

Research Paper

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# The Nagorny Karabakh Conflict

## Defaulting to War



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## Summary

- The Nagorny Karabakh conflict, involving Armenia and Azerbaijan, poses a major threat to regional and European security. Following a surge of violence in early April 2016, international concern has shifted from stabilizing a fragile ceasefire to war prevention.
- Negotiations have remained deadlocked, with no fundamental change in the parties' positions since the early 1990s. As a result the more aggrieved and now rearmed party, Azerbaijan, sees front-line violence as its sole lever of influence to counter the indefinite prolongation of a 'frozen conflict'.
- Azerbaijan presents its operations of 2–5 April 2016 as a tactical victory and psychological breakthrough. Although slivers of territory changed hands for the first time since 1994, little of strategic significance appears to have altered on the ground. The most important change is the erosion of the deterrent assumed to exist between Azerbaijan and Armenia.
- Designed in the mid-1990s, the mandate of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to monitor the ceasefire is limited and obsolete. This has resulted in the delegation of security arrangements to one of the lead mediators, Russia, which has sought to create a deterrent precluding all-out war. However, there is no effective deterrent to recursive low-intensity violence, including major escalations of the sort seen in April.
- Armenia and Azerbaijan are now suspended in a dangerous security vacuum that needs to be filled by multilateral international action. The scope for that action is defined by external consensus on averting a major new war, and by consensus between the conflict parties that they do not want exclusive Russian control over security arrangements.
- Institutional and procedural inertia, geopolitical rivalries in neighbouring theatres, the cynicism of the parties and deep mistrust between them, and the dividends of symbolic nationalism for unreformed elites remain significant obstacles to negotiating alternatives to the status quo. These factors combine with the erosion of constraints on recursive low-intensity violence to pose significant risks that a large-scale war could occur by default.

# 1. Introduction

Despite serial warnings, the world was still surprised by the outbreak of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan on 2–5 April 2016. Distracted by other flashpoints and inoculated by the language of ‘frozen conflict’, regional and global powers have overlooked a dispute that could embroil them all in a major new war.

The combination of structural distinctiveness and geographic remoteness has made the Nagorny Karabakh (NK) conflict conceptually and strategically peripheral. Post-Soviet territorial conflicts have attracted attention from Western policy-makers primarily as microcosms of Russian–Western confrontation. The NK conflict falls outside this stereotype. Neither belligerent has made an unambiguous commitment to a Euro-Atlantic orientation, and the mediation structure for the conflict necessitates cooperation, not confrontation, between Russia and Western partners. While the degree of that cooperation should not be overstated, the NK conflict is an anomaly in the wider rule of Russian–Western confrontation in Eurasia.

The fact that the NK conflict does not fit the ready-made templates of Eurasian geopolitics is reflected in policy responses. In Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, Western policy-makers have unequivocally supported the territorial integrity of a pro-Western base state against interloping – and pro-Russian – *de facto* states. Much to Azerbaijan’s chagrin, no such clear strategy of intervention has characterized Western approaches to the NK conflict.<sup>1</sup> Although states and intergovernmental organizations formally support Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity, they also engage Armenia, the patron state of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, mostly without reservation.<sup>2</sup>

In the absence of such a template, much commentary has sought to interpret the April violence through alternative geopolitical frames. The fact that it followed a tumultuous period in Russian–Turkish relations led many commentators to find its logic there.<sup>3</sup> Regional contexts matter, of course. But upscaling the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict to the level of Russian–Turkish confrontation only results in misplaced analysis neglecting the importance of long-term, local drivers preceding and outlasting particular geopolitical conjunctures.

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<sup>1</sup> For an Azerbaijani perspective on this issue, see Shafiyev, F. (2016), ‘Liberal hypocrisy on post-Soviet separatism’, *The National Interest*, 13 June 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/liberal-hypocrisy-post-soviet-separatism-16575>.

<sup>2</sup> There are some exceptions. Turkey has no diplomatic relations with Armenia, as a result of Armenian advances into *de jure* Azerbaijani territories beyond NK in 1993. Pakistan, which does not recognize Armenia, is another example.

<sup>3</sup> For an example, see Jones, D. (2016), ‘Turkey-Russia Antagonism Playing Out in Karabakh’, *Eurasianet*, 7 April 2016, [www.eurasianet.org/node/78206](http://www.eurasianet.org/node/78206).

This paper examines the context, dynamics and implications of the April outbreak, with a strong emphasis on local factors. It seeks to answer three questions. Why has the security and mediation infrastructure surrounding the NK conflict decayed to the point where outbreaks of violence are regular and increasingly large-scale? Was there anything new in the 2–5 April hostilities? And in the aftermath, what can or should be done to reduce future prospects for violence and revalidate the mediation process?

