

Armenia: A Tectonic Fault

Dr. Gayane Novikova

The full-fledged Karabakh war (September 27 – November 9-10, 2020) has become a watershed in the post-Soviet history of Armenia.

It will take time to evaluate human, territorial, economic, political, and moral losses, to recover, to strengthen the sovereignty of the country, and to overcome the aftermath of this war. The aims of this article are a) to discuss the challenges Armenia is facing currently and b) to attempt to offer ways out of this dangerous situation. Some parts of this puzzle are still missing; many questions remain unanswered.

Dynamics of the Conflict

At the foundation of the first Karabakh war (1991–1994) was a collision of two principles of the Helsinki Declaration: the right for self-determination and territorial integrity. Correspondingly, the principal parties to the conflict were the Armenian population of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast' (NKAO) and the newly-independent Republic of Azerbaijan. The war ended with the Armenian side's military victory. An open-ended ceasefire agreement brokered through Russian mediation was signed on 11 May 1994 by the military leadership of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Commander of the Nagorniy Karabakh Army of Defence. Further negotiations were initiated within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. However, important shifts in the very nature of the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict (NKC) occurred over the next 26 years.

- The ethno-political conflict between the Armenian ethnic minority and the state inside Azerbaijan gradually transformed into a territorial conflict between the unrecognised Nagorniy Karabakh Republic (NKR, fully backed by the Republic of Armenia) and the Republic of Azerbaijan.

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Photos: Diana Ananyan



The village of Shoshin in Nagorniy Karabakh, on 15 November 2020

- Initially de jure an intra-state conflict, the NKC became transformed into a de facto international conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the exclusion of the representatives of the NKR from the negotiation process in 1998.
- The approaches of the parties to a resolution of the conflict were incompatible. Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis claimed the territories of the former NKAO and seven regions (controlled since the 1994 ceasefire by the Armenians) as their own historical lands. Therefore, these territories were called in the Armenian political lexicon "liberated" vs. "occupied" in the Azerbaijani terminology. The final goal of the negotiations for Armenia and the NKR was international recognition of the NKR and a guarantee for life and security for its population. For Azerbaijan, the aim was the return of the territories (the former NKAO included) by all means to its full jurisdiction.
- The Armenian sides chose mainly a passive attitude, focusing on the preservation of the status quo established

in 1994. They were ready to discuss a mutually acceptable compromise. The Azerbaijani side adopted a proactive strategy, emphasizing its right to resume the war and, therefore, rejecting any possible compromise.

Trapped by the Status Quo

A psychological factor played a quite negative role in Armenia's approach to the resolution of the conflict. The 1994 military victory was taken for granted and the negotiations were perceived as a tool to achieve (with the help of the international mediators) the most favourable resolution of the conflict for the Armenian sides. At the core of the modus vivendi was a formula – "territories in exchange for a status of Nagorniy Karabakh" – and a misguided assumption: the international community will recognise the NKR's independence sooner or later.

An attempt by the first Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan to resolve the conflict in accordance with the above-mentioned formula ended in his resignation in 1998. The next two Presidents,

Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, did not exclude (although neither did they openly support) the possibility for a step-by-step solution.

The stagnation of negotiations caused a gradual transformation from conflict resolution to conflict management. The Armenian sides had viewed the situation on the ground as relatively secure; however, they emphasised the necessity to increase the capacities of the OSCE monitoring mission along the Line of Contact and to exclude the “use of force or the threat of force.” Meanwhile, unable to offer any significant modification of the Madrid Basic Principles, the mediators preferred to focus upon a “necessity to prepare the societies for the peace.” In the meantime, Azerbaijan – along with a build-up of its military might – was becoming more exasperated and aggressive. Openly blaming the OSCE Minsk Group for its inability to resolve the conflict through negotiations and simultaneously generating and promoting anti-Armenian sentiments through a bellicose and hatred-inciting rhetoric, President Ilham Aliyev had been preparing his society for revenge and a war against the NKR and Armenia. The territorial claims of the Azerbaijani leadership became louder and louder.



Shahumyan Region in Nagorny Karabakh, on 15 November 2020

Clear indications of Azerbaijan’s shift toward a resolution of the conflict through military means were the shooting down of the Armenian helicopter MI-24 in November 2014 by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces and – more significantly – the four-day war in April 2016. The latter revealed the poor preparedness of the

Armenian sides for war and signalled a serious change in the balance of power in the area of the conflict. The April war became also a catalyst for an eruption of political instability inside Armenia. After the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the Pashinyan government tried, in regard to the NKC, to adopt a proactive position

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The hospital in Stepanakert, capital of the unrecognised Nagorny Karabakh Republic

that included several provocative – especially from the Azerbaijani viewpoint – statements and actions. Azerbaijan responded in July 2020 with a direct attack on Armenia's territory, followed by a full-scale new generation war against the NKR and Armenia on 27 September. The active military actions ceased on 9-10 November 2020, after the signing of the trilateral Armenian–Azerbaijani–Russian ceasefire agreement.

