
COPING WITH THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CRISIS

— PAUL A. GOBLE —

More than any other problem in the post-Soviet space, the fighting around Nagorno-Karabakh threatens to expand and to involve not only regional powers but more distant countries as well. The current difficulties there reflect the complexities of geography, ancient cultural and religious divisions, certain peculiarities of Soviet nationality policy, the changing dynamics of the fighting itself over the last four years, and the exigencies of state building in the post-Soviet environment. Any effort at reaching a stable settlement and the settlement itself must be based on an understanding of these factors and on an appreciation of the often strained relationships among and between regional and international actors.

Defining Factors of the Conflict

Geography

Nagorno-Karabakh—the name itself means “mountainous dark gardens” in a combination of Russian and Azeri—has been the home of both Armenians and Turkic communities for almost one thousand years. Mountainous and difficult to reach from either Yerevan or Baku, this isolated region supports an economy largely dependent on agriculture, particularly grape growing. Besides its relative isolation, another geographic feature compounding Nagorno-Karabakh’s ethnic troubles is the location there of the headwaters of one of the most important tributaries of the river that flows through Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Consequently, the group that controls Karabakh will have powerful leverage over the center of the Azerbaijani state.

Cultural Asymmetries

Although they have existed alongside one another for almost one thousand years, the Armenian and Turkic communities have long been in conflict, a reflection of deep cultural animosities and asymmetrical ethnic development. Armenia is an ancient nation which was fully consolidated at least 2,300 years ago. Azerbaijanis did not exist as a separate people until this century, before which time they were simply part of the Turco-Persian world—Azerbaijanis

called themselves Turks until 1938 when Moscow insisted on the new nomenclature.

Religion

This is certainly another source of disparity. Armenia is Christian and tied to Europe; Azerbaijan is Muslim and tied to Iran (it is predominantly Shiia) and to Turkey, with which it shares a virtually common language. Armenia's significant diaspora communities in the United States and Western Europe, which act as lobbies for the Armenian cause, have further strengthened its association with the West. In contrast, Azerbaijan must depend on a more generalized sense of support from Islamic and Turkic countries.

Economics and Demographics

Armenia has always had a sizeable diaspora whose settled communities are largely urban and managerial; Azerbaijan has a mostly rural peasant population, and its urban residents are generally proletarian. Until this century, Baku, similar to other Caucasian cities, was more Armenian than Azerbaijani on its cultural face. Armenians have a relatively slow population growth rate and hence have been in demographic retreat; Azerbaijanis, on the other hand, have been growing far more rapidly.

Both groups have long memories of slights and attacks in the past. The defining event for Armenia was the 1915 genocide of Armenians by the Ottoman government, which further reduced the size of historical Armenia. For Azerbaijan, the defining event was their gradual assumption of power over their own territory under Soviet rule, which has led them to expect that they will always have at least what they have now.

The Results of Soviet Policy

Drawing the Borders

Soviet policy both under Stalin and more recently under Gorbachev exacerbated all the above-mentioned bases for conflict. Stalin territorialized and politicized nationality, making ethnic identity and territory the bases for access to power and services, something they had rarely been the case in the pre-1917 Caucasus. Stalin intentionally planted in each republic one or more minorities which would have to depend on Moscow for protection and which would thus serve as Moscow's agents on the scene. Moreover, by creating asymmetrical power relationships among the republics in the region, Stalin was able to direct ethnic antagonisms toward non-Russians and away from the dominant Russian community at the center. All of these political tactics ensured that repression would become crucial to maintaining order in the region.

In the case at hand, this divide-and-conquer approach led the Soviet government under Stalin to take the following actions. First, Moscow insisted that the Azerbaijanis define themselves as a separate people, something they had never done before. To further ensure Azerbaijan's distinctness, Stalin arranged the

borders so that Azerbaijan proper was at no point contiguous to Turkey, whose population shares so much in common with the Azerbaijanis, thus preventing Turkey from running a railroad line into Baku. Second, Moscow drew borders in this region so that there would be significant Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in each other's states and then used these minorities as its henchmen, something neither group has forgotten or forgiven. Third, Moscow created the largely Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) within and under the rule of Azerbaijan, and the largely Azerbaijani Nakhichevan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic surrounded on three sides by, but not under the rule of, Armenia. Even if there had not been a basis for conflict in the past—and as we have seen there were more than enough of them—these political manipulations virtually guaranteed conflict in the absence of overwhelming outside force.