**Map 1: Nagorny Karabakh, the Line of Contact and sites of violence in April 2016**



The boundaries and names shown, and designations used, on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by the author or Chatham House.

## 2. Context

The outbreak of violence in April was not unexpected, but a long-forewarned event in an established pattern of recursive violence. It followed a long-term deterioration of the ceasefire that brought the 1991–94 Armenian–Azerbaijani war to an end. This process has run parallel to Azerbaijan’s growing strength and confidence as an exporter of Caspian oil and gas, the embedding of Armenia’s security alliance with Russia, the entrenchment of a *de facto* jurisdiction in NK, and a gradual stalling of the Minsk Process, the Armenian–Azerbaijani peace process initiated in 1992 and mediated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The violence has been focused primarily on the 160-mile-long *de facto* boundary between Armenian-controlled territory and Azerbaijan. Known as the Line of Contact (LoC), this front line is entirely different from the *de facto* boundaries between Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (until 2008) and their base states. The LoC is a heavily fortified line of separation between bristling, 20,000-strong armies; crossings are very rare and carefully choreographed diplomatic events. Yet with no peacekeepers or international monitoring missions on the ground, maintaining the ceasefire lies entirely in the hands of the conflict parties.

To the north of the LoC, Armenia and Azerbaijan share a *de jure* international boundary, which has also seen an escalation in violence in 2014–15, notably involving civilian casualties. This contrasts with the situation along the LoC, which has very few Armenian civilians living in close proximity but substantial communities on its Azerbaijani-controlled side.

The pace of escalation has increased, especially since 2014. Incidents had occurred before that time,<sup>4</sup> but violence had mostly been limited to sniper warfare. In the years preceding 2014 total fatalities averaged 20–30 (2012 was the worst year, with 34 fatalities reported), and in several years the number of non-combat-related deaths rivalled or exceeded those resulting from enemy action.<sup>5</sup> Compared with daily fatalities running into the hundreds in Iraq or Afghanistan over the same period, Armenian–Azerbaijani violence appeared contained. Three trends converged to alter this situation: increasing military capabilities on both sides, changing military intent, and the marginalization of negotiations.

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<sup>4</sup>Notably on 4–5 March 2008 and 18–19 June 2010. The former incident took place in the aftermath of post-electoral violence in Yerevan on 1 March 2008; five Azerbaijani soldiers were reported killed. Five soldiers – four Armenian and one Azerbaijani – were reported killed in the 2010 incident.

<sup>5</sup>According to the Azerbaijani NGO Doktrina, between 2003 and 2013 only 186 of the 728 deaths registered across the defence and security sectors were caused by enemy action. Mammadov, J. (2014), ‘Conflict Management and Peace Resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. Solutions from ‘Doctrine’ JMRC’, presentation in Paris, 9 April 2014. Entries for Armenia in consecutive annual Human Rights Watch reports covering the years 2011, 2012 and 2013 respectively reported 17, 44 and 29 non-combat-related deaths in the Armenian army. These figures cover each year up to October–November only. See Human Rights Watch’s annual reports for these years, <https://www.hrw.org/previous-world-reports>.



## Rising military capabilities

Both sides' military capabilities have substantially increased over recent years in terms of the scale, sophistication and range of their arsenals.<sup>6</sup> As a proportion of GDP, Armenia and Azerbaijan have emerged as the biggest military spenders in the post-Soviet space bar Russia (see Table 1).<sup>7</sup> Globally, both countries have featured in the top 10 militarized states since 2011; moreover, they are the only pair of states within the top 10 engaged in active conflict with each other.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1: Armenia and Azerbaijan military expenditures, 2006–14**  
(US\$ millions at 2014 constant prices/exchange rates, as % of GDP and 2014 constant US\$ per capita)

	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Armenia	288	392	427	401	458
% of GDP	2.9	3.4	4.3	3.8	4.2
Per capita	63	133	133	128	153
Azerbaijan	1,398	2,045	1,709	3,376	3,427
% of GDP	3.4	3.3	2.8	4.7	4.6
Per capita	82	181	163	353	367

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 1988–2015, [http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex\\_database](http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database).

