



Another Regional War in the Wings

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In the conflict zone stretching from Syria to Afghanistan lies another war waiting to re-emerge: Nagorno-Karabakh. This dispute is likely to occupy President Obama's new foreign-policy team whether they want it or not.

Two decades ago the newly independent states of Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a bitter war over this remote area of mountains and valleys. Armenia won the war, but nobody has achieved peace. A fragile ceasefire signed in 1994 remains the only tangible achievement of diplomacy.

Since then, a mediation effort led by Washington, Moscow and Paris has sought a solution. Despite the best efforts of the three governments—including presidential initiatives by all three—the parties to the conflict do not and will not negotiate. This impasse has contributed to a dangerous evolution of the dispute in recent years from post-war to pre-war.

A major arms race is underway, fueled by Azerbaijan's oil and gas wealth and by Armenia's support from Russia. Azerbaijan is acquiring a distinct advantage in military technology and firepower, but Armenia retains major advantages of terrain and operational skill. Azerbaijan has a patron in Turkey, which feels a fraternal commitment, but Armenia has a treaty-based security alliance and historical partnership with Russia.

A new war would likely be pyrrhic for both sides, but also dwarf the first war in scale and destruction. The initial conflict was limited to Karabakh and its surroundings, and was largely an infantry fight. The next war will engage Armenia and Azerbaijan against each other directly, with greatly expanded arsenals. Both sides plan on this basis and both threaten to target civilian infrastructure, such as pipelines. Serious ceasefire violations have recently occurred on their joint border, not just around Karabakh.

The international mediation effort, though complex, envisions a final settlement involving an exchange of land for peace. In earlier years, diplomats and politicians in Baku and Yerevan privately acknowledged that a settlement would involve Armenian withdrawal from lowland territories to the east and south of Karabakh, as well as Azerbaijani acceptance of an Armenian identity for Karabakh and a link with Armenia to the west. Today, the land-for-peace concept is essentially dead on both sides. Armenia demands "comprehensive security" in the captured lands around Karabakh, while Azerbaijan believes its new weaponry and support from Turkey can restore its full Soviet-era territorial control.

Political rhetoric on both sides dehumanizes the other. Each side exploits its refugees and wallows in a cult of victimization. Each side outrages the other: last year Baku lionized an officer who committed a vicious axe murder of an Armenian in Hungary; Yerevan publishes maps of "Armenia" which include large swaths of inherently Azerbaijani territory. Each believes war will bring military triumph and historical fulfillment. Both cannot be correct in their expectations, but both certainly can be wrong.

The broader danger lies in the patron-client relationships of the regional great powers, Russia with Armenia and Turkey with Azerbaijan. Ankara and Moscow would not actually come to blows in a new Karabakh war, but both can be dragged into dangerous circumstances by their clients. The Azerbaijani tail has already wagged the Turkish dog to prevent normalizing relations between Ankara and Yerevan. (For the time being, Iran plays a marginal political role, but provides vital energy and trade links to Armenia. However, Tehran's relations with Baku are poisonous and, in a new Karabakh war, Iran might seek to settle accounts.)

The parties to the conflict have demonstrated that a peaceful resolution does not lie with them unaided. However, the international mediators have been consistently abused, as Baku and Yerevan hide behind them to avoid genuine negotiations. While mediation may have been appropriate for the post-war environment of the 1990s, the present pre-war atmosphere calls for a more direct and forceful approach.

The missing element in the diplomatic equation is Turkey, which needs to play a political role comparable to Russia. Only Moscow and Ankara working together can restrain their clients from renewed war and compel them to real negotiations. This kind of traditional great power collusion may be out of fashion, but it can work and is far preferable to another war. Ankara and Moscow have differing priorities on Karabakh, but they share broadly similar views on Black Sea, Caucasian and Caspian issues. They both want to avoid a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan while not allowing their clients to compromise their own wider interests.

Unfortunately, Turkey today is so bogged down on its southern frontier that it pays inadequate attention to the looming danger to the east. The failure of its previous effort to normalize relations with Armenia has made Ankara both overly cautious and prone to excessive influence from Baku. However, Karabakh is an opportunity for active Turkish diplomacy both to contribute to a regional settlement and to regularize ties with Yerevan.

American diplomats have tried to be evenhanded toward Armenia and Azerbaijan, but U.S. influence on this conflict is, candidly, inadequate. Thus, Washington should encourage a more active Turkish role and welcome collaboration by Russia and Turkey as Caucasian peacemakers.

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