

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict In The Caucasus (III)

Motto: "When the game is over, both the king and the pawn end up in the same box. "
Italian proverb

CORNELIU PIVARIU



The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict goes on in spite of the two ceasefires agreed and which violated a short time after their coming into force. The material damage and loss of life, military and civilian, are important for both sides.

The regional and global geostrategic context which shifted since the previous conflict periods is impacting on the evolution of the situation while Baku's military expenditures during the last years (24 bill.\$ between 2008-2018) seems to secure presently an advantage, mainly by the large scale use of drones. That explains as well the Azeri military successes on the ground including occupying some localities which were so far under Armenian control.

In order to better discern the evolutions we referred to a well known expert in Yerevan, Dr. **Benyamin Poghosyan, Executive director, Political Science Association of Armenia** who had the kindness to grant this exclusive interview to Geopolitica blog.

Title and subtitles belong to the blog.

Interview made through on-line correspondence by Corneliu Pivariu

The time has come to elaborate a new formula for the conflict settlement in Nagorno Karabakh

Question: *How do you assess the regional and global geopolitical context in September and what are in your opinion the causes which triggered the latest military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh, probably the amplest of the last 20 years?*

Response: The 2008 world financial crisis marked the beginning of Post-Cold war order's unraveling, with few hints when new world order may emerge and what it may look like. The relative decline of the US, the end of "Unipolar moment", and the rise of the rest have brought strategic ambiguity and significant instability. Dubbed by many scholars as "Global disorder", these tectonic changes have impacted also regional balances of power. In the absence of global hegemony, the rivalry for regional influence as been launched in many regions of the world, with growing emphasize on economic, political and military coercion by states.

These global developments have their influence on South Caucasus too. The region is perceived by Russia as part of its zone of "legitimate interests", and despite the involvement in the region of the US, NATO and EU, Russia hopes to keep her dominant position there. However, the 2008 Russia – Georgia war and the recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence by Russia effectively put to an end to any meaningful Russian influence in Georgia. In the period after 2008 war Russian attention was focused in preventing the growth of Turkish influence in Azerbaijan, while keeping her strong positions in Armenia.

However, the significant shifts in global and regional order have changed this equilibrium. As a part of its assertive foreign policy, Turkey was making significant steps to strengthen its positions in South Caucasus, using Azerbaijan as a strategic asset. Simultaneously, the fostering of Turkey – Georgia – Azerbaijan strategic partnership was supporting the Turkish goal of challenging Russian positions in Azerbaijan. The April 2016

war was the first sign that previous balance of power has been changed and more was coming.

Q: *President Levon Ter-Petrosyan's resignation was induced by his willingness to take into account certain concessions to the benefit of the Azerbaijani side for solving the conflict. What has changed later on once Robert Kocharyan and Serge Sargsyan, both originating in NG, acceded to presidency in what an actual settlement of the conflict is concerned? What has changed after president Armen Sarkissian's coming to power and the appointment of the government led by Nikol Pashinyan?*

R: Levon Ter-Petrosyan was willing to accept the phased approach solution - to give to Azerbaijan parts of Nagorno Karabakh Republic territories in return of the opening up of communications between Armenia and Azerbaijan via Russia and Armenia and Iran via Nakhijevan Autonomous Republic. Probably, one of the key elements of the deal was the passage of the future Baku - Jeyhan oil pipeline via Armenia. Meanwhile, the final status of Karabakh should be defined in the future through negotiations, but without any guarantees that Karabakh would never be part of Azerbaijan. We may summarize this formula as the "Land for peace" approach. However, this option was rejected by absolute majority of Armenian and Karabakhi society as it was perceived as equal to capitulation of the Armenian sides.

During Robert Kocharyan's and Serzh Sargsyan's Presidency Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh Republic advocated "Land for status" formula. In 2001, during the week-long negotiations in Key West, Robert Kocharyan and the late President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev discussed package deal, according to which Karabakh within its 1988 borders plus a land corridor with Armenia was becoming part of Armenia, while Armenia granted an unrestricted access, in the form of the construction of the new bridge, from Azerbaijan to Nakhijevan Autonomous Republic.