Russia is the dominant supplier of weapons to both countries. It is the source of around 80 per cent of Azerbaijan's arms purchases, although the latter's procurement processes have engaged several other states, notably Israel. Armenia's lower expenditures in absolute terms are to a debatable extent offset by discounted purchases of Russian weapons granted by its membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Regular Armenian procurement processes have been further punctuated by substantial ad hoc deliveries negotiated with Russia; details of the most recent agreement were, unusually, made public in February 2016.<sup>9</sup> Comparing Armenian and Azerbaijani capabilities is further complicated by the capabilities of the self-styled 'Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army', which is not counted in international indexes but is closely integrated with Armenian armed forces.<sup>10</sup> This is reflected in the extent to which Armenian casualties in the April 2016 escalation originated in Armenia rather than in NK.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Holtom, P. (2012), 'Arms Transfers to Armenia and Azerbaijan, 2007–11', in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (ed.) (2012), *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Yearbook 2012: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Oxford: Oxford University Press on behalf of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, pp. 286–92; see also BBC Russian Service (2016), 'Armii Azerbaydzhana i Armenii: byudzhets, chislennost', vooruzheniya' [The armies of Azerbaijan and Armenia: budget, strength, weapons], 5 April 2016, [www.bbc.com/russian/international/2016/04/160404\\_karabakh\\_armies](http://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2016/04/160404_karabakh_armies).

<sup>7</sup> SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 1988–2015, [http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex\\_database](http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database).

<sup>8</sup> According to the Global Militarization Index, compiled by the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), [www.bicc.de/publications/publicationpage/publication/global-militarisation-index-2015-627/](http://www.bicc.de/publications/publicationpage/publication/global-militarisation-index-2015-627/).

<sup>9</sup> Sanamyan, E. (2016), 'Russia details USD200 million arms sale to Armenia', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 19 February 2016, [www.janes.com/article/58187/russia-details-usd200-million-arms-sale-to-armenia](http://www.janes.com/article/58187/russia-details-usd200-million-arms-sale-to-armenia).

<sup>10</sup> Synovitz, R. (2016), 'Open secret': Experts cast doubt on Yerevan's claims over Nagorno-Karabakh', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 5 April 2016, [www.rferl.org/content/armenia-nagorno-karabakh-army-synergy/27656532.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/armenia-nagorno-karabakh-army-synergy/27656532.html).

<sup>11</sup> More than half of the names listed in some casualty reports came from Armenia. See, for example, *Razminfo* blog (2016) '(Updated) Names of 36 army servicemen who died defending their homeland: Defense Army', <https://razminfo.wordpress.com/2016/04/09/updated-names-of-36-army-servicemen-who-died-defending-their-homeland-defense-army/>.

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Expenditures are of course not the whole story. The arms race between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been constantly accompanied by reports and anecdotal evidence of corruption in procurement processes and within military structures. These have generally been more prominent on the Azerbaijani side.<sup>12</sup> However, in the aftermath of the April violence, corruption in Armenian defence spending also became a focus of public attention.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the scale of corruption, however, there is no doubt that military capabilities have significantly increased.

## Changing military intent

Change in capability has been matched by change in intent. This has been visible in more frequent incidents, the increasing calibres and varieties of weapons used, and diversifying tactics. Until 2014 significant escalations generally related to key political events, to the mediation calendar and to an annual spike in spring owing to military redeployments after snow thaw. But during 2014 and 2015 incidents and casualties became more consistent along both the LoC and the *de jure* international boundary between Armenia and Azerbaijan (for a summary of major events, see Table 2).

Shifts to attacks on moving targets, increased use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), use of heavy-calibre weaponry (mortars and artillery), and increased presence and reported casualties among contracted service personnel and special forces – all indicated a ‘new normal’ of low-intensity warfare.<sup>14</sup> This ‘new normal’ included probes testing the porosity of the LoC, and more civilian casualties.

Beyond the LoC there have been ample indications of growing intent to use force. Both countries intensified military drills in 2015. Azerbaijan held exercises involving 20,000 troops in February of that year, followed by more in September which, at a reported 65,000 participating servicemen, involved virtually the entirety of its armed forces.<sup>15</sup> Also in September, Armenia conducted a three-day simulation exercise, dubbed ‘Shant 2015’ [‘Lightning 2015’], aimed at testing military preparedness.<sup>16</sup>

The renewal and prominence of military leadership has also been evident across the conflict. Zakir Hasanov, a former deputy minister of internal affairs, replaced Azerbaijan’s long-serving defence minister, Safar Abiyev, on 27 October 2013. Although some escalatory trends preceded this shift, they have largely coincided with Hasanov’s tenure. On 15 June 2015 the *de facto* Ministry of Defence in NK also received a new chief, Levon Mnatsakanyan, previously deputy chief of staff in the Armenian army. As new appointees, both men are under pressure to prove themselves. The defence ministers in both Armenia and Azerbaijan have assumed increasingly prominent media profiles. In the former this sparked speculation in the domestic media in 2015 as to whether Seyran

