



POTENTIAL STRESS POINTS IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

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There are number of potential stress points in the ceasefire agreement signed by Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, but also agreed to by the president of Nagorno Karabakh on November 9th, 2020. It is a document that was signed under the duress of rapidly deteriorating war conditions for Armenians. Few within Armenia were consulted apart from some senior military leaders. It has not been ratified by the Armenian Parliament. Public disapproval has been extensive.

The twin territories of Nagorno Karabakh and Nakhichevan historically had been cut off from direct links with Armenia and Azerbaijan respectively. This agreement proposes twin corridors to remedy that situation.

- a) For Armenia, the Lachin corridor is a perilous and vulnerable life line for their fellow Armenians in Karabakh. The Russian peacekeeping troops are scheduled to be there for up to five years. Will there be troops or monitors from other countries? What will happen after five years?
- b) The proposed southern link for Nakhichevan along the Iranian border has enormous risk and potential. It will be the first direct link in three decades and will extend Turkey-Azerbaijan connections greatly. It is to be monitored by Russian military.
- c) While the southern corridor along the Iranian border is a great military risk for Armenia, it could lubricate the jammed transportation links in the Southern Caucasus, not only for

East-West transport, but also North-South. This has appeal for both Russia and Iran. It could be a plus-sum game for the entire South Caucasus region, particularly if the route continues through Georgia and neighbouring territories. It is likely that Chinese investment and goods, tapping the One Belt One Road initiative, are likely to flow into such an international project.

During the Armenia-Azerbaijan war of the 1990s, Turkey closed the border with Armenia, ostensibly in solidarity with Baku over the Armenian control of Karabakh and the seven surrounding Azerbaijani territories. Now that Armenian forces no longer occupy these territories, will the border be opened as a complement to the E-W corridor to Nakhichevan?

War is often seen as a zero-sum game. In such an assumption, who are the winners and who are the losers? In general, autocratic governments in the region did well. Azerbaijan achieved the most gains, Turkey made significant advances in influence and prestige, and Russia extended its military presence. One democratic government did very badly. Armenia suffered a severe military defeat, verging on an enormous catastrophe. The democratic hopes and progress of the Armenian Velvet Revolution are in great jeopardy. There have been extensive cabinet resignations, firings and senior Ministry of Defence leadership changes. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is hanging on to power, but is confronted by street protests and a large array of opposition parties denouncing him and calling for his resignation. Is a crisis coalition government urgently needed? Who could provide the critical consensual leadership of such a diverse political grouping? The current president Armen Sarkissian has the stature and voice of moderation that he could be a possibility. The alternative of some might be a hyper-nationalist, militarist response.

Has a new conflict-resolution and peace-making paradigm emerged? After three decades of too little meaningful success, is the Minsk Process and its troika-leadership of France, the United States and Russia eclipsed? Has it been replaced by the twin coordination of Russia and Turkey, reprising their historic imperial roles in the region? The subject nations are perhaps left with little option. The proposal for a new joint Russian-Turkish peacekeeping center seems counter-intuitive, given Turkey's pivotal role in the war.

While Russia seemed to offer little military aid to Armenia during most of the recent six weeks war, it was swift in suggesting/imposing a ceasefire and rolled out a very rapid deployment of a robust two-thousand men peace-keeping contingent. No doubt, it was much faster and more effective than any multi-lateral force could have been formulated, let alone put into the field. But how viable are Russian peacekeepers in the long run? How successful have they been historically elsewhere? They have entered an extremely volatile ethnic setting that has been inflamed by heavy recent losses on the Armenian side and soon to be returning Azerbaijanis who will discover the extensive devastation of their once home villages. The hate narratives on both sides are likely to see an escalation in coming days. Russian conflict-resolution techniques have had a very poor record to date.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan was in essence over the future status of Nagorno Karabakh. The ceasefire agreement does not resolve the long-term status of Karabakh. But what is likely to exist in the near future is a reduced territory, a smaller population, a more isolated

entity, with fewer foreign investments and tourists. The physical dangers are likely to be significant. Will it become a rump garrison state, with far fewer families? If so, how viable is it in the long run?

With the devastation of war comes the inevitable humanitarian crises of refugees, displaced persons, inadequate shelter, food, clothing, and medical treatment. Winter in the Caucasus can be harsh. What is urgently needed is a Marshall Aid Plan for the South Caucasus. A world in the midst of a global pandemic, economic recession and other conflicts seems otherwise pre-occupied.

Perhaps as important is how do you transform the decades of nationalist hate narratives into something else. How do bitter enemies become neighbours once more? Perhaps, efforts at functional integration addressing common problems, such as the Covid pandemic, environment crises (water shortages, pollution) and the pressing need for economic and social development, will provide a path through the mountains.

The situation is grave and perilous. The current realistic alternatives for Armenia and the people of Nagorno Karabakh are bad, worse or catastrophic. The time for rhetoric is long past. Tough rigorous analysis is needed. It will need leadership with vision and courage of a different sort.