

Karabakh

A Time For Thoughtfulness?

Beneath the surface, new and possibly constructive positions are being tested

By Hratch Tchilingirian

The conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over Nagorno-Karabakh has resisted attempts at a solution since the Karabakh Armenians' independence movement emerged in 1988. Over two dozen OSCE sponsored negotiations, initiated since 1992, have failed to resolve the oldest conflict in the former Soviet Union. The last formal talks between the parties to the conflict under the auspices of the OSCE's Minsk Group were almost a year ago. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan and Karabakh Armenians are as far apart from each other on key issues as they were five years ago.

In May the Minsk Group co-chairmen (Russia, US and France) presented a new proposal. The key elements were that Karabakh would receive autonomous status within Azerbaijan; security guarantees would be given to Karabakh by the international community; Karabakh would reduce its own armed forces; and Karabakh Armenian forces would withdraw from six regions in Azerbaijan, including Shusha and Lachin, followed by the return of refugees.

While Azerbaijan and Armenia disagreed with some of the terms, Karabakh rejected the entire proposal, particularly the prospect of remaining within Azerbaijan. Karabakh Armenians have clearly stated that their independence is not negotiable. They would only agree to a "horizontal" relationship with Azerbaijan. Baku, however, has refused to speak directly to them

and chosen to portray the conflict as purely a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. They will never be able to resolve the question of their status. Prime Minister Robert Kocharian and Defence Minister Vazgen Sarkisyan of Armenia have fully supported Karabakh's position and have spoken in favour of the package solution. In response to negative public opinion and the politically motivated protests of the opposition parties in Armenia, Ter-Petrosyan took the unusual step of explaining his position in a long article—entitled "War or Peace? Time for Thoughtfulness"—published in Yerevan on November 1. In the article, Ter-Petrosyan stated that "by first rejecting the package, then the step by step solution, and today proposing to return to the package approach, the Karabakh side has put both Karabakh and Armenia in an uncomfortable situation." He emphasised that the key issue is not a phased or a package solution, but "the resumption of negotiations". Ter-Petrosyan warned that if the parties to the conflict do not "accept a draft document that would constitute the basis for the negotiations" before the next ministerial meeting of the OSCE in December, "then we can expect serious complications." He reassured the public and his opponents that Armenia will not sign any document without Karabakh.

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After this six month impasse, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and French President Jacques Chirac agreed in Strasbourg in early October to invite the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan to Moscow for talks on the Karabakh conflict. No details or dates have been announced for such a meeting, but their offer prompted a statement from two of the parties. While attending the Council of Europe summit in Strasbourg, Presidents Levon Ter-Petrosyan of Armenia and Heidar Aliiev of Azerbaijan met and in a joint statement after the meeting declared that "Armenia and Azerbaijan are in favour of a peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by political means." Since then, diplomatic efforts, especially by Russia, the US and France, have focused on restarting the negotiations that were interrupted in November 1996.

Armenia and Karabakh are divided over whether to choose a phased or a package resolution of the conflict. At a press conference in late October President Ter-Petrosyan expressed his support for the so-called phased settlement suggested by the Minsk Group co-chairmen. In the first stage, Karabakh forces would withdraw from six regions of Azerbaijan proper—the "occupied territories"—and international peacekeeping forces would be deployed. In the second stage, the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh would be decided.

The Karabakh leadership, however, has publicly rejected Ter-Petrosyan's position in favour of a package solution. Karabakh Armenians mistrust the Azerbaijani leadership, fearing that once Karabakh gives up the "occupied

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In Baku, Azerbaijani opposition parties, among them Yeni Musavat and the Popular Front, have also criticised the phased solution, if on different grounds. They reject the proposal because it "fails to preserve Azerbaijan's territorial integrity" and leaves fewer political levers for Azerbaijan. Former President Abulfaz Elchibey rejected the OSCE proposal and stated that Karabakh should have no more than "cultural autonomy". He advocated military action to resolve

means."

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan Foreign Minister Hasan Hasanov expressed satisfaction that Armenia has "given a positive answer to the two-stage settlement" and hoped that an agreement ending the almost decade-long conflict could be signed "before the end of the year". US Under-secretary of State Stuart Eizenstat expressed similar hopes before a Senate hearing in Washington.

The negotiations are expected to be put on track again sometime before the end of the year and the OSCE will continue to serve as the primary forum for the negotiations. But Russian and US influence, exercised through the triumvirate chairmanship, will provide the likely means to bring the conflicting sides to compromise positions.

In the long term, no serious progress will be made without the full participation of the Karabakh Armenians and direct talks between Baku and Stepanakert and a final solution to the conflict is still in the distant future. As one Western diplomat put it, "signing an agreement is one thing. Making it work is entirely another. . . . We could have a long period where nothing happens."

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