

Edging Towards the Big Agreement

By Hratch Tchilingirian

The dispute between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over Nagorno-Karabakh - a small enclave of 4,388 square kilometres in Azerbaijan, with a population of about 150,000 - is the oldest conflict in the former Soviet Union. By 1991, what started as a popular movement for self-determination in 1988 had turned into a full-scale war with far-reaching political and military implications for the region. The situation in Karabakh was further complicated by the fact that both parties in the conflict - the Armenians of Karabakh and the Republic of Azerbaijan - consider Karabakh an integral part of their territory. In September 1991, the Karabakh Armenians declared an independent Republic of Mountainous Karabakh. No state has recognised Karabakh's claim to independent statehood. While the war is not officially over, May 12, 1995, marked the first anniversary of the cease-fire in Karabakh, after six years of armed conflict and bloodshed.

Willingly or unwillingly, the Republic of Armenia - after declaring independence in 1991 - was drawn into the war and became a formally recognised party to the conflict with Azerbaijan. Yet Armenia has insisted all along that it is not at war with Azerbaijan and that it does not have any territorial disputes with its neighbour. Levon Ter Petrossian, Armenia's President, has stated at every possible opportunity - from the UN General Assembly to the summit of the Confederation of Independent States (CIS) in Almaty - that negotiations should be held directly between Azerbaijan and Karabakh. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has persistently refused to recognise the Karabakh Armenians as a side in the conflict.

From 1988 to 1992, there was lack of international diplomatic and political will to resolve the Karabakh problem. However, in February 1992 the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) - the CSCE at the time - called for a cease-fire, humanitarian aid, an arms embargo and guarantees for human rights. Since then, the OSCE has become actively involved in facilitating negotiations for the peaceful settlement of the Karabakh conflict - and, since March 1992, the OSCE's Minsk Group has become the main forum of negotiations. During more than half a dozen Minsk Group meetings between the parties to the conflict, attempts have focused on drawing a "Big Political Agreement" between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis.

At the last OSCE Minsk Group negotiations held in Moscow in May, Vardan Oskanian, Armenia's First Deputy Foreign Minister, outlined the main issues discussed during the meetings. Armenia's position on the five points of the Agreement could be summarised as follows:

1) The security of Nagorno-Karabakh. As far as Armenia is concerned, there are four necessary conditions for Karabakh's security. First, the deployment of international peace-keeping forces; second, full demilitarisation of liberated territories; third, permanent land connection between Karabakh and Armenia; fourth, guarantees to be provided by the UN, OSCE and possibly CIS Interparliamentary Conference that the hostilities will not be resumed. The terms of the guarantees have not yet been specified, but they would include deployment of multi-national peace-keeping forces and setting up of monitoring structures in the region.

2) The Lachin corridor issue - the land passage that connects Karabakh with the Republic of Armenia. Armenia maintains that the issue of Lachin should be discussed irrespective of the issue of Shusha (the "Golan Heights" of Karabakh). For Armenia, the status of Lachin can be resolved only after the status of Karabakh is determined.

3) The problem of Shusha - a strategic area for both the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis. For Armenia, the question of Shusha could only be considered in connection with the issue of the return of refugees to their homeland. According to official estimates, there are about 450,000 refugees spread throughout Armenia and the former Soviet republics, and close to 1 million refugees in Azerbaijan - mostly near the Iranian border.

4) The status of Karabakh. Armenia did not raise this issue at the last Moscow negotiations, but Azerbaijan and Karabakh did. Armenia said it would agree to any decision taken by Azerbaijan and Karabakh concerning the status issue. Armenia has always thought that this should be determined by the Minsk Group conference.

5) Refugees from the Northern Caucasus. There are an estimated 400,000 refugees from Chechnya now living in various parts of Transcaucasia - mostly in Ingushetia and Dagestan. The conflict in Chechnya has major implications for the stability of the region. Karabakh is particularly concerned about the growing number of refugees coming to the southern areas of the Caucasus. Armenia has not presented any position on the problem.

According to the Foreign Ministry of Armenia, there is so far no consensus among the parties to the conflict - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Karabakh - on these issues. As to the deployment of peacekeeping forces, it is generally agreed that it will take place only after the Big Political Agreement is signed. Armenian and Azerbaijani negotiators have resumed the talks in Helsinki, on June 15. Meanwhile, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the cease-fire, on May 12 of this year, POWs and hostages were exchanged between Armenia and Azerbaijan under the auspices of the Minsk Group and the International Red Cross.

The OSCE and the regional powers are eager to resolve the Karabakh conflict. Besides the military threat it presents to the region, the conflict is having a great impact on the economic development of the Caucasus. Armenia has been blockaded by Azerbaijan, causing extreme hardship in daily life and stalling economic recovery. Azerbaijan's "deal of the century" with Western and regional oil companies to exploit its oil reserves has been greatly hampered by the war in Karabakh. It is to the benefit of all the sides to resolve the Karabakh question as speedily as possible, so that the state and nation-building processes that have started in these newly independent states could continue under more favourable conditions.