Later both Kocharyan and Sargsyan was negotiating a deal, according to which parts of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic should be returned to Azerbaijan, Karabakh would receive an interim status and secure land corridor with Armenia, while final legal status of Karabakh should be defined by the legally binding expression of will. Meanwhile, a peacekeeping force should be deployed along the new line of contact between Nagorno Karabakh Republic and Azerbaijan to prevent Azerbaijan from using its newly gained territories to launch another attack against Karabakh (this formula is also known as Basic Principles and was publicized by the US, France and Russia Presidents in their July 2009 L'Aquila statement. In June 2011 a document based on these principles was assumed to be signed by Armenia and Azerbaijan in Kazan summit, but at the last minute document was rejected by Azerbaijan). However, after the April 2016 four day war, which was launched by Azerbaijan against Nagorno Karabakh Republic, vast majority of Armenian society, was skeptical about this option, as there were doubts that international security guarantees including peacekeeping force could provide necessary level of security during the interim status for Nagorno Karabakh.

After April 2018 "Velvet Revolution" in Armenia, new government rejected phased approach solution, stating that it did not accept any options elaborated prior to April 2018. Armenian new Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan argued for the restoration of trilateral format of negotiations (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh Republic, which was in place until late 1997), and declared that any settlement of Karabakh conflict should be acceptable for people of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Karabakh, but without providing any details on what that solution may like.

Q: *What is presently the health condition of the president of the Artsakh Republic Arayik Harutyunyan?*

R: Artsakh Republic President Arayik Harutyunyan has no health problems and continue to fully exercise his powers.

Q: *What are the most important losses witnessed by the Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh?*

R: As of evening of October 18 Azerbaijan forces had some successes in the Northern, and particularly in the Southern parts of the frontline, where they managed to conquer some territories of Nagorno Karabakh Republic.

Q: What would be the most significant achievements recorded by the Azerbaijani diplomacy and army?

R: Azerbaijan's position is clear – Azerbaijan is not going to recognize Nagorno Karabakh Republic independence under any circumstances. Thus, we may speak about ultimate success for Azerbaijani army or diplomacy only if they are able to capture the whole territory of Nagorno Karabakh Republic, or to force Armenia and



Nagorno Karabakh Republic to sign a document accepting Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan.

Q: What is Turkey's real role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict— does it back or put pressure on Azerbaijan?

R: Turkey's policy in the region is based on strategic alliance with Azerbaijan and on fostering trilateral Turkey – Georgia – Azerbaijan strategic partnership. In recent years Turkey was developing very complex relations with Russia, simultaneously cooperating and competing in several areas such as Syria, Libya, and Black sea region. In this nexus of pragmatic friendship and strategic rivalry South Caucasus plays a significant role. Turkey backs Azerbaijan by supplying modern armament including Bayraktar drones, as well as military advisors and mercenaries from Syria. Simultaneously, Turkey puts pressure on Azerbaijan not to accept Russia mediated ceasefire or Russian offer to deploy Russian military observers and peacekeepers, as it would significantly diminish Turkey's recently gained influence in Azerbaijan.

Q: What would military solution conflict?

“Armenia now may see the deployment of Russian peacekeepers as the only reliable way to balance Turkey's presence and to stop Azerbaijan attack fully supported by Turkey.”

Turkey gain by pushing a to the Nagorno-Karabakh

R: Turkey's decision to launch large-scale Turkish support is obviously aimed at further reducing Russian presence in the region, transforming Azerbaijan into Turkish de facto protectorate, using it as a launch pad for further enlargement into the Central Asia, putting pressure on Iran and coming closer to Russia's Northern Caucasus. Turkey may reach its goals only by complete defeat of Nagorno Karabakh Republic.

sion to convince Azerbaijan scale war in Karabakh with

Q: What does it mean for Armenia a peace solution through which Russia deploys "peace keeping forces" in Nagorno-Karabakh? Is there a possible evolution toward a self-proclaimed republic such as Transdniestria in the Republic of Moldova?

R: After April 2016 war Armenia was skeptical about deployment of any peacekeeping forces in Karabakh, regardless of the composition, if it also included return of parts of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic to Azerbaijan without fixing the final status. Given the growing "global disorder", there was a certain decline of trust regarding international security guarantees, including the deployment of peacekeeping forces. However, given Turkey's active role in the new war in Karabakh, Armenia now may see the deployment of Russian peacekeepers as the only reliable way to balance Turkey's presence and to stop Azerbaijan attack fully supported by Turkey.

