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NAGORNO-KARABAKH SITUATIONAL ASSESSMENT

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As an independent think tank based in Yerevan, Armenia, the Regional Studies Center (RSC), regularly monitors the military security situation related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. But in the wake of the serious Azerbaijani offensive on 2 April and the subsequent three days of fighting along the Nagorno Karabakh “line of contact,” the RSC held a Special Briefing to offer a “Situational Assessment” of the military, diplomatic and political situation, featuring:

- (1) an overview of the background of the recent military clashes, including an analysis of the Azerbaijani strategy and the broader trend of escalation;
- (2) an assessment of the significance impact of the fighting on the peace process and diplomacy;
- (3) a set of five significant concluding observations.

SUMMARY NOTES

In the early pre-dawn hours of Saturday, 2 April, Azerbaijani forces launched a coordinated offensive targeting three main fronts along the Nagorno-Karabakh “line of contact” separating Karabakh from Azerbaijan. This particular offensive campaign was significant, as a well-coordinated assault that exceeded all prior attacks in terms of both intensity and scale, and as the most serious attack since a ceasefire was reached in May 1994.

But most notably, unlike each previous escalation, the Azerbaijani offensive campaign was based on a *new strategy to seize, secure and sustain control of territory*. This a significant departure from the previous Azerbaijani strategy of simply attacking for the sake of pressure and posturing, but rather, represents an important turning point in the context of military strategy and objectives.

I. BACKGROUND

The Traditional Azerbaijani Strategy

In a broader context, the traditional Azerbaijani strategy is not necessarily based on the more predictable elements of military logic. Rather, the nature of Azerbaijan’s military strategy is driven more by the diplomatic calendar, and timed with the activity of the mediators. Moreover, there are four basic components of the traditional Azerbaijani strategy:

- The first element of the Azerbaijani strategy rests on leveraging military attacks in an attempt to garner greater diplomatic leverage within the peace process. Although this has never delivered any tangible or demonstrable diplomatic dividends, and usually tends to only weaken the Azerbaijani position within the negotiations, this posture is driven by a pronounced sense of frustration over the lack of any tangible gains from the peace process, and tends to reflect a deep-seated disdain for diplomacy and mediation;
- A second element is an attempt to widen the conflict, aimed at more directly drawing Armenia proper into the conflict and at provoking an Armenian over-reaction. This is evident in the pronounced expansion of the geography of fighting, well beyond the “line of contact” separating Karabakh from Azerbaijan proper and including Armenia’s north-eastern and southern border areas. Although this strategy has generally failed to provoke an Armenian overreaction, it has led to the development of a policy of “overwhelming response” by the Armenian and Karabakh sides, aimed to deter and retaliate for Azerbaijani attacks, but which also contributes to a dangerous “spiraling up” of the conflict;
- And third, the strategy has also been matched by a deeper trend of consistent increases in defense spending and an underlying military buildup by the Azerbaijani side. Although the military buildup has included the procurement of more modern, serious weapons systems, the absence of any real defense reform or any attempt to tackle corruption within the Azerbaijani armed forces remain serious obstacles, however;
- Fourth, Azerbaijan’s force posture has become significantly bolder and more aggressive, rooted in frustration over the peace process and reflecting a preference for the force of arms over the rather deadlocked diplomatic process. This is also driven by domestic considerations, as the Azerbaijani leadership leverages the conflict for domestic dividends, appealing to nationalism and distracting attention away from socio-economic problems.

A Broader Trend of Escalation

Yet this offensive was only the latest in a broader pattern of escalating attacks by Azerbaijan, which have routinely targeting not only Nagorno-Karabakh, but also Armenia proper. More specifically, even prior to this latest offensive, there has been a deeper trend of escalation and combat, most seriously in November 2014 and December 2015.

