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*A strip of land situated between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, the post-Soviet Caucasus embarked on a painful identity quest at the turn of the third millennium. This – still ongoing – quest involves several daunting choices: between Moscow, Washington and Brussels, between oil and democratic values, and between feudal realities and revolutionary ideals. Throughout the last decade, the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute has been conducting in-depth research of the conflicting and often subtle trends in the regions' politics. This volume contains a selection of research papers published by the Caucasus Institute since 2001 in Armenian, Russian and English, which best represent the challenges faced by this varied region at this crucial stage of development.*

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## ARMENIA IN KARABAKH, KARABAKH IN ARMENIA: LIVING WITH A CONFLICT<sup>1</sup>

*By Sergey Minasyan<sup>2</sup>*

Since the time when the military phase of conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh ended in May 1994, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh have formulated their own strategies with respect to the conflict. Throughout these years, the conflict has remained a factor that influenced the development of independent Armenia; this fact has had a significant impact on Yerevan's approaches to conflict settlement. Moreover, the Karabakh issue in Armenia merged with anti-Communism and with the struggle for independence from the USSR, and ended up as the cornerstone of the ideology promoted by Armenian political actors in 1988-1992, prior to the disintegration of the USSR and the independence of Armenia. It is, therefore, essential to allow for the role of the "Karabakh factor" when discussing the foreign or the domestic policies of Armenia.

### NAGORNO-KARABAKH IN ARMENIA: THE IMPACT OF THE CONFLICT ON DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS IN ARMENIA

In terms of domestic policies, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is no less important for Armenia than it is for Azerbaijan, and in terms of the formation of political elites, it is much more important for Yerevan and Stepanakert than for Baku, being a fundamental and systemic factor. A significant part of the current political elite in Armenia consists of former activists of the Karabakh movement, former combatants, or just people originating from Nagorno-Karabakh or the formerly Armenian-populated regions of Soviet Azerbaijan. The issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, seen from various angles, is a key component of the program of almost every political party, whether in coalition or in opposition.

The tremendous influence of the Karabakh issue over Armenia's political system and its political development is best illustrated by the careers of independent Ar-

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menia's first three presidents. Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan all played leading roles in the Karabakh movement. During the war, each of them either led Armenia and/or Nagorno-Karabakh, or commanded military operations. Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, had to resign in 1998 as a result of putting forward a conflict settlement plan that was unacceptable to Armenian elites and society. Ter-Petrosyan was succeeded by Robert Kocharyan, formerly the first president of Nagorno-Karabakh. Since 2008, Armenia has been led by Serzh Sargsyan, formerly minister of defence of Armenia who had also led the military command in Nagorno-Karabakh during the war.

Azerbaijan is different in this respect. Although the Karabakh issue led to a series of coups d'état and power handovers in Baku in the early 1990s, it has not been as instrumental to the formation of today's political elite in Baku as it has been for Yerevan. After Azerbaijan lost the war, the mid-1990s era political elites, including the then-ruling Azerbaijani Popular Front, gradually became unpopular, leading to the demise of President Abulfaz Elchibey and his government, and the accession of a neo-Communist nomenclature led by Heydar Aliiev. As a result, many activists who gained prominence during the conflict were either politically marginalized or even physically eradicated. However, Heydar Aliiev incorporated some combatants and some of the military elite into the camp of his supporters and into the power pyramid. Still, the role of the "Karabakh guys" in Azerbaijan's elite is negligible compared to the political, military and economic importance that Karabakh combatants and activists hold in Armenia and especially in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The role of "Karabakh guys" in Armenia's political and economic life reached its peak in the last years of Levon Ter-Petrosyan's presidency and only began to decrease at the start of the presidency of Robert Kocharyan, himself a Karabakh man. This may sound illogical but it is not: as someone coming from Nagorno-Karabakh, Kocharyan was not getting enough support in Yerevan and needed to incorporate strong local actors, both in the capital and in the provinces, into the bureaucracy and economic elite. The turning point was May 2000, when Kocharyan dismissed Armenia's prime minister, Aram Sarkisyan, brother of war hero Vazgen Sarkisyan who had also held the post of prime minister and was murdered during the October 27, 1999 fatal attack on the Armenian parliament. From that point on, Armenia's political system was gradually de-militarized; in most offices, supporters of the slain prime minister were replaced by the new generation of bureaucrats. This did not dramatically reduce the role the Karabakh factor in politics, especially since the rotation of elites was still incomplete. However, political developments in Armenia before and especially after the 2008 presidential election proved that the elite rota-