Q: How can Armenia compensate the war effort having in mind:

a) a major demographic gap as compared to Azerbaijan's as can be seen in the number of the united Armenian fighting troops (Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh), even if we admit they are separated;

R: Azerbaijan has demographic advantage over Armenia. However, we should take into account that official numbers of population declared by Azerbaijan (more than 10 million) are vastly exaggerated. According to several expert assessments, Azerbaijan's population is approximately 6.5 - 6.7 million, while Armenia's population is 2.7 million.

b) the huge budget gap as compared to Azerbaijan's as the Azeri military budget equals practically the entire Armenian budget;

R: This was the case during 2007 – 2014 oil boom in Azerbaijan. However, Azerbaijan's economy registered significant decline in 2015 due to the oil prices slump and decline of oil production and export. Since 2015 Azerbaijan's economy has been in stagnation, while Armenia registered more than 7 percent GDP growth in 2017 and 2019. Even the launch of the Southern gas corridor scheduled at the end of the 2020, which will bring 6 billion cubic meters additional Azerbaijani gas to Turkey and another 10 billion to Southern Europe annually, will not compensate the decline of profits from oil export. Thus, the gap between Armenia and Azerbaijan was shrinking in recent years, and most probably, this trend will continue.

c) the superiority of the especially those developed and those imported

R: Armenia, as a member of the CSTO, purchases military equipment from Russia by significantly reduced prices. However, Nagorno Karabakh depicted

Iran in air domain, as a result of the massive usage of Turkish and Israeli "Kamikadze" and attack drones. After the war Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh Republic will reassess the development programs of their air defense systems, putting more emphasize on equipment's to fight against drones.

d) the political and military support Turkey is granting to Azerbaijan as long as the red line which implies a direct attack on Armenia and implicitly Russia's direct involvement is not crossed;

R: Russian security guarantees to Armenia in both bilateral and multilateral formats (within CSTO) cover only Armenia and do not apply to Nagorno Karabakh Republic. However, Russia, has plenty of other means to put pressure on Azerbaijan and Turkey without directly attacking Azerbaijan. These measures may include overt and covert economic restrictions on Azerbaijan and Turkey, pressure on Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia, actions against Turkish interests in Syria and Libya.

Q: What is the present military context in which future political decisions in Baku, Ankara, Yerevan, Tehran and Moscow will be made?

R: As for now Azerbaijan has advantage in air power. It gives Azerbaijan tactical advantage, but it is not sufficient to defeat Nagorno Karabakh Republic forces and conquer the whole territory of the Republic.

Q: How do you see the evolution of the conflict? Will we see a new ceasefire situation with a precarious duration or will we witness decisive evolutions determined by a final solution? If yes, what would be that solution would be?

R: As for now there are four main scenarios for moving forward:

The first scenario is the restoration of permanent ceasefire and the continuation of negotiations based on the "Basic principles" without any agreements or pledges to reach agreement. It will repeat the situation after April 2016 four day war, and most probably it will only lead to another outbreak of hostilities some-

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member of the CSTO, purchases from Russia by significantly er, the new war in Nagorno Karabakh Republic depicted the superiority of Azerbaijan result of the massive usage

times in the near future.

In the second scenario OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs will force both Armenia and Azerbaijan to accept settlement based on “basic principles” and will convince Turkey not to spoil. In this scenario, conflict will be frozen for another decade or more.

In the third scenario Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh Republic, Russia, Turkey, and other actors will not be able to reach any agreement. In this case we will see lingering low intensity conflict with no permanent ceasefire. These developments will gradually transform Karabakh into another area of Russia – Turkey proxy war.

In the fourth scenario all sides will finally realize that the phased approach solution, which has been discussed for last sixteen years, has exhausted itself, and that time has come to elaborate a new formula for the conflict settlement. In this case sides will start to work on package deal, which will solve all issues – status, territories and refugees – in one document. Package deal should include the recognition of Nagorno Karabakh Republic independence as the only way to the lasting peace and sustainable development of the region.



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Benyamin Poghosyan was director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies, Ministry of Defense, in 2016 -2019 and previously served as the institute's deputy director in 2010 - 2016. He is a graduate of Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy special program on international security. His areas of expertise are geopolitics

of the South Caucasus and the Middle East, and the US – Russia relations.





● - Nagorno-Karabakh Republic

● - Claimed by the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic but controlled by Azerbaijan