



The Silent Guns of August: Why the Karabakh War Has Not Begun Anew

Sergey Minasyan



© 2014 Caucasus Institute, Yerevan

Policy Brief #1, September 2014

www.c-i.am

Policy Brief Caucasus Institute, №1, Yerevan, September 2014.

Author: Sergey Minasyan, Doctor of Political Studies, Deputy Director of Caucasus Institute

Editors: Hrant Mikaelyan, Nina Iskandaryan

The policy brief analyses the clashes that took place in early August 2014 along the military contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh and the borderline between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The clashes resulted in an unprecedented number of casualties since the ceasefire, but did not transform into a full-scale war. The policy brief offers an explanation of this fact within the paradigm of deterrence in the conflict zone, and discusses the potential impact of the clashes on the military and diplomatic confrontation.

The Silent Guns of August. Why the Karabakh War Has Not Begun Anew

A spiral of escalation or media hype?	2
Is an accidental war possible?	3
Military deterrence: the logic of peacekeeping in Karabakh	4
What can diplomacy achieve?	5

A spell of heavy shooting across the contact line in Karabakh and the borderline between Armenia and Azerbaijan took place in August 2014. The level of escalation was unprecedented since the May 1994 signing of the ceasefire agreement in the Karabakh conflict zone.

A distance of two months is sufficient for unbiased analysis. It is clear that alarmist statements and predictions made by the parties in conflict and external actors have failed to come true: the clashes on the border have not caused the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh to escalate into a full-scale war.

A spiral of escalation or media hype?

Once the clashes began in early August 2014, a variety of conspiracy theories began circulating in the media of Armenia and Azerbaijan, placing the clashes in the context of the confrontation between Russia and the West in the light of events unleashing in Ukraine. A popular version in Armenia was that Baku was taking advantage of Moscow's involvement at the Ukrainian frontier and making a move to renew a full-scale military campaign.

During the first days of August 2014, experts and journalists predicted an unavoidable “escalation spiral” across the entire range of mass media. An analogy became popular, one with Barbara Tuchman’s bestselling novel, “The Guns of August”, depicting events preceding the involvement of European powers in the World War I during August 1914. The date was also just right: exactly a century later. It was to represent Armenia at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of World War I, as a participant and even winner of that war, that Armenia’s president Serzh Sargsyan’s flew to Belgium on the 3rd of August 2014.

As it often happens in politics, the events that took place (or, rather, didn’t take place) in the Karabakh conflict zone at the beginning of August 2014 followed a complicated and to some extent accidental trajectory. The details of what happened at the contact line are well known now, so that there is no need here to cite information that can be found in the press. What is more important is to assess the scope and understand the logic of what happened (or did not happen), and how it can influence the military-political situation around Nagorno-Karabakh and the logic of conflict development.

According to Azerbaijani military expert Uzeir Djafarov, in three days of clashes in August 2014 Azerbaijani armed forces experienced the biggest losses since the signing of the

ceasefire agreement in May 1994. This is also corroborated by official information circulated by the defence ministries of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Understandably, the public in Azerbaijan was shocked. The country's military-political leadership responded by sending large numbers of artillery to the border and launching military airplanes to fly over the contact line. The Armenian side reacted in proportion by strengthening frontier subdivisions.

However, a new war over Nagorno-Karabakh did not start. Due to the large loss of human life, attempts to prolong the escalation failed. The display of Azerbaijan's military potential was clearly aimed at disguising its inability to launch a new large-scale war over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Is an accidental war possible?

Why didn't the predictions of bloggers and columnists come true? The answer to this question is surprisingly logical and therefore insufficiently convincing for the public in Armenia, Karabakh, and to some extent also in Azerbaijan and outside the region. Faced with a threat of war, the general public cannot be expected to analyze the complicated balance of power and military-political factors. It is hard to understand why, despite everyday calls for war, the status quo has remained unchanged for two decades.

The answer lies in the area of military strategy and deterrence theory. Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the most militarized regions anywhere in the world. In a place like that, a new war cannot begin by accident because the party that initiates the war will have a huge price to pay, especially in the absence of political support from external actors. Given the huge military potential of the parties in conflict, the extent of their militarization, and the awareness that each has of the other's military and technical capacity, the stakes are enormous. And indeed, despite the two decade arms race, the military balance in the conflict zone between Armenia and Azerbaijan has not undergone any qualitative change since the mid-1990s. What did change is that back then, the armies had dozens, and now they have hundreds and even thousands of tanks and personnel carriers, artillery and missile systems, airplanes and helicopters.

At the current stage of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan can hardly make a rational political decision to renew the warfare, given that it is likely to end up as a

long-term war with uncertain results rather than a successful *blitzkrieg*. Every new round of the arms race increases the stakes of the war, preventing the parties from causing an accidental escalation, so that the renewal of military actions in the conflict zone is currently only possible in the event that a political decision is made at the top level by one of the parties in conflict.

Tens of thousands of soldiers on full combat alert have been stationed along the contact line for about two decades now; the two armies have huge military and technical power and are positioned to target industrial areas, infrastructures and cities, including capitals. With the stakes so high, claims that an “accidental war” may break out in the region do not correspond to fundamental military strategy or the military deterrence theory, and are often made for the sake of politics or propaganda or both.