tion and the decrease of the role played by “Karabakh guys” was still underway and would in all probability intensify during Serzh Sargsyan’s presidency. Regardless of the wishes of President Sargsyan or his team, this potential intensification stems from the overall trend in the interplay between coalition and opposition, and from the new political situation in Armenia that begs for the expedient rotation of the political and economic elites.

Meanwhile, the “Karabakh factor” has been losing its prevalence in Armenia’s political landscape. Over the last two years, domestic developments have proven this very clearly. The society and part of the elites gradually started to pay less attention to the struggle for Nagorno-Karabakh because, in the public perception, Armenia already “owns” Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, in the last few years, exploiting the “Karabakh factor” has no longer been a good way to win over the support of the underprivileged strata of the population, perhaps with the exception of people living along the border with Azerbaijan for whom the settlement of the conflict is directly linked to their personal survival. Unlike Azerbaijan’s authorities, Armenia’s leadership cannot use the non-settled status of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh as a convincing explanation for their country’s social problems. The Armenian opposition does use this kind of logic with some degree of success to mobilize the disgruntled part of the electorate with promises of potential economic development in the wake of rapid conflict resolution. However, the authorities cannot mobilize the disgruntled electorate in their favour in the name of protecting something the country has already gained (i.e. the province of Nagorno-Karabakh) because the society no longer perceives this as a priority concern.

Another aspect of the issue is that as a result of Armenia’s victory in the war, Armenian society is more open to compromises than Azerbaijani society. This creates illusions amongst Azerbaijani experts, making them inclined to see this openness as a sign that the Armenian society is weary of the conflict. However, they overlook the fact that the compromises that Yerevan (and to some extent also Stepanakert) may be willing to make do not concern the vital interests of Nagorno-Karabakh, i.e. its security and the protection of its citizens’ fundamental rights.

Despite the fact that the Karabakh issue has slipped down on Armenia’s domestic political agenda, no other political issue is so instrumental for political actors in Armenia, whether opposition or coalition. The authorities are trying to take a hard line on the issue, and the opposition criticizes the official approach, albeit only where the implementation of policies is concerned. As to the overall approach to the future and the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, there is a near complete consensus within Armenian society over this issue. Therefore, this approach can hardly be

expected to change should the opposition come to power in Armenia. Very little depends on the leaders' personal opinion; whatever steps any Armenian president may try to make to achieve dramatic changes in Armenia's policy with respect to the conflict, they are certain to fail due to a combination of domestic deterrents and external influences. Moreover, it has been clear since the 1990s that Yerevan cannot make completely independent decisions with regard to the conflict, because Nagorno-Karabakh is an important actor with a will of its own.