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<sup>12</sup> The Germany-based oppositional website Meydan TV has run various reports on alleged corruption in Azerbaijani procurement processes. See, for example, Muhtarli, A. (2014), ‘Bidding Secrets of the Armed Forces Part 1: Purchases without tenders’, Meydan TV, 16 October 2014, <https://www.meydan.tv/en/site/politics/3402/Bidding-Secrets-of-the-Armed-Forces-Part-1-Purchases-without-tenders.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Khojoyan, S. (2016), ‘Money for Army: Anti-corruption sentiments grow in Armenia amid Karabakh escalation’, ArmeniaNow.com, 17 April 2016, <https://www.armenianow.com/en/society/2016/04/15/armenia-panama-papers-offshore-scandal-mihran-poghosyan-karabakh/1067/>.

<sup>14</sup> Sanamyan, E. (2015), ‘Tactics shift in Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict’, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 21 October 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Contact.az (2015), ‘Azerbaijani Army conducts Large-Scale Exercises’, 6 September 2015, [www.contact.az/docs/2015/Politics/090600128608en.htm#.VyIu73AbZek](http://www.contact.az/docs/2015/Politics/090600128608en.htm#.VyIu73AbZek).

<sup>16</sup> Khojoyan, S. (2015), ‘Shant-2015: Large-scale drills simulate Armenia’s response to different military situations’, ArmeniaNow.com, 8 September 2015, [www.armenianow.com/news/66070/armenia\\_shant\\_2015\\_military\\_exercises](http://www.armenianow.com/news/66070/armenia_shant_2015_military_exercises).



Ohanian, of Karabakh Armenian origin, was being groomed as a possible successor by President Serzh Sargsyan.<sup>17</sup> While no such speculation attaches to Zakir Hasanov, in the week preceding the April outbreak Azerbaijani media provided significant coverage of him visiting the LoC, inspecting battle-readiness and convening a meeting of Azerbaijan’s top generals.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 2: Civilian deaths and major military incidents, January 2014–March 2016**

<b>2014</b>	
January	LoC skirmishes
15 April	Armenian civilian killed by mine explosion in Berdavan, Tavush region
15 July	Azerbaijani infiltrator group kills Armenian teenager in Kelbajar area
31 July–2 August	Severe fighting along LoC, about 20 combatants killed, most of them Azerbaijani
13 November	Armenian MI-24 helicopter shot down over Agdam
<b>2015</b>	
11 January	Armenian civilian killed by Azerbaijani fire in Baghanis, Tavush region
23–26 January	At least three Azerbaijani soldiers killed in clashes along LoC; at least two Armenian soldiers killed along <i>de jure</i> border
5 February	Armenian civilian killed in Nerkin Kamiraghbyur, Tavush region
19 March	Four Armenian soldiers killed and four injured (two seriously) in Gulistan area; sides subsequently accuse each other of using 120-millimetre mortars for first time since 1994
July and August	Exchanges along LoC
24 September	Three Armenian civilians killed in Tavush area along <i>de jure</i> border
25 September	Four Armenian soldiers killed in mortar strike on training centre near Matagiz–Talish road; artillery continue to fire for two days
26 September	Azerbaijani civilian killed in Agdam by Armenian fire
27 October	OSCE co-chairs take cover from shooting while inspecting LoC
9 December	Tank warfare reported for first time since 1994
<b>2016</b>	
11 February	Armenian civilian killed by sniper in Martuni
29 March	Two Azerbaijani soldiers killed in Qazax area along <i>de jure</i> border

Sources: News reports and Saferworld, [www.protectcivilians.org/database-map-of-incidents](http://www.protectcivilians.org/database-map-of-incidents).

<sup>17</sup> Azatutyun.am (2015), ‘Press Review’, 17 June 2015, [www.azatutyun.am/content/article/27077937.html](http://www.azatutyun.am/content/article/27077937.html).

<sup>18</sup> Contact.az (2016), ‘Soveshchane generaliteta u ministra oborony Zakira Gasanova’ [Generals meeting with defence minister Zakir Hasanov], 26 March 2016, [www.contact.az/docs/2016/Politics/032600150810ru.htm#.VweiinAbZek](http://www.contact.az/docs/2016/Politics/032600150810ru.htm#.VweiinAbZek); APA (2016), ‘Zakir Hasanov tells General Staff to check troops’ combat readiness’, 26 March 2016, [http://en.apa.az/xeber\\_zakir\\_hasanov\\_tells\\_general\\_staff\\_to\\_che\\_241171.html](http://en.apa.az/xeber_zakir_hasanov_tells_general_staff_to_che_241171.html); News.Az (2016), ‘Zakir Hasanov visits frontline positions – PHOTOS’, 27 March 2016, <http://news.az/articles/karabakh/107228>.