Gorbachev's Miscalculations

The situation was further exacerbated in the last six years by what can only be described as the grossly inept policies of the Gorbachev regime. In 1986, his anti-alcohol campaign led to the plowing under of vineyards in Nagorno-Karabakh, throwing tens of thousands of Armenians out of work. This prompted Armenia's government in Yerevan to take a new look at the region and consider measures to protect its people, who had been fairly well-off until that time. According to Gorbachev's close advisor and ethnic Armenian Abel Aganbegyan, Gorbachev subsequently promised that he would give the NKAO to Armenia and then reneged on the deal, thus infuriating both Armenia and Azerbaijan. This heightening of tensions resulted in the creation of the radical Karabakh movement, which demanded Armenian control over the NKAO, the Azerbaijani response at Sumgait in February 1988, where more than 100 Armenians were tortured and killed, and the massive transfers of some 170,000 Azerbaijanis from Armenia and an equal number of Armenians from Azerbaijan.

By creating asymmetrical power relationships among the republics in the region, Stalin was able to direct ethnic antagonisms toward non-Russians and away from the dominant Russian community at the center.

Still more seriously, Gorbachev refused to use force against the Azerbaijanis who were blockading the rail line from Baku to Yerevan because of Azerbaijani threats to return fire, sending a message to other non-Russian groups that armed resistance brings results. Yet Moscow used force against Baku to overthrow the government in 1989, antagonizing the Azerbaijanis while doing nothing to assuage Armenians fears. The conclusion of both groups: they would have to

depend on themselves rather than Moscow for defense, and would have to arm themselves as a means to that end.

The Shifting Dynamics of the Fighting

The Caucasus has always been a violent place, even at times of great repression from outside. But the violence was generally limited by the high cost of localized blood feuds, which, once they start, tend to escalate quickly and persist for a long period of time, and by the absence of modern weapons systems. Soviet policy eliminated both these barriers to large-scale violence. By defining everything in terms of ethnic groups, Moscow broadened all fights from simply family- and communal-based violence to national ones. And by linking ethnicity to territory, Moscow transformed all ethnic conflicts into territorial ones. Conflicts now attract a much larger base of support. To make matters worse, because of an unfortunate strategy adopted by the Gorbachev government to train pre-inductee youth in their home towns, the Soviet government unintentionally armed the population with weapons of far greater destructive power than those previously accessible to them.

The longer the conflict persists following independence on both sides, the more difficult the two governments and outsiders will find it to overcome political pressure in order to reach a stable settlement.

Despite these changes in the dynamics of the fighting, there have been relatively few deaths in the region, all the press notwithstanding. The numbers of deaths since 1985 claimed by either side are in every case under 2,000; a more realistic estimate is between 1,000 and 1,200. The fighting so far has been highly localized, conducted by individuals not organized in broader units or under centralized command. That may make the restoration of peace more difficult—there is no one who can simply give an order to stop the fighting—but at the same time, it means that the various governments involved have not yet fully invested themselves in the fighting and thus have more room for maneuver. Certainly no side has a monopoly on virtue or blame in this conflict; both sides have committed horrible human rights violations.

The Exigencies of State Building

With the final collapse of the Soviet Union, both Armenia and Azerbaijan have been engaged in defining themselves as states. As was true of the newly emerging African countries in the 1960s, neither government can allow itself to appear to be backing down. One can argue that former Azerbaijani President Mutalibov was pushed aside precisely because he failed to respond to Armenian challenges. Nor does either government have the requisite command and

control mechanisms in place to effectively run either country, and both lack negotiating experience, whether it be with friendly neighbors or with each party's self-defined "historic enemy." Consequently, both sides must engage in posturing far beyond what their respective leaders probably believe, but unfortunately this posturing creates new realities with which these leaders, the respective populations, and outside agents must cope. The longer the conflict persists following independence on both sides, the more difficult the two governments and outsiders will find it to overcome political pressure in order to reach a stable settlement.