The Deepening Internal Crisis

The military defeat revealed the depth of the internal crisis now faced by Armenia. The motley, wide-ranging political opposition – which currently includes also several high-ranking military commanders and former Presidents Kocharyan and

Sargsyan – has labelled Prime Minister Pashinyan “a traitor” who should be deprived of the right to negotiate with Azerbaijan. Demanding his “immediate” resignation, the opposition is advocating the establishment of a “national salvation” government. Pashinyan and his team, in turn, have rejected any wrongdoing, arguing that the war was unavoidable and its catastrophic consequences were predetermined by the politics of the previous governments.

It is obvious that the opposition has been unable to mobilise a significant protest movement capable of forcing Pashinyan to resign, and the government has been unable to provide a more or less clear roadmap out of multiple crises. A divided, frustrated, and confused society is seeking an answer

to one question mainly: “Who is to be blamed for this catastrophe?” A prolongation of this political confrontation is definitely weakening the Armenian state. It endangers the nation's sovereignty, questions its ability to defend its own national security interests, and directly influences its strength in further negotiations with Azerbaijan regarding the status of the NKR.

Another important factor is the state of the Armenian Armed Forces. A combination of strategic mismanagement, serious tactical mistakes, and the absence of political power and courage – either to use all available weapons and to demonstrate a willingness to fight for every inch or to sign a ceasefire agreement at an early stage of the war in order to avoid human and territorial losses – resulted in a devastating military defeat. Its moral consequences are even more devastating.

What Next?

In the short term, it is necessary to design a roadmap that will address an acute and multilayered humanitarian crisis. Indispensable are:

- the use of all possible mechanisms to address the issue of missing people;
- a return of all prisoners of war and civilians, as well as the bodies, held by Azerbaijan in violation of international humanitarian law and the ceasefire agreement;
- a provision of adequate medical and psychological treatment to thousands wounded soldiers, compensations for the disabled, and the families of dead and missing people;
- a provision of housing, jobs, medical assistance, etc., to the tens of thousands displaced persons in both the NKR and Armenia.

Owing to very limited resources, the measures introduced by the authorities are temporary and inadequate to provide substantial support for these strata. At this stage, it is necessary to apply for international economic and medical assistance. It is necessary to interrupt an ongoing delimitation and to prevent a demarcation of borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan (especially in the Syunik and Gegharkunik regions of Armenia) in order to reduce anxiety and a population exodus. The border issues should be resolved through negotiations in accordance with international law, and a full respect for and recognition of the rights of the citizens of Armenia and the NKR, rather than as a result of permanent pressure and security threats from Azerbaijan.



The opposition's tents in front of the Parliament building, Yerevan

Even small – but effective and visible – progress on these issues can reduce tension in the society and prevent further radicalisation (in particular, involvement of the army in ongoing political processes). A restoration of social trust is crucial: it will prepare a basis for free and fair snap parliamentary elections and will, to some extent, slow down emigration. In the mid-term, the state should address the needs of the Armenian army by focusing upon its rebuilding. The abrupt end of the war and provisions of the ceasefire agreement prevented more human and, probably, territorial losses on the one hand and, on the other hand, raised many questions. Nevertheless, Armenia needs a strong army owing to the activity of an aggressive and openly anti-Armenian Azerbaijani-Turkish political and military alliance. A complex revision of national security and defence strategies, as well as a reassessment of the army's capacity-building, should be undertaken.

The next five years will be critical for Armenia, which is, from economic, political, and diplomatic viewpoints, currently a severely weakened state. It is unrealistic to assume that the state will be able quickly

to restore its pre-war capabilities; however, a sober analysis will allow a prioritisation of those strategic areas capable of stimulating economic growth.

This period will be challenging for the Armenia-NKR relationship. The defeat has revealed many disagreements between the authorities in Yerevan and Stepanakert. In accordance with the ceasefire agreement, Russian peacekeepers can remain in the territory of Nagorniy Karabakh – as a guarantor of the security of Armenians – for five years; by the end of this period each party to the conflict can veto their presence. In fact, all discussions concerning the future of the NKR are taking place between Russia and Azerbaijan; Armenia has been pushed aside. It is important to prevent a crisis between Armenia and the NKR in order to a) withstand Azerbaijan's pressure, b) preserve the unity of the two parts of the Armenian nation, and c) defend the interests of the NKR population in the international arena. The complete restoration of economic and social connections will be very challenging owing to the post-war reality on the ground.

Armenia's diplomatic efforts should become very proactive both to prevent any

attempt by Azerbaijan (and Turkey) to define the Karabakh conflict as fully resolved, and to retain a focus upon the problem of the international recognition of a status of the NKR. These efforts should include a full guarantee for the physical security of Armenians, protection of their human rights, and preservation of the Armenian heritage in the territories now under Azerbaijan's control.

Armenia must utilise the potential of the Diaspora by wisely using its diplomatic means and tools, and re-evaluate its role in the state- and institution-building. It must offer to the Diaspora a social contract and provide a legal basis for its broader participation in Armenia's economy, politics, and social life.

Only after the achievement of a relatively stable and secure environment based on a full-scale peace agreement will it be possible to implement regional co-operation projects. Armenia should not make any further concessions without a complete de-blocking of its borders by Turkey and Azerbaijan and without international guarantees of security for its territory and population. As Golda Meir stated: "You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist."

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