## Marginalized negotiations

The evolving intent to use new capability is related to a third trend, the decline in the likelihood of a negotiated agreement. Since the mid-2000s Armenia and Azerbaijan have been negotiating a proposal known as the Madrid Principles under the auspices of the OSCE's Minsk Group, an 11-state body led by a permanent troika of French, Russian and US co-chairs.<sup>19</sup>

Comprising a short list of bullet points, the Madrid Principles provide a roadmap to a settlement. Negotiated from 2004, they were first presented in the Spanish capital on 29 November 2007. Although later modified, the core ideas remain the same: a vote on the final status of NK, withdrawals of Armenian forces from around NK, peacekeeper deployment, a right of return for displaced persons, an interim status for NK, and a land corridor between NK and Armenia.<sup>20</sup>

The longevity of the Madrid Principles indicates implicit agreement on much of their content: previous peace proposals lasted months, not years. But the sticking point remains the final status of NK. Originally covering 4,400 sq km, NK morphed into a significantly larger entity of more than twice that area encompassing a belt of territories occupied by Armenian forces during the course of the 1991–94 war. In all, just under 14 per cent of *de jure* Azerbaijani territory is under Armenian control. The resulting *de facto* jurisdiction, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, remains unrecognized by any state, but is tightly integrated into Armenian political, economic and security structures.

Since the adoption of the Madrid Principles as the basis for negotiations, Armenian–Azerbaijani talks have circled around the detail of the timing and sequencing of their implementation. Essentially, the impasse in negotiations stems from Armenian preferences for fixed deadlines, security and comprehensiveness, and Azerbaijani preferences for flexible or undefined deadlines, incremental implementation and the conditionality of security.<sup>21</sup>

These respective emphases derive from the differences in each party's calculus towards the Minsk Process. The Armenian understanding is that it will ultimately lead to negotiated agreement legalizing NK's secession and Armenian control over some of the adjacent territories (at least part of Lachin and, temporarily, Kelbajar). Even if the Minsk Process does not deliver, its perpetuation enables Armenia's best alternative to a negotiated agreement: the embedding and solidification of *de facto* control in NK that the status quo allows. By this reasoning Armenia wins either way. The Azerbaijani understanding of the Minsk Process is that it could very well lead to the legal ratification of secession, an outcome that today's elite sees as unacceptable and to be avoided at any cost. But permitting the Minsk Process to continue indefinitely enables Armenia's best alternative, while making even those gains that Azerbaijan would with certainty receive from a successful conclusion of the process – the return of the adjacent occupied territories and of Azerbaijani displaced communities to them – ever more unlikely. By this reasoning, Azerbaijan loses from either the conclusion of the Minsk Process or its indefinite prolongation.

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<sup>19</sup> In addition to Armenia, Azerbaijan, France, Russia and the United States, the wider Minsk Group includes Belarus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Sweden and Turkey. This wider format meets four times a year but plays no substantive role in the mediation process.

<sup>20</sup> The full text of the original Madrid Principles, subsequently amended, was published on 11 April 2016 by the ANI Armenian Research Center, Yerevan, and can be found at [www.anirc.am/2016/04/11/madrid-principles-full-text/](http://www.anirc.am/2016/04/11/madrid-principles-full-text/).

<sup>21</sup> For more on these dynamics, see the papers produced by the Karabakh Contact Group, a Track-2 initiative supported by peacebuilding NGO Conciliation Resources, which can be found via <http://www.c-r.org/where-we-work/caucasus/karabakh-contact-group-0>.

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The extent to which the Minsk Process coheres into coordinated pressure for negotiation depends significantly on the interrelationships between the mediating countries and their foreign policy engagements in the region. Since the failure of a push led by Dmitry Medvedev, then Russia's president, for a signing at an Armenian–Azerbaijani presidential summit in Kazan in 2011, the peace process has been overshadowed not only by the changes in military capability and intent described above, but by numerous regional developments: conflict in Syria and Iraq, the return of Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency, conflict in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and the expansion of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The variable contours of Russian–Western confrontation within each of these theatres have created a destabilizing background for the Minsk Group as a multilateral mediation structure predicated on Russian–Western cooperation. The dissolution of previously close Russian–Turkish relations after November 2015 and the challenge to petrodollar economies posed by a prolonged decline in oil prices have added to this destabilizing mix. These multiple higher-order priorities have led to the dwindling of expectations, pressures and available attention for a negotiated outcome on NK to all-time lows.

