

Resolving Karabakh? The Problem of Protracted Conflicts

Written by Emma Stewart

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EMMA STEWART, DEC 18 2013

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Policy Recommendations:

To prevent a future escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute to renewed all-out war, the international community should:

1. Prioritize diplomatic engagement. Pressure from external actors is essential to resolve this dispute;
2. Create incentives to encourage the conflicting parties to compromise within the peace process;
3. Step up peace-building projects in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Karabakh to address the lack of trust between the parties that is an impediment to peace;
4. Develop viable research frameworks that combine empirical evidence and expert knowledge to help us to tackle pressing issues such as the Karabakh dispute and other unresolved conflicts.

Analysis:

The Nagorno Karabakh dispute presents a real challenge to analysts and policy-makers seeking practical solutions to violent conflict. Karabakh was an autonomous Armenian populated enclave in the old USSR, situated within Azeri borders. War between Azerbaijan and Armenia broke out over the region when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, leading to the Armenian occupation of Karabakh and surrounding Azeri territories. A ceasefire was agreed in 1994, but there has been no significant progress in the resolution of the dispute: it is the post-Soviet region's most bitter 'frozen' conflict; a situation of no full blown war, but no real prospects for peace because of the complexities of regional geopolitics and the belligerence of the disputing parties. The OSCE's Minsk Group, the official mediation body for the dispute, has had little success in finding a compromise between the two sides, and the situation is not helped by bypassing the actual authorities in Karabakh and only dealing with the equally militaristic and unmoveable governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

So what's a policy-focused analyst to do? The non-resolution of this conflict has had and is having serious consequences. It stifles democracy and socio-economic development in Armenia, Azerbaijan and in Karabakh itself, and it impacts negatively on regional relations. There is no incentive for Armenia to resolve the conflict, since the status quo is preferable to making any concessions to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is the only party keen to resolve the dispute, but frustration with the lack of progress has increasingly led to talk about taking the region 'back' with military force. Russia, strategic ally of Armenia and arms supplier to both sides, frequently throws its geopolitical weight around, and is partly responsible (at least) for turning Armenia away from the EU.[i]

As the years go by, it is arguably becoming more and more difficult to resolve this conflict. 'Windows of opportunity' open (for example, this year after elections in both countries), then swiftly slam again when the same players retain power and fail to even agree on a set of basic principles on which to base discussions. Plans have been formed and rejected by one or more of the parties since the early days of the peace process. Deals based on 'swapping' territory

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(e.g. Azerbaijan gets Karabakh in exchange for the Azeri region of Nakhichevan) are probably unworkable, but some form of self-government for Karabakh coupled with Armenian withdrawal from the surrounding occupied territories is one feasible scenario. While there is clearly no simple solution to this conflict, the pursuit of a three-pronged strategy based around diplomatic engagement, incentives and peace-building could contribute to progress towards its eventual resolution.

Firstly, concerted diplomatic engagement is needed if the parties are to be pushed towards resolving this dispute. The conflict is a low priority for the governments of the Minsk Group co-chairs (Russia, USA and France), and there is a reluctance on the part of other organizations such as the EU to disrupt the fragile peace process of the OSCE – even if progress is sorely lacking. Given the enmity of the conflicting parties, pressure from external actors is essential to the resolution of the dispute. And according to the International Crisis Group, the risk of the resumption of full-blown conflict should not be under-estimated.[ii] Secondly, and closely linked to this process should be the creation of incentives to push the conflicting parties to make concessions in the context of the peace process. Turkey, it has recently been argued[iii], is a powerful regional player who could step up to provide incentives for the resolution of the conflict (the closed Armenian-Turkish border is a serious regional disadvantage). Iran is another regional power whose involvement is stymied by its international isolation. Some pro-action by the Minsk co-chairs could help bring these actors on board. Unfortunately the vested interests of external actors in economic development (particularly the oil industry in Azerbaijan) leads to a reluctance to criticise the arms race and the lack of freedom and democracy in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, it is difficult to see how a resolution will ever be on the table if external powers do not prioritize the resolution of this dispute.

Of course, any diplomatic action leading to an agreement will not create peace without a simultaneous multi-level peace-building strategy to address the deep level of mistrust that exists between the disputing parties. This is aptly illustrated by the return last year of an Azeri military officer convicted in Hungary of murdering a fellow Armenian student during a NATO language course in 2004. The man was pardoned and hailed as a hero in Azerbaijan, causing a huge diplomatic row and consternation in Armenia. The political culture and media in both countries currently precludes any possibility of a workable solution to the conflict being achieved. Relations between the parties need to be fundamentally restructured to alter damaging and inaccurate perceptions of the ‘enemy’.[iv] Long-term peace-building should be a priority for the OSCE and also the EU.

As academics and policy-makers, we cannot throw our arms up in the air and fail to address the conflicts and challenges that pervade the world. We need to develop viable research frameworks that combine empirical evidence and expert knowledge to help us to tackle pressing issues such as the Karabakh dispute and other unresolved conflicts. The use of complex systems analysis tools, such as Bayesian Belief Networks, would be one way of bringing together policy-makers and academic experts to develop flexible and transparent decision analysis tools. These could identify strategies of benefit to all actors, even where full and lasting solutions to protracted crises remain elusive. Let’s get truly inter-disciplinary and walk the walk instead of talking the talk.

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Emma Stewart *is an independent researcher, specialising in conflict prevention.*

[i] See Nicu Popescu ‘Behind – and beyond – Armenia’s choice’ EUISS Issue Alert 35, 2013, http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Alert___35_Armenia_U-turn.pdf

[ii] See the ICG’s latest Update Briefing, ‘Armenia and Azerbaijan: A Season of Risks’, 26 September 2013.

[iii] See Alessia Guilianì, ‘Turkey’s role in the Nagorno Karabakh war: a potential resource for peace’ *Caucasus Edition*, 15 July 2013, <http://caucasusedition.net/analysis/turkeys-role-in-the->

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[iv] See John Paul Lederach *Preparing for Peace*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1996.