Searching for a Settlement

In attempting to push for a settlement, all concerned parties must recognize that Armenia and Azerbaijan will not be able to resolve the situation on their own. As new states, both need outside cover in order to make what will necessarily appear to be concessions to the other side. Absolutely no settlement will be possible if the parties attempt to return to the status quo ante, conditions as they were before the current fighting erupted in 1988. The previous status quo was sustained only by the overwhelming dominance of a power that no longer exists, namely the Soviet Union. In addition, the demands of nation building preclude any early acceptance of multi-ethnic citizenship in either Armenia or Azerbaijan.

The region's political situation can be conceived as an inverted pyramid with four outside actors—Turkey, Iran, Russia, and the West (including both Western Europe and the United States)—on the top tier, three governments—Baku, Stepanakert (the capital of the NKAO), and Yerevan—comprising the second tier, and two populations—Armenians and Azerbaijanis—at the bottom. At present, neither of the two top levels has any effective control over the bottom one, which might seem to preclude any settlement.

But there may now be a narrow window of opportunity for a settlement, because all four outside actors want to avoid a wider war, each for its own largely domestic reasons, as do the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan, although their positions are so far apart that any agreement seems unlikely.

Let us first consider the positions of the four outside actors. Turkey wants a quick but lasting peace, lest it be put in the impossible position of having to choose between supporting the Turkic Azerbaijanis, thus freezing itself out of Europe and risking a US aid cutoff, or trying to play a moderating role as Europe and Washington want, thereby undercutting its ability to expand influence in the former Muslim republics, as the United States also has been pushing it to do. At the current level of fighting, Ankara can resist popular demands for backing Baku; however, if the fighting expands, it will probably find its hands tied.

Turkey, although a member of the Council for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), and a secular rather than Islamic state, may have some difficulties over time in collaborating exclusively with that organization. This is be-

cause the West Europeans who dominate that group have been sharply critical of the human rights situation in Turkey—particularly Ankara's treatment of the Kurdish minority.

Iran also has an interest in a quick peace. Teheran does not want Baku either to achieve a massive victory, which might encourage Azerbaijani separatism in Iran, or to suffer a massive defeat which would undercut Teheran's efforts to expand its influence in Central Asia. At present, it is the only outside player which has been fully accepted by both sides as a mediator and has been effective in arranging limited cease-fires.

For Armenians, Nagorno-Karabakh represents one of the last Armenian-occupied territories outside Soviet-defined Armenia to which they have historic ties. It is thus, like Masada, a location invested with the meaning of an ethnic last stand.

Russia too wants quick peace lest violence spread north, a relatively unlikely prospect, or otherwise force Moscow to intervene, something it wants to avoid for both practical and precedential reasons. Russian intervention, even if limited to rhetoric, would almost certainly be on the side of the Christian Armenians. Baku has long been deeply suspicious of Russia, feelings that were exacerbated by Moscow's moves against Azerbaijani demonstrations in 1990 and apparent support for Armenians then and earlier.

Washington would also like to see a settlement but seems reluctant to work with Iran for obvious historical reasons, and is also hesitant to work through venues such as the United Nations where cooperation with Iran would be possible. However, Iran has been playing the most effective and calming role of any outside power. While it appears ready to work with the United States in a UN context, Iran would face great difficulties in working directly with the CSCE of which it is not a member and which Tehran views as hostile to Islam. Therefore, some sort of UN role is needed to supplement CSCE activity in order to ensure Iranian cooperation.

The involvement of the four outside parties is further complicated by the fact that they have little experience or willingness to work together, and each has an interest in excluding others. Consequently the forum chosen for any discussion may not only skew the outcome but in many cases may actually prevent any outcome from being reached.

The three local governments also have an interest in an early peace, Yerevan and Stepanakert because of fears of Armenian deaths and Baku because of fears of international isolation, such as that foreshadowed by the proposed Senate resolution seeking to block US investment in Azerbaijan until a settlement is

reached. The positions of Baku and Yerevan remain asymmetrical, however. Baku seeks a return to the status quo ante—a clear impossibility—plus Armenian concessions on access to Nakhichevan. Armenia wants a transfer of territory from Azerbaijan to its own control without having to give anywhere else. The position of the government of the NKAO reflects that of its Armenian population at any particular time.