Consequently, the fact that some Armenian political actors address domestic audiences with visions of potential compromises in the Karabakh issue does not in fact imply that these actors are defeatists in real politics. It is highly improbable that Armenia's main strategic priorities, including those that concern Nagorno-Karabakh, should change even as a result of changes in the power configuration. Just as in the ruling coalition, many of Armenia's actual opposition actors were once directly involved in Armenia's military and political victories during the war; after moving into opposition, they continued to participate in the dealings over Nagorno-Karabakh. It would be very superficial to divide Armenian politicians into camps of doves and hawks, as far as foreign policy is concerned. The experience of many modern local conflicts shows that at some stage of ethno-political conflict, compromises are often promoted by politicians who started out with the most radical nationalistic policies, have extensive experience of political struggle or undercover activities, and/or were the most brilliant and successful military commanders. In contrast, it is the liberal politician with a reputation for compromise and peace initiatives in an armed conflict with a neighbouring state that often (consciously or unconsciously) makes the toughest and most radical decisions, starts wars or forms military coalitions. For example, one of the strongest criticisms of the 1967 Six Day War in Israel came from David Ben-Gurion, one of the founders and first prime minister of Israel who spent his lifetime fighting for his nation's independence and security. He believed Israel would be unable to win the war and, thus, doomed to perish as a result of it. The decision to start the 1967 war, leading to Israel's victory and ensuring dramatic change of the entire political landscape in the Near East, was made by Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, a reputedly mild and timid politician inclined to concessions and endless negotiations.<sup>3</sup>

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3 See: Epstein, Alek D. "Twelve False Axioms of the Arab-Israeli Conflict." *Jews of Euro-Asia*, 1(2), 2003. – Pp. 26-32. "The experience of those Israeli political leaders belonging to the "national" camp testifies to the following: it is not necessary to give power to the social democrats in order to develop and promote relations with Palestine and/or other Arab countries. It was a right-wing "nationalist", prime minister Menachem Begin, who signed the peace Agreement with Egypt in 1979, as a result

Moreover, even the most radical opposition actors in Armenia believe that surrendering lands occupied by the Karabakh army or otherwise yielding to Azerbaijani pressure would not lead to the settlement of the conflict (since the controversy is about who owns Karabakh!) but would simply transform it so that Armenians will find themselves in a less advantageous position for defence and maintenance of the political and technical balance in the conflict. The public opinion in Armenia holds that any change in the geography of the frontlines would only upset the balance in favour of Azerbaijan, giving Baku a new motive to resume war. By this logic, any change in the status quo would increase, rather than decrease the probability of war. The placement of peacekeeping forces on the borders will not solve the problem because the experience of other countries shows that peacekeepers are no guarantee against war in the conflict zone in the case of external pressures.

ARMENIA IN KARABAKH:  
HOW ARMENIA INFLUENCES POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN  
NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Armenia's policy with regard to resolving the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh strongly impacts the society, political actors and elites of Nagorno-Karabakh. The impact has remained very strong regardless of exactly who was in charge in Armenia. Yerevan has been constantly pressurizing the leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh to moderate its approach to conflict settlement and to the prospects of improving relations with Azerbaijan. While maintaining some degree of independence in conflict resolution, the authorities and society of Nagorno-Karabakh perceive the people and the leadership of Armenia as their only reliable allies in the confrontation with Azerbaijan.

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of which the whole Sinai peninsula, a territory of which exceed that of the sovereign State of Israel, 3 times was returned to Egypt; it was his successor Yitzhak Shamir, who headed the Israeli delegation at the Madrid international peace conference in 1991; it was another right-wing prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who signed the Wye River Memorandum, according to which Israel undertook to give the Palestinian Authority full or partial control of 40 percent of the Judea and Samaria territory. The dominant political party, be it as it may, should neither take the full credit for concluding agreements between Israel and the Arab countries, nor be held responsible for the failure of the talks. Both success or breakdown of a negotiation process depend mostly on the (non-)readiness of the Arab leaders to reach accord. This fact became particularly evident when then Prime Minister Ehud Barak was prepared to make unprecedented concessions in order to enter into a peace treaty with the Palestinians. His extraordinary efforts, however, resulted in nothing but a new cycle of the uprising... Ehud Barak, who was ready to generously compromise with both Palestine and Syria, had been the chief of Israeli special troops and the military intelligence."

