



The Prospects of Nagorno-Karabakh Political Status after the Second Karabakh War

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Almost a year after the tripartite ceasefire statement, the security along the Nagorno-Karabakh contact line is stable mainly thanks to Russian peacekeeping forces.

Most sensitive for both parties and heavily downplayed by Azerbaijan after its successful military campaign, the future of the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh remains uncertain. In the post-war period, the traditional framework of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace negotiations - the OSCE Minsk Group - has practically been sidelined from the ongoing diplomatic processes. Moreover, the current negotiations over humanitarian issues, the return of prisoners of war, the opening of regional transport communications etc., which were traditionally considered as prerogatives of the Minsk Group framework, are now only mediated by Russia.

Moscow's post-war formula of the conflict management assumes the deferment of discussions over the highly sensitive status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Instead, Moscow actively proposes the implementation of the January 11 statement, which entails the opening of transport communications between Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to Russia, the processes of regionalization in the South Caucasus and multilateral regional cooperation will create a conducive atmosphere for mutual trust before the status negotiations.

To this end, a trilateral commission of Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani deputy prime ministers convened in January to discuss the opening of regional communications. With some delays, namely after Azerbaijani soldiers invaded the Armenian Syunik region, thus far the commission have had four meetings with eight sessions in Moscow.

In Stepanakert, the clarification of its status is considered to be a prerequisite for long-lasting regional peace; thus negotiations within the Minsk Group should be resumed. Moreover, the government of Nagorno-Karabakh regularly voices the necessity of the de-occupation of NKAO territories of Shushi and Hadrut now under Azerbaijani control.

After months of domestic turmoil, the reelected government of Armenia finally formulated its position on regional issues. Yerevan calls for the resumption of the Minsk Group negotiations to determine the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh while circumventing to specify Yerevan's vision of the status. Armenia welcomes the prospects of regionalization with a strict commitment to open transport communications and carry out the demarcation of borders.

However, Baku consistently claims that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been resolved and does not acknowledge the existence of Nagorno-Karabakh as a separate entity, thus rejecting any prospects of negotiation resumption under the auspices or within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. Azerbaijan welcomes the process of regionalization and vigorously insists on the opening of so called "Zangezur Corridor" to Nakhichevan. Besides, Azerbaijan proposes a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a premise of regional peace.

In parallel, Turkey continues to support Azerbaijan with political and military means, a fact marked by the Shushi declaration signed during Erdogan's visit to Shushi in June. Proclaiming a qualitatively new level of relations, the comprehensive document, which ironically does not include the "Karabakh" toponym, reaffirms bilateral commitment to defend each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity if those are threatened by a third party. Not surprisingly, the declarations also touch upon so called "Zangesur Corridor" in the context of connecting Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Moreover, being the first foreign leader to visit Azerbaijani captured territories, Erdogan, during his speech at the Azerbaijani Parliament, did not exclude the prospect of the deployment of a Turkish military base in Azerbaijan, which could be the first non-Russian base in the post-soviet area. Russia rushed to respond to Erdogan on behalf of Putin's spokesperson Peskov assuring that Russia will take steps to ensure its security and interests in that case, while it previously considered Shushi declaration a matter of sheer Turkish-Azerbaijani bilateral relations.

As to Iran, its position with regard to the status of Nagorno-Karabakh is much vaguer, conditioned to some extent on the regional and geopolitical arrangements. However, Iran positively reacts to the idea of regionalization supposing that it would have own benefits from it.

In contrast to regional countries, the other two Co-Chairs of the Minsk Group, the US and France, whose engagement in regional issues heavily suffered after the last war, consider the conflict unresolved until the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh is defined, which will be a premise of long-lasting peace and regional stability. Therefore, they insist on a re-involvement of the OSCE Co-Chairs in negotiations over Nagorno-Karabakh. In a similar manner, recently, the EU put forward a step-by-step rehabilitation plan of the post-conflict situation which includes the resumption of negotiations within the Minsk Group over four themes: the return of POWs, border demarcation, transport communications, and political status.

In sum, after the Second Karabakh War, the future political status of Nagorno-Karabakh is obscure as ever. Azerbaijan rejects any form of self-determination of the Karabakh people, while Yerevan and Stepanakert call on resumption of the Minsk Group negotiations over the final status of Karabakh based on the self-determination principle. While the US and France find necessary the change of the current status-quo in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia's stance is more moderate. With uncertainty of the fate of Russian peacekeepers after four years, Moscow's vision on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict now supposes a beginning of a regionalization process, which includes cross border trade and transportation, and the demarcation of boundaries between Armenia and Azerbaijan.