In November 2014, for example, an Azerbaijani frontline unit downed a Nagorno-Karabakh army helicopter, killing three Karabakh army officers onboard. The shoot down of the Mi-24 combat helicopter, utilizing a shoulder-held anti-aircraft missile, followed an earlier surge in fighting in August 2014. And there was a further significant escalation in December 2015, with the active use of an armor unit for the first time since the 1994 ceasefire, when Azerbaijan utilized battle tanks in an assault and fired nine rounds targeting frontline positions southeast of Karabakh.¹ Thus, in that context of a broader trend of expanding clashes, surpassing each previous round, the recent offensive is indicative of a dangerous spiraling upward of intensity and impact. This trend is also evident in the increase in casualties, both in terms of combat and civilian deaths.

II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS OFFENSIVE

The Deeper Military Significance

At the same time, however, this Azerbaijani offensive not only exceeds earlier incidents, but in terms of Azerbaijan's military capabilities, also stands apart due to four key military factors:

- **greater operational intensity**, whereby previous ceasefire violations have included the use of mortars and grenade launchers, well beyond more routine sniper fire, this offensive was better coordinated, targeting three fronts along the “line of contact,” and utilized much heavier weapons (including advanced artillery and multiple-launch rocket systems, armored units, and combat helicopters) than past incidents;
- **improved use of combined arms** consisting of the coordinated combination of supporting artillery, with improved target range and precision guidance, an improved deployment of tanks, armored personnel carriers (APCs) and helicopters to support infantry assaults. Nevertheless, the efficacy of the combined arms operation quickly decreased, and given the topography and terrain, any reliance on “blitzkrieg” offensive operations is negated by the lack of sufficient operational battlespace and difficult terrain to advance. Hence, the nature of the Karabakh warfare, therefore, is more similar to World War I-period trench warfare;
- **increased operational tempo**, with an accelerated pace of offensive advancement that exceeded previous reconnaissance missions and probes of defensive positions. This was also due to the expanded use of better trained Azerbaijani units brought in from Baku and endowed with greater **operational autonomy** and authority than standard front-line units;
- **expanded battlespace**, with Azerbaijani attacks targeting Armenian border areas as well as Karabakh, and in terms of a new “air war” dimension to the theater of operations, with the deployment and use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or “drones” along the “line of contact” separating Karabakh forces from the Azerbaijani side;

¹ For more, see our analysis from the time: “RSC Nagorno-Karabakh Situational Assessment,” Regional Studies Center (RSC), 14 December 2015, Yerevan, Armenia. www.regional-studies.org/publications/rsc-analysis/467-141215

The Deeper Diplomatic Context

In the aftermath of the Karabakh clashes, there are three significant repercussions for the broader diplomatic context:

- First, one key “lesson learned” was that rational expectations and reasonable decisions do not always apply in the case of the Karabakh conflict. This was most aptly demonstrated not by the outbreak of military operations themselves, but by the unexpected and rather shocking timing of the campaign. More specifically, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia were in Washington just hours prior to the launch of military operations, participating in President Obama’s Nuclear Security Summit, from 31 March-1 April.²

The summit was an important opportunity for both presidents to enhance the strategic significance of their respective countries, while also garnering a greater degree of legitimacy. And for the Armenian president, it was also a reaffirmation of deepening ties with the West, particularly important in the wake of a Russian decision to boycott the summit. The Washington summit and the related meetings with senior U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Kerry and Vice President Biden, were also important to the authoritarian Azerbaijani president to improve his tarnished image in the West. But in hindsight, that perception was false. It was proven incorrect once the Azerbaijani president’s order to commence military operations was given. Moreover, looking at the operational demands of preparing for such an extensive three-pronged offensive, it is fairly certain that the Azerbaijani president approved the initial stages even before traveling to Washington. And given the launch of the offensive in the pre-dawn hours of 2 April, it also seems clear that the presidential order to start was either given from Washington or from the plane back to Baku;