To date, Azerbaijan has been the more restrained party. Under Mutalibov, Baku did not strike back after every Armenian attack, insisting only that the NKAO remain within Azerbaijan. The Popular Front government that displaced him, however, came to power precisely because of Mutalibov's unwillingness to strike back. It will thus be under enormous pressure to use violence if Armenian attacks continue. At the present moment, however, the new regime remains extremely disorganized and thus open to negotiations.

Armenia has a more disciplined government, but it too is facing pressures to become more radical and violent. For Armenians, Nagorno-Karabakh represents one of the last Armenian-occupied territories outside Soviet-defined Armenia to which they have historic ties. It is thus, like Masada, a location invested with the meaning of an ethnic last stand.

President TerPetrossian last fall disowned any Armenian claim on the NKAO and for more than a year has sought a rapprochement with Turkey—perhaps the greatest heresy of all in the Armenian pantheon but perhaps the only way out of Armenia's impossible geography. In early 1992, however, TerPetrossian began to shift his position in response to popular anger about Azerbaijani killings. Should they continue, he will almost certainly be forced to respond with violence. In that event, the NKAO fighting would become a much broader and more intractable war.

Can a Settlement be Achieved?

Despite the length and intensity of conflict in the region, there are some reasons for hope. All the outside powers and both of the republic governments have behaved with statesmanlike restraint, a restraint the United States should do nothing to undermine. But in each case, the governments are under pressure from their populations to move in directions that could push the possibility for a settlement into the distant future. Some steps need to be taken now to get a process of confidence building going. Even with good will on all sides, reaching a stable settlement will be difficult and take time.

The parameters of the US role are clear: first, the United States must do nothing to weaken those opposed to force in Armenia and Azerbaijan and those opposed to intervention in the outside countries. Second, the United States must avoid falling into the trap of thinking that it can impose a solution. And third, the United States must not accept the widespread assumption that no sustainable settlement is possible. Committing any one of these errors will prolong the process and thus make it more likely that extremist groups will influence the turn of events.

For any settlement to be sustainable, all the above-mentioned parties must be included in any talks. Failure to include Iran will not only push Tehran into mischief in Nakhichevan but will almost certainly undercut if not torpedo any agreement. Europe and the United States are simply not taken as credible mediators in Baku; Tehran is—and in Yerevan as well. That almost certainly dictates a UN or ad hoc venue, given American hostility to Iran. In addition, no settlement will be possible if the negotiators recommend a transfer of territory or population that benefits only one side.

In principle, there are three ways to “solve” the Nagorno-Karabakh problem: driving out or killing all Armenians now there, reimposing enormous outside force to keep the two sides apart, or transferring the NKAO to Armenian control. The first of these is morally impossible, the second is probably physically impossible, and the third is politically impossible if it is done alone because it would leave Azerbaijan the loser both territorially and in terms of the water supply to Baku.

Consequently, the various participants need to begin to consider the possibility of a territorial swap including the following concessions:

- sending part of the NKAO to Armenia, with the area controlling the headwaters of the river flowing to Baku and areas of Azerbaijani population remaining in Azerbaijani hands; and
- transferring the Armenian-controlled landbridge between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan to Azerbaijani control.

Both sides would have difficulties with this, Armenia because it would lose its tie to Iran and Azerbaijan because it would lose something it said it would never give up. But both sides would also gain something that they have long wanted. Moreover, by focusing on the transfer of land, this type of settlement would minimize the need for any shift in population. In any case, no ceasefire or settlement will hold for very long unless both sides feel that they were not the latest victims in this long-running conflict. And perhaps most important, any “solution” which takes as its point of departure the preservation of the work of Stalin and his successors is doomed to failure and will insure that this region will remain unstable long into the twenty-first century.



United Kingdom Northern Ireland

- International boundary
- District boundary
- District seat
- Frontier post
- Railroad
- Expressway
- Road
- Built-up area

Districts have the same names as their seats except where otherwise noted. Belfast is the seat of both Belfast and Castlereagh Districts.