## A lack of political will?

Against a backdrop of maximalist and militarist posturing, domestic advocates of dialogue have been marginalized in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, albeit to differing extents. In Armenia intimidation, vandalism and physical assault against some advocates of dialogue have been documented, although generally peacebuilding non-governmental organizations (NGOs) face no obstacles to engaging with Azerbaijani counterparts.<sup>22</sup> As part of a wider crackdown on NGOs and civil society in Azerbaijan in 2014–15, engaging in dialogue with Armenians has been selectively criminalized. Some practitioners have been deliberately targeted when their profiles have coincided with prominent oppositional or human rights activism. However, advocates of moderate views have on occasion been vilified even without such an activist profile.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond these specific incidents, both Armenian and Azerbaijani political elites have encouraged and embedded a rhetorical and ideological climate in which the public discussion of compromise has become taboo. This is usually parsed in international and diplomatic assessments as 'a lack of political will'. But the lack of political will is not an explanation in itself. Rather, it is an outcome that needs to be explained. While this question is beyond the scope of this paper, a few comments are necessary. The degradation in the security context of the NK conflict coincides with the longevity of political elites across the divide: the same elites have been in power in Azerbaijan since 1993 and in Armenia since 1998. Both states now have entrenched hybrid regimes, combining aspects of formal procedural democracy with soft authoritarian toolkits.<sup>24</sup> Both regimes, albeit

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<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International (2013), *Armenia: No Space for Difference*, London: Amnesty International, pp. 9–10.

<sup>23</sup> The most prominent example is novelist Akram Aylisli's treatment following his literary portrayal of the massacre of Armenians in Baku in 1990 in the novella *Stone Dreams*. Aylisli's story intersected with that of the April outbreak when he was detained on 30 March 2016 while leaving Azerbaijan for a literary festival due to take place in Venice until 2 April. He was subsequently charged with assault of a security official. McChrystal, R. (2016), 'Azerbaijan: Akram Aylisli faces further charges after sending letter to president', Index on Censorship, 22 April 2016, [www.indexoncensorship.org/2016/04/azerbaijan-akram-aylisli-faces-charges-sending-letter-president/](http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2016/04/azerbaijan-akram-aylisli-faces-charges-sending-letter-president/).

<sup>24</sup> For samples from the wider literature on these topics, see Payaslian, S. (2011), *The Political Economy of Human Rights in Armenia. Authoritarianism and Democracy in a Former Soviet Republic*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris; and Aldstadt, A. (forthcoming), *Frustrated Democracy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*, Washington and New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Columbia University Press.

through different methods, have progressively marginalized the mass demands for popular participation expressed by Armenian and Azerbaijani societies in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In this situation, symbolic nationalism has become an important substitute for popular sovereignty, providing a core resource for unreformed elites to demobilize societal demands for reform and participation, and to remobilize societies around nationalist goals and agendas. This is not a purely instrumental process. Both republics are young states with less than 30 years of sovereignty in modern history, and are actively engaged in nation-building. The territorial component within these processes is central for both nations. In the context of unrealized aspirations for popular sovereignty and weak representative institutions, nationalist sentiments create a moment of otherwise elusive consensus between elites and societies. Unresolved conflict simultaneously provides a forum that locks incumbent leaders into a high-status international mediation process, subliminally underscoring their parity with global leaders.

Externally and internally, then, the NK conflict has given crucial dividends to elites defaulting on commitments to institutionalize popular participation, socio-economic reform and the rule of law. These dividends depend on sustaining a rhetorical climate of antagonism that continually shapes the domestic political arena to marginalize advocates of reform. The result has been a long-term disjunction between international and domestic discourses on the negotiations, encapsulated in the notion that ‘the presidents are ahead of their peoples’.<sup>25</sup> Even if successive Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents have been able to sustain the image of a viable negotiation process with the Minsk Group, they have declined to engage their own societies in a dialogue on the real implications of peace. Political elites have instead based their domestic discourse on assumptions of total and indivisible sovereignty over NK. Although this largely accords with public opinion in each state, elite rhetoric has in many cases gone considerably further in constructing historical and primordial antagonisms between Armenians and Azerbaijanis and legitimating the use of force to resolve them.<sup>26</sup>

There is not so much an absence of political will, then, as a determination on the part of elites to stay in power. Preparing societies for peace, acknowledging compromises and defusing Armenian–Azerbaijani tensions will only be undertaken when such steps appear to support this goal. The current elite calculus offers the Minsk Group few alternatives other than to manage the conflict as best it can, rather than allowing painstakingly crafted peace proposals and political capital to fall on barren ground. The trap for political elites is that in the absence of real institutionalization they may ultimately be unable to control the nationalist sentiments they have mobilized, and default to war.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>This idea was invoked by the then US co-chair, Carey Cavanaugh, in connection with the progress made in the negotiations in 2000–01. See Ambassador Cavanaugh’s comments in the meeting transcript contained in Caspian Studies Program, John F. Kennedy School of Government (2001), *Negotiations on Nagorno-Karabagh: Where Do We Go From Here?*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, pp. 8–12.