Military deterrence: the logic of peacekeeping in Karabakh

Of course, by pure coincidence, a few successful operations in a row (e.g. reconnaissance missions, subversive raids or sniper fire) may give one of the parties in conflict a false sense of optimism and superiority, thereby creating potential incentives for a political decision to make the conflict escalate further.

This was the logic behind Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh’s tough retaliation against the raids of early August 2014. The goal was to quash the violent outburst before it escalates. To achieve this, the Armenian parties in conflict aimed to destroy Azerbaijan’s hopes for further success and leave it no option to interpret the outcome of the clashes in a victorious spirit. This retaliation style has been practiced by Armenia since the armistice (e.g. the clashes near the village of Levonarkh on March 2-3, 2008, the summer 2011 escalation in the conflict zone and along the borderline between Armenia and Azerbaijan, etc.).

After each series of raids and retaliations, the mass media and the Internet are flooded by panicky prophecies of further escalation of the conflict. On several occasions in the last few years, Azerbaijan even launched military aircraft and drew its troops closer to the frontline. However, the only outcome of these actions has been that tension along the frontline diminished, albeit temporarily. In fact, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh have for two decades been implementing a typical Cold-War-style deterrence policy, in which threats of incurring unacceptable losses are used to prevent the adversary from making undesirable military-political steps.

The media grossly overstated Azerbaijan's use of artillery during the August clashes. According to military data, Azerbaijani units shelled the Armenian positions using small calibre (23 mm) ZU-23 double-barrelled anti-aircraft automatic guns. In the last few decades, this make of gun has become popular in local conflicts worldwide. Apart from its intended targets (helicopters and low-flying airplanes) it is also being effectively used against targets on the ground, as support for infantry raids.

In the media reports, ZU-23 anti-aircraft guns were soon promoted to anti-aircraft missile systems, and after a while some media even ran the story with photos of Grad multiple rocket launcher systems (MLRS) supposedly used by the Azerbaijani army. This was not true, and could not have been, for the military and political reasons explained above.

What can diplomacy achieve?

Against the background of the clashes, all the August 10 Sochi meeting between the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia could achieve was acknowledge the military and political reality that had formed in the previous week. Apart from this, Russia used the Sochi meeting as an opportunity to display its peacekeeping potential, crucial in the light of the Ukrainian crisis and confrontation with the West. Moreover, Russia made it clear that it was not interested in the renewal of armed hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh and would do everything in its power to prevent the parties in conflict from starting a new war, which would be extremely undesirable for Russia at the moment.

This was all that happened at the trilateral meeting. It did not lead to a breakthrough in the negotiations, reduction of tensions at frontline, or the implementation of trust-building measures. The parties did not agree to withdraw snipers from the borders or to desist reconnaissance and subversive raids. Apparently, that had been the parties' intention all along, and the true purpose of the meeting had been to acknowledge, at the top level, the current (albeit temporary) de-escalation of the conflict. This purpose was achieved.

The meeting also showed that, with relations between Russia and the West deteriorating, the OSCE Minsk Group co-chaired by Russia, France and the U.S. remained the only effective format in which these three countries could cooperate on the level of world politics. This fact was proved by the next meeting of Armenia's and Azerbaijan's presidents held at the beginning of September 2014 within the framework of the NATO Summit in Wales and mediated by the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry. Plans to organize the next

meeting in Paris, this time mediated by the third member-state, France, point in the same direction.

Understandably, it is too soon for the advocates for peace in Nagorno-Karabakh to sigh with relief. The situation at the frontline may escalate again even though without provoking a full-scale war. Already in September 2014, another round of shelling and raids happened on the border, with casualties on both sides bearing testimony to the tough reality of an unresolved conflict.

Sergey Minasyan is the Deputy Director and Head of Political Studies Department at the Caucasus Institute in Yerevan, Armenia. He holds a PhD in Military History (2002) at the Institute of History under the National Academy of Sciences and Doctor of Political Science degree at the Institute for National Security Studies at the Ministry of Defence of Armenia (2013). Sergey Minasyan holds a MA in International Relations from the Department of International Relations, Yerevan State University (1998) and graduated from the Council of Europe Yerevan School of Political Studies in 2010.

Caucasus Institute (CI) – is one of the leading think-tanks and educational centers in Armenia and the entire region. It implements research in the areas of political science, social sciences and media studies with regard to the Southern and Northern Caucasus. The CI also engages in regional studies on a wider scope.

Founded in Yerevan in 2002, the CI offers a neutral platform for non-politicized debate on acute issues of the region's political and social development. Based on research, the CI conducts expert consultations, roundtable discussions and conferences. CI produces publications in various formats, including Caucasus Yearbooks, which sum up various aspects of politics, social life and economics in the Southern and Northern Caucasus every year.

The CI is special in that it combines research and debates with close ties to the news media, actively engaging the media in order to inform the region's societies and political elites of the results of policy research. Its wide public outreach enables CI to influence the public opinion as well as professional discourses, and to propose recommendations to political decision-makers.

After its founding in 2002 and until mid-2008, the institute was called the CMI or Caucasus Media Institute, stressing its media ties. The changeover to just "Caucasus Institute" reflects the broadening scope of CI activities and its focus on politics, economics and society in the wider Caucasus region.

Caucasus Institute
31/4 Charents St.
0025 Yerevan, Armenia
contact@c-i.am
www.c-i.am