One of the main objectives of Armenia's foreign policy has been to establish normal and friendly relations with its neighbours: Georgia, Iran, Turkey and Azerbaijan. Despite the occasional internal problems in Georgia, Georgian-Armenian relations have been friendly. Iranian-Armenian relations have been increasingly solidified by numerous bilateral agreements. Turkish-Armenian

relations are not normal yet, but the prospects are promising. As for Armenian-Azerbaijan relations, Armenia has been trying to find a way of normalising relations without antagonising its own population. Armenia finds itself in a precarious situation, where it has to balance finding an acceptable resolution to the Karabakh conflict with securing a normal life for its citizens.

What are the prospects of solving the Karabakh conflict? A compromise solution would be as follows: Nagorno-Karabakh would remain as part of the Republic of Azerbaijan, territorially and legally. But Karabakh Armenians would be given real independence or autonomy (unlike the Soviet model) to run their affairs,

with a permanent land link to the Republic of Armenia. Variations of this scenario are already being discussed in political circles in the region, as well as in diplomatic circles in the West.

As both sides become increasingly tired of the war and the military situation, the chances for a political agreement are increasing. If negotiations fail and hostilities intensify, both Armenia and Azerbaijan would find it difficult to mobilise their scarce resources for war again. Thus, a gradual shift toward a political settlement of the Karabakh conflict is seen as imminent. This would be desirable for the whole region.

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Fragile Cease-fire

By Leila Aliyeva in Baku

Despite the idea that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict triggered the disintegration of the Soviet Union and accelerated the liberation of the former Soviet republics, in reality it was a distraction for the countries of the Caucasus. It distorted the struggle for independence from Moscow and totalitarian regimes into a bloody war over patches of territory, and started the chain of wars all over the former Soviet territories. Constructive processes of democratic, economic and social development were obstructed by the ethnic and territorial conflict.

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is not unique and has much in common with the conflicts in former Yugoslavia and in the Middle East. After seven years of conflict, including five years of war, Azerbaijan has failed to protect its internationally recognised borders and has lost nearly 20 per cent of its territory, far more than just the Nagorno-Karabakh region itself. For its part, Armenia has not succeeded in opening communications with Azerbaijan or in escaping its economic crisis. With 17,000 killed and 50,000 wounded, the conflict has created more than 500,000 refugees from both sides, and as a result of the scorched earth tactics and ethnic cleansing applied by Armenian forces on the occupied territories, nearly 600,000 Azeris have fled to refugee camps in other parts of the country.

However, the 12 May 1994 cease-fire agreement between the parties has now held for more than a year, suggesting that the war is not popular in either republic. Yet several breaches of the cease-fire during this period have also proved the fragility and instability of the situation at the front, suggesting that the cease-fire might not hold indefinitely if it is not supported by some essential measures.

The resolution of the conflict is complicated by the overt interference by the Russian military in the conflict and its alliance with Armenia. In general, this conflict allows the direct military participation of outside parties, because international and European organisations regard this remote region as a traditionally Russian sphere of interest, and are now uncertain about border questions in the former Soviet Union.

Besides that, Western foreign policies towards Russia's behaviour in the "near abroad" are still unsure. Competition of the West with Russia over mediation of the conflict ended up with joint partici-

pation with the Russians in peace-making within the framework of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Thus, a solution to the conflict depends not only on the warring parties but also on whether the great powers can resolve contradictions between themselves.

There is an essential difference in the definition of "justice" by the Armenians and Azerbaijanis. If Armenians define justice for themselves by reference to the past, to historical grievances, and to memories of Greater Armenia, Azerbaijanis consider appeals to history as a dead end, and are far more concerned with the present problem of national minorities on their respective territories. At the beginning of the conflict each ethnic group was represented in both republics, so it was quite natural for the Azerbaijanis to expect reciprocal resolution of the problem. However, the conflict began with the expulsion of the entire Azeri population from Armenia by the end of 1989, and this inequality rankles with Azerbaijan.

This factor creates mutual incomprehension between each party in negotiations. Where the conflict turned into a full-scale war, a few peace plans were put forward, for example those by the American analysts John Maresca and Paul Goble, or by political groups within the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities. These ranged from an oil pipeline uniting Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey to confederation or dual citizenship.

Peace efforts are taking place on both the official and un-official levels. Such conflict resolution methods, including dialogue group, mediation and facilitation have deeper and more long-term effect than the official agreements, but when applied at the wrong stage of the conflict they can lose their effectiveness. Timing is important because the success of such groups depends very much on the balance of power, of military superiority, and external political support. Very often the difficult process of peaceful resolution through dialogue groups can be completely neutralised by official foreign policies disrupting their effectiveness. Conflict-resolution measures are at their most effective when the situation has matured when both sides realise that they cannot gain from the war and when there is a change in the balance of power depriving them both external support.