<sup>26</sup>Polling consistently shows that Armenians and Azerbaijanis have diametrically opposed views on their preferred status for NK. Less often reported is their apparent preference for negotiation over war. In 2013, 54 per cent of Armenians and 52 per cent of Azerbaijanis surveyed by the Caucasus Barometer answered that a solution was rather or very likely to arise from peaceful negotiation; significantly fewer Azerbaijanis (33 per cent) and Armenians (20 per cent) saw a solution by force as rather or very likely. These figures point to an implicit societal demand for statesmanship. See the Armenian and Azerbaijani data sets for 2013, the last year when the Caucasus Barometer was conducted in Azerbaijan as of this writing, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/datasets/>.

<sup>27</sup>See de Waal, T. (2009), *The Karabakh trap: Dangers and dilemmas of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict*, London: Conciliation Resources, [http://www.c-r.org/downloads/The%20Karabakh%20Trap\\_Undated\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.c-r.org/downloads/The%20Karabakh%20Trap_Undated_ENG.pdf).

## 3. The Outbreak of Violence: 2–5 April 2016

### A narrative of events

In the early hours of 2 April, as Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan were returning home from the Nuclear Security Summit in the United States, large-scale hostilities broke out in the northeast, east and southeast sectors of the LoC. In the morning civilians were reported killed by Armenian artillery fire in Terter district, and by Azerbaijani rocket attacks on the town of Mardakert in NK. By the end of the day, Azerbaijani forces had captured numerous Armenian front posts<sup>28</sup> in two locations: around the villages of Talish and Seysulan in the northeast,<sup>29</sup> and in the hills around Lale Tepe in the extreme south near the Iranian border.

Intensive tank and heavy artillery warfare continued throughout 3 April, despite a unilateral ceasefire declared at midday by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence. One Azerbaijani civilian was killed and others were wounded in Terter. By evening, Armenian journalists were reporting from some of the areas previously said to be under Azerbaijani control, indicating that this control had been brief. One report from the village of Talish, by the respected Yerevan-based investigative journalism centre Hetq, identified three Armenian civilians as having been killed and mutilated post-mortem in an outlying house that had not been evacuated.<sup>30</sup>

A third day of fighting on 4 April saw the mobilization of volunteers on both sides, the Azerbaijani deployment of suicide drones, and Azerbaijani threats of strikes on the capital of NK, Stepanakert, reciprocated by unspecified threats of commensurate response by the Armenian side. Armenian sources confirmed that Azerbaijani forces had held some of the front posts captured on 2 April in both the southern Lale Tepe and northeastern Talish-Seysulan areas.<sup>31</sup> After reports that artillery exchanges were spreading to the *de jure* border, on 5 April the respective chiefs of staff of the Armenian and Azerbaijani armed forces, Yuri Khachaturov and Necmeddin Sadyghov, agreed a ceasefire under Russian mediation in Moscow. Although large-scale hostilities quickly died down, sporadic artillery, mortar and sniper exchanges continued to claim lives during the rest of April.

A full range of societal reactions to the April escalation is difficult to distinguish from propaganda and ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effects. In Azerbaijan a surge of patriotic support, manifested in official and social media, led to a sense of disappointment at the declaration of the ceasefire on 5 April.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> These posts are the first line of Armenian forces and are usually manned by eight servicemen, with two serving as lookouts at any given time. Sanamyan, E. (2016), ‘April 2016 war in Karabakh: a chronology’, 6 April 2016, <http://yandunts.blogspot.co.uk/2016/04/april-2016-war-in-karabakh-draft.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Talish is an Armenian-inhabited village in the northeast of Armenian-controlled territory, the closest in its vicinity to the LoC. Seysulan is a reportedly abandoned settlement to the southeast. Armenian and Azerbaijani reports differ as to whether this settlement was under Armenian control before 2 April. Armenian maps of the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh Republic indicate that it was not; Azerbaijani reports suggested that it had been ‘recaptured’.