Accordingly, the elites of Nagorno-Karabakh usually support the authorities of Armenia in periods of political tension and especially during elections. This was what they did in 1996, 2003, and 2008. Stepanakert's reaction to the 1998 removal of President Ter-Petrosyan from office was also part of the trend. Since the reason why Ter-Petrosyan had to resign was his offer to make concessions in the Karabakh issue, the society and elites of Nagorno-Karabakh were obviously not on his side. However, at that time, the position of Nagorno-Karabakh had little impact on the situation in Yerevan, so that the resignation of the first president resulted from pressure coming from inside the Armenian political elite and was determined by the position of domestic players.

#### KARABAKH IN ARMENIA: THE CONFLICT OVER NAGORNO-KARABAKH AS A FACTOR AND RESOURCE IN ARMENIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA

The impact of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh on Armenia's foreign policy has two dimensions. The first consists of Yerevan's reactions to Azerbaijan's policies with respect to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The second is the way the conflict is used by international policy-makers, affecting Armenia's foreign policy priorities.

It is only natural that reactions to Azerbaijan's actions are part of Yerevan's and Stepanakert's strategies. All parties in conflict use typical "propaganda war" techniques; apart from that, each party has its own methods and approaches. Azerbaijan's policies include pressure in the communication sphere; exploitation of the Caspian oil as a political, psychological and material resource; threats to resume warfare and an arms race. The strategies used by Yerevan and Stepanakert have the following dimensions:

- *Asymmetrical perceptions of the conflict*: first of all, asymmetrical interests of the parties and differing attitudes towards the conflict. What is regarded in Baku as a political problem, a component of nationbuilding, and an issue of prestige and revanchism, is considered a survival issue in Yerevan and even more so in Stepanakert. This asymmetric perception, often leading to the weaker side winning and the stronger side losing, has been manifest since the 1990s in armed conflicts between unrecognized entities and former parent states. Political asymmetry has its disadvantages, especially where its psychological perception is concerned.

The losing party can never forget that it lost to a weaker opponent.<sup>4</sup> Since irredentists are fewer in numbers and formally weaker, the losing party starts to believe they would have been unable to win the war on their own and had only won due to the support of external actors. Former parent states, therefore, have difficulty coming to terms with their defeat; this is a lot easier to do if one's opponent is more powerful. Historical experience shows that the revanchism of the losing party can only decrease after another devastating defeat (or series of defeats); it can also diminish over time if the *status quo* prevails for a long time. As military theorist Carl von Clausewitz pointed out, defeat in a war is almost never regarded by the losing side as an absolute and final reality, because "the conquered state often sees in it only a passing evil, which may be repaired after times by means of political combinations."<sup>5</sup>

- *The "complementarism" of Armenia's foreign policy*, i.e. the fact that Armenia avoids opposing either Russia or the West but tries to combine the interests of both while also taking heed of the Iranian factor in the conflict. Under whatever external conditions, Armenia comes across as much more pro-Western than Azerbaijan, whereas Russia perceives it as more pro-Russian than Azerbaijan. Moreover, Western political perceptions of Nagorno-Karabakh, given that Russian peacekeepers are not stationed in the zone of the conflict, are very different from perceptions of South Ossetia or Abkhazia.
- *Sustained military and technical parity* as a result of the fact that defensive action requires fewer men and smaller material resources. Moreover, many experts believe Armenia's army, and even more so Nagorno-Karabakh's army, to be better trained and better motivated than the army of Azerbaijan. Though smaller in size, the armies of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are mobile, have well-trained officers, and their mid- and top-level command consists almost entirely

4 The founder of Israel David Ben-Gurion wrote on November 27, 1948: "What is our reality: the Arab nations have been beaten by us. Will they forget that swiftly? 700,000 men have beaten 30 million. Will they forget this insult?" Ben-Gurion, David. *War Diary: the War of Independence. 1948-1949*. Eds. G.Rivlin and E.Orren. – Tel-Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1982 (in Hebrew), cited in: Shlaim, Avi. *Collision Across the Jordan*. – New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. – P.343. The Arab world was extremely bitter about the 1949 victory of Israel. The defeat the Arab nations suffered in Palestine became the embodiment of everything they disliked about their governments: their weakness, corruption, military incompetence, and inability to act together with other Arab countries. What made the defeat especially painful was that it came from a mere handful of "Zionist intruders". This bitterness laid the foundation for many years of Arab revanchism with regard to the much less numerous Jews.