- A second, possible “lesson learned” is rooted in what now seems to have been Azerbaijan’s decision to end or at least suspend its commitment to the peace process and instead, to resort to force to change the “status quo.” Thus, in hindsight, the timing suggests that even in the meetings with senior American officials, the Azerbaijani president viewed the Washington visit as a “last chance” for the U.S. to more forcefully engage in efforts to break the deadlock in the peace process. And while obviously not clear to the Americans at the time, Azerbaijan’s sense of frustration may have reached a dangerous tipping point, where Baku’s patience for peace was overtaken by a preference for the force of arms;
- And third, the offensive may also hold much wider implications, in two key ways. It offers Moscow an opportunity for a unilateral Russian-led diplomatic initiative. Although most likely to be implemented through the OSCE Minsk Group format, it would reaffirm and reinforce the local perception that Russian involvement is the most essential, much to the diplomatic detriment of the two other Minsk Group co-chairs, France and the United States. And given the collapse of the existing ceasefire agreement, the Karabakh conflict may become even more of an instrument for Moscow to enhance its power and influence, perhaps with a bid to deploy Russian peacekeepers. The outbreak of warfare also ended Azerbaijan’s precarious position of being forced to navigate the larger crisis between Turkey and Russia, and with the onset of combat operations, Baku was able to regain the upper hand, set Ankara’s regional agenda and garner blanket Turkish support.

² For more, see: Giragosian, Richard, “Nagorno-Karabakh: The death of diplomacy,” *al Jazeera*, 3 April 2016. www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/04/nagorno-karabakh-death-diplomacy-russia-azerbaijan-armenia-160403105406530.html

Conclusion

In terms of the broader context of the recent fighting, there are five important observations:

The collapse of the ceasefire. Although the inherent vulnerability of the previous ceasefire regime was obvious, the sudden collapse of the ceasefire only reaffirmed the potent risk of “war by accident,” based on misperception and miscalculation where smaller skirmishes can quickly and easily spiral out of control. The fighting also revealed the limits of a ceasefire that has only held since 1994 based on the willingness and commitment of the parties to the conflict themselves. And without any external security guarantee and weak monitoring and supervision, any one of the parties to the conflict holds the power to take action to not only violate the ceasefire, but to also trigger its complete and immediate collapse;

The absence of effective deterrence. The fighting also highlighted the absence of any real deterrence to prevent or at least pressure any side from launching military operations. Although there are no real strategic advantages for the Armenian and Karabakh sides from offensive operations, the lack of restraint and deterrence on Azerbaijan are only exacerbated by the limited leverage over Azerbaijan held by the West and by the Russian position as the primary arms provider to both Azerbaijan and Armenia;

Insufficient and inadequate diplomacy. Given Azerbaijan’s frustration with the peace process and its decision to resort to force of arms, the scale and scope of diplomatic engagement must be expanded and enhanced. Although the OSCE Minsk Group format is the sole diplomatic mechanism, more can be done to widen and deepen diplomacy, in several ways: (1) expanding the number of stakeholders, (2) reiterating the incentives for peace, (3) “naming and shaming” the aggressor, while ending the disingenuous “false parity” of always “blaming all sides” for unacceptable behavior, and (4) by imposing or at least threatening to impose punitive measures to punish such unacceptable attacks and aggression, no matter which side is found in breach of the basic minimum demands of upholding the ceasefire and refraining from military operations;

Difficult to disengage. Another consideration is that given the intensity of the clashes and the unprecedented losses, it will be very difficult for all sides to disengage. Thus, there needs to be more investment in “face-saving” ways for the combatants to “climb down” and “step back” from the brink. But this is an even more daunting challenge than usual given the lack of political will and the absence of statesmanship. Therefore, this necessitates a more nuanced strategy that may seek to “refreeze” the conflict itself and focus more on engaging civil society, empowering more moderate peace advocates, and enhancing democratization in the parties to the conflict themselves, while at the same time resisting efforts by the local elites to drive the agenda and define the narrative;

A “new normal.” And a final observation is that no matter when and how this round of fighting ends, the conflict is now defined by a “new normal,” meaning that it is now virtually impossible to return to the earlier status quo. And it is this specific point that may necessitate an immediate change to both the diplomatic dynamic and the political process, including the possible return of Nagorno-Karabakh as a direct party to the peace talks, by virtue that it is a direct, if not primary party to the conflict itself.