitive targets deep in hypothetical enemy territory. Taking into account the weakness of the air forces of both sides, these weapons include heavy artillery, tactical midrange and tactical operational long-range missiles, and large-caliber multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS). When assessing the local military balance, therefore, it becomes clear that despite its deeper arsenal of long-range missiles, Azerbaijan remains vulnerable to attacks on its energy and industrial facilities. Using its large-caliber MLRS WM-80¹ and tactical operational missile systems 9K72 Elbrus (SS-1C Scud-B in NATO classification),² Armenia's army can cause serious harm to energy, industrial, infrastructural, and communication facilities deep in Azerbaijani territory.

Furthermore, in spring 2011, it was reported that the Armenian army possessed the new 300-mm Smerch MLRS missile system.³ For a long time, Azerbaijan's own possession of such systems⁴ was an argument for Azerbaijani resumption of hostilities.

¹ Eight WM-80 launchers of 273-mm MLRS of Chinese make (with maximum range, depending on missile type, from 80 to 120 km) were acquired by Armenia at the end of the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s. Later the media reported that Armenia was procuring modernized rockets with extended shooting range.

² They were transferred to Armenia from the arms and ammunition dumps of the 176th Rocket brigade of the 7th Guards army in the course of the distribution of the Soviet military property in the mid-1990s. The range of these rockets is up to 300 km with probable circular deviation of 0.6 km at large distances.

³ Harutyunyan, Sarkis, "[Armenian Military 'Interested' in Russian Rocket Systems](#)," RFE/RL – Armenia, June 6, 2011

⁴ In 2004-2005, Azerbaijan purchased from Ukraine 12 launchers for the 9A52 "Smerch" MLRS. The range of the "Smerch" MLRS is from 70 to 90 km (depending on missile type).

Baku hoped possession of such systems would enable it to conduct "remote" military operations, thereby allowing Azerbaijani forces to avoid having to storm the Karabakh fortification line, which would incur heavy losses. But now with its own Smerch system, and the prospects of acquiring additional long-range missile systems, Armenia's deterrence has been strengthened.

As a result, Azerbaijan's leadership faces a serious choice. It could instigate a full-scale military confrontation, in which both sides use heavy artillery, including MLRS and long-range missiles. However, this will lead to heavy losses and destruction of all of Azerbaijan's energy and communication infrastructure, with no guarantee of a quick victory. Any such military conflict would also not last long, as the international community would simply not allow it.

The alternative for Azerbaijan is to forgo using MLRS and long-range missiles in the hope that Armenians would also refrain from their use. This, however, seems unlikely. Azerbaijan would then have to restrict itself to a frontal offensive, "Stalingrad-style," over reinforced fortification lines. The heavy losses such an offensive would entail make this an unpalatable option.⁵

It is very difficult for Azerbaijan to choose between these two alternatives. In either case, the price of war will be too high and outcomes too uncertain. It thus seems that Azerbaijan's leadership has for now chosen the only viable option: an arms race, hoping to exhaust Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Even this arms race, however, reinforces Armenia's deterrence capacity. Armenia is able to maintain parity with Azerbaijan, despite the latter's high level of military spending, through free and preferential arms transfers it receives from Russia, its military and political ally. The fact that Azerbaijan buys arms, even if from Russia, while Armenia receives them for free or at a heavily discounted price, gives Armenia the ability to keep up with Azerbaijan, maintaining the existing balance of power at ever higher thresholds, thereby reducing the likelihood of an outbreak of hostilities. This maintenance of parity is not a guarantee that military actions will not resume, but it is still a deterrent.

Political Containment and External Constraints

The main source of political containment in the Karabakh conflict is the uncompromising attitude of key international actors, which reject all consideration of a military settlement to the conflict.

The current format of negotiations, conducted with the mediation of the OSCE Minsk Group, is a rather atypical case of cooperation between states (Russia and the United States) that are otherwise in heated global and regional competition with each other. They have similar approaches to the process of peacefully settling the Karabakh conflict, and they share a consensus on the unacceptability of unleashing new rounds of hostilities. The country that initiates a new war will face a rapid and unified reaction

⁵ For more detailed analyses of the Karabakh's conflict military balance see: Minasyan, Sergey, "Nagorno-Karabakh After Two Decades of Conflict: Is Prolongation of the Status Quo Inevitable?" *Caucasus Institute Research Papers #2*, Yerevan, August 2010.

from these outside powers, which could lead to serious consequences for the state and its leadership personally.

Another source of political containment is the possibility of direct involvement by Russia in the event of a renewal of conflict. Currently, Armenia is the only country in the South Caucasus that has security guarantees and can expect to receive direct military assistance from a third country (Russia), as well as via a broader security alliance (the Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO). Although Turkey and Azerbaijan have an agreement on military assistance, signed in August 2010, the provisions are vague and do not contain a commitment of direct involvement by Turkey.

In August 2010, Medvedev paid a state visit to Armenia, where he signed a protocol amending a 1995 agreement on the operation of Russia's military base there. According to the protocol, the geographic sphere of responsibility of the 102nd military base was extended to cover Armenia's entire territory. A 25-year lease extension for the Russian base was also signed, granting Russia permission to maintain its base until at least 2044. In addition, Russia took upon itself the responsibility, in the spirit of the protocol, to supply Armenia's armed forces with modern arms and weapons.

Armenians are inclined to interpret this document as a guarantee of Russian military assistance in case of war with Azerbaijan. Formally, the obligations of Russia and the CSTO in matters of mutual defense cover only the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Armenia, not the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. It is highly likely, however, that in the event of war, hostilities will extend past Karabakh and into Armenia. In this case, a failure to provide effective and immediate military support to a member state may discredit the CSTO and could lead to irreparable consequences. In any case, in May 2011, General Andrei Tretyak, chief of the main operations directorate of Russia's General Staff, stated that Russia would fulfill its promises and come to Armenia's defense in case of war.⁶

In addition to this high level of Armenian-Russian military cooperation, the fact that Azerbaijan is not regarded as an unwavering pro-Western state deserving unconditional Western support also helps Armenia to leverage its close security connections with the United States and NATO to discourage Azerbaijani hostilities.

Conclusion

As with any classic military-strategic concepts, deterrence and containment are imperfect and certainly not mechanisms for actually settling ethnopolitical conflicts. Full-scale conflict resolution is possible only on the basis of compromise by all conflicting sides, not from their awareness of war threats. Currently, the only goal of military deterrence and political containment in the context of the Karabakh conflict should be the preservation of stability. Over time, this can help to create conditions for a future lasting peace.

⁶ Kucera, Joshua, "[Russian General: We Will Intervene to Protect Armenia](#)," EurasiaNet.org, June 6, 2011

Indeed, many analysts predict the current status quo will be conserved for a long time. Nonetheless, the kind of conflict resolution that seems impossible today may become a reality in the mid-term, provided that two important conditions are met: a non-resumption of hostilities and the preservation of the formal negotiation format with the active support of (and pressure by) influential external actors. These conditions can yet pave the way to compromise, but only once the parties are psychologically ready to accept a settlement and a more favorable dynamic in the development of the region arises.