5 Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1946/1946-8.txt>



of 1992-1994 war veterans. The structure of the two armies enables the mobile and efficient operations of small units, as suitable in the case of a defensive in the highlands. The fortified frontline offers Armenian armies an advantage when defending their positions against an offensive by Azerbaijan's more numerous troops. As regular military exercises in Nagorno-Karabakh have shown, almost the entire male population of Nagorno-Karabakh can be drafted in the event of war. These men include many veterans of the last war who have combat experience and good knowledge of the terrain. All this can compensate for the much larger numbers of soldiers on the side of Azerbaijan. A recent illustration was the March 3-4, 2008 encounter near the Levonarkh village in Nagorno-Karabakh, probably the largest-scale military engagement that occurred on the frontline in Nagorno-Karabakh since the May 1994 ceasefire.<sup>6</sup>

- *Balance of threats, or the deterrence policies of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.* The probability of war goes down with each next round in the arms race within the conflict zone. Seemingly ironic, this situation has been common since the time of the Cold War, and is well researched by political scientists. The arms race leads to mutual deterrence, when the military potentials of the parties in conflict become so high that any benefits a country might hope to get from starting the war cannot compensate for the potential human and material losses, to say nothing of the political consequences of a negative reaction on the part of the international community. At the time of the Cold War, it was the potential of nuclear weapons held by superpowers involved in a bipolar confrontation that led to deterrence. In the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, deterrence is ensured by conventional weapons. As a result of the arms race, the military potentials of parties in conflict are incomparably larger than they were during the war of the 1990s; it is very probable that should warfare resume, all parties would lose tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians in the very first days of combat. From a technical perspective, there is no reason to expect Azerbaijan to win a *blitzkrieg* in Nagorno-Karabakh; the most probable scenario is long-term trench warfare similar to the 1980-1988 war between Iran and Iraq. In the event of long-term engagement, the side that starts the war suffers greater military losses and more political damage too (in the eyes of the international community). By continuing to purchase more weapons, Azerbaijan can change the military balance in its

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<sup>6</sup> During this encounter, timed to coincide with post-election unrest in Armenia in early March 2008, a reconnaissance unit of the Azerbaijani army assailed Karabakh positions on the north-west stretch of the frontline. The unit met with Karabakh troops, including many veterans, and had to withdraw. The encounter left 13 to 15 Azerbaijani soldiers dead, and just two Armenians wounded.

favour to some extent; however, it is another type of balance – the “balance of threats” – that that will ensure stability in the zone of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and make the parties in conflict sustain fragile and instable peace for quite a long time. British military theorist and historian Basil Liddell-Hart once said that “the *object in war is to attain a better peace* — even if only from your own point of view.”<sup>7</sup> In a situation when every party in conflict is aware that whatever the outcome of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, it is going to lose tens of thousands of men and suffer large material and economic damage, it will think very hard before deciding to resume the war. Should Azerbaijan make this decision, there is not much chance that the resulting peace will be a better one. As Liddell-Hart wrote, “victory in the true sense implies that the state of peace, and of one's people, is better after the war than before. Victory in this sense is possible only if a quick result can be gained or if a long effort can be economically proportioned to the national resources. The end must be adjusted to the means.”<sup>8</sup>

