PISM | POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 26 (876), 6 April 2016 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (PISM Director) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz • Anna Maria Dyner • Patryk Kugiel
Zuzanna Nowak • Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Marcin Terlikowski

The Escalation of the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: Causes and Probable Course

Anna Maria Dyner, Konrad Zasztowt

The escalation of fighting between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh was caused by Azerbaijan. The authorities there want to use the conflict to distract its population from impending economic collapse and worsening living conditions as a result of the falling price of oil. The resumption of fighting has resulted in an increase in nationalist sentiments on both sides. Russia may indeed be effective in reducing the tension on both sides of the conflict, but for internal reasons it also may be interested in further escalation.

On 2 April, Azerbaijani forces using tanks and helicopters crossed the Armenian defence line near the town of Terter and occupied two villages situated directly on the contact line between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces (Talysh and Seysulan). According to a statement by the Azerbaijan Defence Ministry, it was in response to shelling by Armenian forces of the village of Terter, which remains under the control of Azerbaijan. On 3 April, taking into account appeals by international organisations, Azerbaijan declared a unilateral cessation of hostilities. Nevertheless, fighting has continued. According to sources in the two countries, 29 Armenians and 31 Azerbaijani soldiers have been killed. Azerbaijan lost an Mi-24 helicopter and Armenia lost 14 tanks and 15 artillery positions. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have announced they are recruiting volunteers into their armies.

The OSCE Minsk Group for the settlement of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which includes France, Russia and the United States, met on 5 April in Geneva to discuss the situation. During the meeting, Armenia and Azerbaijan ceased military actions.

Internal Problems in Azerbaijan. The risk of exacerbation of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has grown in the past few years. Negotiations conducted with the participation of the OSCE Minsk Group had reached stalemate. The Azerbaijani authorities had been expressing disappointment of late with the situation, stressing that the Minsk Group is not useful to a peaceful settlement of the dispute, instead leading to only a freeze of the conflict. At the same time, Azerbaijan has been intensively implementing a re-armament programme. As a result, it has achieved a significant advantage in almost all areas, excluding aviation, over Armenia and the Armenian forces of the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. This may suggest that the real aim of the Azerbaijani authorities is a military recovery of Karabakh. There also were increasingly serious incidents of violations of the ceasefire in the region (including the downing of an Armenian Mi-24 helicopter by Azerbaijan in 2014).

The current escalation of the conflict most likely occurred as a result of planned actions by the Azerbaijani authorities. The order to start an offensive against the Armenian positions may have been taken by the military command, but without doubt was preceded by the prior consent of Azerbaijan's political elite. The recovery of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh has been a publicly declared political objective for years by President Ilham Aliyev.

His policy on Karabakh is supported by the vast majority of the population of Azerbaijan. Although a large part of the 600,000 refugees from the war years of 1988 to 1994 managed to adapt to living in new places, the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh remains a traumatic event, not only for that group but for the majority of Azerbaijanis. Hostility towards Armenians is also deliberately stoked by Azerbaijan's authorities.

The hostilities in Karabakh also serve to distract public attention from the country's mounting economic problems associated with low oil prices. The living standards of a large part of the population of Azerbaijan have deteriorated significantly. Earlier this year, against this background, there were a number of spontaneous protests. The protesters demanded actions from the state regarding social issues, but did not put forward any political demands.

In view of the worsening situation in Karabakh, opposition activists and opposition internet sites muted their anti-government rhetoric. This either out of genuine support for the government's action or the desire to avoid accusations of betraying the national interest. Thus, in the absence of international pressure, the Azerbaijani authorities, under the influence of current public sentiment, may decide to continue the military action against Armenia.

Reactions by the EU, U.S. and Turkey. So far, the EU and the U.S. positions on the conflict have been limited to condemning the violations of the ceasefire and calling for a cessation of hostilities. However, Turkey expressed strong support for Azerbaijan.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, already in Washington for the Nuclear Security Summit, expressed his solidarity with the efforts of Azerbaijan. He also criticized the OSCE Minsk Group's efforts for not having yet yielded the desired results. Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, said that the Karabakh conflict should be resolved without delay in compliance with the principle of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

If the conflict further escalates, Turkey will support Azerbaijan, although it will confine itself to diplomacy and symbolic gestures. Embroiled in an internal conflict with Kurdish PKK guerrillas and the civil war in Syria, the Turkish government will not be able to take a more active policy in the South Caucasus.

The Reaction of Russia and the CSTO. Although Armenia is part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Russia so far has been neutral in its stance on the Azerbaijan-Armenia dispute. Also, on the escalation of the conflict, Russia has kept a rather balanced position. President Putin called on both countries to immediately halt hostilities and return to the ceasefire agreement. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov held telephone conversations with the respective ministers of defence and foreign affairs of the two countries. However, both the Russian defence ministry and CSTO spokesman Valeriy Zaynetdinov have assessed the activities of Azerbaijan as irresponsible and warned that it could lead to unforeseen consequences. Russia also criticized Turkey's stance, stressing that the country has sided with one party of the dispute.

At the same time, however, the Russians stressed that security guarantees—both bilateral ones and those through CSTO—cover only Armenia, not the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, if there were to be full-scale armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, it's highly likely Russia would support the Armenian side. Further evidence of this is the strengthening of Russian troop levels in Armenia and last year's CSTO exercises conducted on its territory. The main scenario of the manoeuvres was, in fact, separating warring parties using peacekeepers. CSTO rapid-reaction forces (KSOR), which in recent years have been extensively trained to intervene in a local conflict, can be used for activities of this type. Russia is interested in maintaining the Azeri-Armenian conflict in Karabakh in a low-active phase, which gives it greater influence on both sides through other instruments.

Assessment of the Current Escalation and Prediction. Despite the Azerbaijan military's significant armament advantage over its Armenian foes, the outcome of full-scale conflict is difficult to predict. The Nagorno-Karabakh landscape makes it difficult to attacking the other side. Azerbaijan's troops, after breaking through a well-fortified frontline, would have to overcome the natural barrier of the Karabakh Range.

The latest offensive by the Azerbaijan military is perceived by Azerbaijanis as an attempt to recover the lost territory. Because the results of the military operation so far have been very limited, Azerbaijan's authorities will try to prevent disappointment within its public. Thus, the conflict may actually result in serious internal problems in Azerbaijan. In the absence of stronger international pressure to end the military action, the public pressure could force Azerbaijan's authorities to further escalate the conflict.

Wider military conflict in Armenia, although unlikely, could force Russia and other CSTO countries to act and could lead to the first intervention of this type by this organisation. Without military and political support from Russia, it will be difficult for Armenia to keep all of Nagorno-Karabakh. Potentially, there is a risk that the conflict could rise to the regional level. Russia is not interested in an escalation of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and therefore will probably work to enhance the defensive capabilities of Armenia, while also using political methods to push Azerbaijan to give up its attempts to escalate the conflict. The potential for an outbreak of full-scale war would mean that either the Russian instruments of influence on both sides of the conflict have failed or, for some other reasons, such a scenario was determined in Moscow to be consistent with the Russian ruling elite's interests. This may be used in Russia's internal politics, as its leaders could see the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as another opportunity to distract Russians from the country's internal problems.