- *Conversion of the time factor into a power resource in the political struggle*: time is a resource that all post-Soviet unrecognized states use to strengthen their political de-facto existence and status. In most modern local conflicts, success in a military campaign does not directly depend on the military and technical potentials of the parties in conflict. Non-military factors are at least as important; these include political, psychological and ideological factors, including the ability to mobilize society and legitimize military action throughout all strata of the population.<sup>9</sup> Time plays a leading role here. As a potential initiator of a revanchist outbreak of war, Azerbaijan would face more problems with legitimizing a military campaign than Nagorno-Karabakh, for which this war would become a war for survival. The history of colonial wars and current confrontations between unrecognized quasi-states shows that the asymmetrical motives and ambitions of parties in conflict lead to a situation when, as David Lynch found, “the de facto states are playing the long game, in which not losing means winning.”<sup>10</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh might not win a new exhausting war with Azerbaijan, whether a trench war or long-distance war, but that would not be the same as losing it. As for the

7 Liddell-Hart, Basil. *The Strategy of Indirect Approach*. – London: Faber and Faber, 1941. – P.202.

8 Liddell-Hart, Basil. *The Strategy of Indirect Approach*. – New York: Fredrik A. Praeger, 1954. – P. 370.

9 Deriglazova, Larisa. “Paradoks asimmetriyi v mezhdunarodnom konflikte” (“The Asymmetry Paradox in International Conflict”). *Mezhdunarodnye Protssessy*. Volume 3. Issue 3(9), September-December 2005 (in Russian).

10 Lynch, David. “Separatist States and Post-Soviet Conflicts.” *International Affairs*, Vol.78, # 4, 2002. – P.848.

leadership of Azerbaijan, which has been talking about reclaiming Nagorno-Karabakh by military force for 14 years now, any outcome except total control over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh amounts to political and military defeat with ensuing consequences for the ruling elite.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh do not limit their strategy to reacting to Azerbaijan's policies, especially since it had been the two Armenian parties that initiated the original conflict back in 1998. Yerevan, and to some extent also Stepanakert, make their own steps towards using the "Karabakh factor" as a foreign policy resource regardless of current developments in their confrontation with Azerbaijan. In a way, Georgia does the same when it uses its conflicts over Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia and its confrontation with Russia as major trump cards in its foreign policy game, bringing Georgia significant political and economical dividends from the West regardless of developments in Abkhazia and Ossetia proper. This dimension of the Karabakh factor in Armenia's foreign policy, though intertwined with the direct confrontation with Azerbaijan, still deserves to be considered as a trend in itself.

At any rate, Armenia's leadership insists that it is prepared to unfold its foreign policy regardless of developments in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh or of the economic and political price that Armenia has to pay for those developments; it is set on pursuing its strategies and integrating into European structures. The stringent reality of the conflict does not give much hope for any improvement of relations with Azerbaijan in the short-term or even in the mid-term perspective. Accordingly, Armenia needs to resign to the situation and try to build relations with other regional countries, international organizations and world powers. The Armenian authorities believe that by creating a positive environment for regional integration, cooperation and trust, they can hope to prepare a platform for improving relations with Azerbaijan in the future.

An initiative that may prove the most important in this sphere is the effort to normalize relations and potentially open the borders between Armenia and Turkey.

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11 Henry Kissinger described the asymmetry of the US engagement in Vietnam, where the "weak" side was able to win the war by not losing it. Small nations which are at war for a meaningful cause that unites the society (e.g. Finland in the 1939-1940 Winter War, Algeria in 1950-1960, Vietnam in its wars against France and the US between the 1940s and the 1970s, Israel in the wars with Arab nations in 1948-1982, unrecognized post-Soviet states in the early 1990s) can, under favorable political and psychological conditions, keep mobilizing material and human resources for a long enough time to win a war against a much stronger opponent.

Another approach, seemingly contrasting with Armenian-Turkish normalization, is to make use of the conflict to stimulate the interest of European organizations and world powers in the South Caucasus. The conflict, and the information flow arising from it, is used to attract attention and to stimulate economic aid and political support. In other words, Yerevan exploits the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in order to boost the geopolitical importance of Armenia in the regional format and on European platforms. Another example of Armenia's reliance on Western political formats is the way it utilizes European and US interests as resources for Armenian-Turkish normalization. This, too, has a direct impact on the situation in the conflict and on the relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.