<sup>30</sup> Hetq (2016), ‘Azerbaijani Soldiers Execute Elderly Armenian Couple in Artsakh; Then Cut Off Their Ears’, Hetq, 3 April 2016, <http://hetq.am/eng/news/66976/Azerbaijani-soldiers-execute-elderly-armenian-couple-in-artsakh-then-cut-off-their-ears.html>.

<sup>31</sup> As stated by Karabakh Armenian Colonel Viktor Arustamyan at a media briefing. See Sanamyan (2016), ‘April 2016 war in Karabakh: a chronology’.

<sup>32</sup> Xaqverdi, A. (2016), ‘Baku: Obshchestvo gotovo na zherty radi pobedy v Karabakhe’ [Baku: Society ready to make sacrifices for the sake of victory in Karabakh], BBC Russian Service, 8 April 2016, [www.bbc.com/russian/international/2016/04/160407\\_baku\\_karabakh\\_conflict](http://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2016/04/160407_baku_karabakh_conflict).

Thousands were reported to have volunteered to fight, only to be turned away by the Ministry of Defence on the grounds that they were not needed. Media of all political orientations carried items framing the outbreak as Azerbaijan's first military success since 1994 and a turning of the tide. Even critical voices expressed surprise at the suddenness and intensity of societal mobilization.<sup>33</sup> Spontaneous demonstrations took place across the country. Youth rallies marched through Ganja and Baku and some smaller towns on 5 and 6 April, with none of the usual hindering of demonstrators by police or security forces.<sup>34</sup> Following the ceasefire, the media emphasized a tactical Azerbaijani victory and claimed that the myths of LoC impregnability, Armenian military superiority and the value of Armenia's alliances had been shattered.

In contrast to this euphoria in Azerbaijan, there was a sombre reaction in Armenia and NK to the outbreak of hostilities.<sup>35</sup> Networks dating from the 1990s were quickly activated to organize volunteers. By the evening of 3 April, thousands of them – some veterans of the 1990s war now in their fifties – had been transported to NK by influential Armenian veteran associations such as Yerkrpah and the Union of Artsakh Volunteers. Diasporan Armenians pledged financial assistance to volunteers and their families. The 5 April ceasefire was greeted in Armenia with cautious optimism. Although Armenian officials initially emphasized the effective performance of Armenian forces, a growing sense of public disappointment focused on corruption and complacency in the army. Outdated equipment and communication lines along front-line positions were held to have been responsible for many Armenian casualties in the first few hours of hostilities. Three high-ranking army officials were dismissed on 26 April, and a fourth, responsible for arms procurement, was relieved of his post at the end of May.<sup>36</sup> Public demonstrations in Yerevan also followed the ceasefire, driven by anti-Russian sentiments protesting against Moscow's arms sales to Baku. These signalled revived expressions of a 'Eurasia-sceptic' constituency in Armenia, motivated by a sense of betrayal by Russia and other allies.<sup>37</sup> Eurasia-scepticism is not a new sentiment in Armenia, however, and although it is sincerely experienced by a significant part of the population, it also provides leverage for the Armenian leadership in its dealings with Moscow.<sup>38</sup>

## What was new in the April violence?

The fighting of 2–5 April continued the 'new normal' prevailing along the LoC since 2014, but it departed from earlier escalations in three critical respects: the scale of fighting, changes in the pattern of territorial control, and the deployment of new technologies.

<sup>33</sup> Contact.az (2016), "Chetyrekhdnevnyaya' voyna. Izbavlenie ot kompleksa pobezhdennykh' [The 'four-day' war: Getting rid of the loser complex], 6 April 2016, [www.contact.az/docs/2016/Want%20to%20Say/040600151876ru.htm#.VwT-3XAbZek](http://www.contact.az/docs/2016/Want%20to%20Say/040600151876ru.htm#.VwT-3XAbZek).

<sup>34</sup> For footage, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6Q29hCgL4M>.

<sup>35</sup> Grigorian, M. (2016), 'Lyudi ponimayut, chto voyna mozhet vozobnovitsya' [People understand that war may resume], BBC Russian Service, 8 April 2016, [www.bbc.com/russian/international/2016/04/160407\\_yerevan\\_karabakh\\_conflict](http://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2016/04/160407_yerevan_karabakh_conflict).

<sup>36</sup> Azatutyun.am (2016), 'Senior Armenian Military Officials Sacked', 26 April 2016, [www.azatutyun.am/content/article/27699843.html](http://www.azatutyun.am/content/article/27699843.html);

Panarmenian.net (2016), 'Melsik Chilingaryan osvobozhden ot dolzhnosti nachal'nika upravleniya vooruzheniy VS Armenii' [Melsik Chilingaryan relieved of the post of the head of ordnance of Armenia's armed forces], 23 May 2016, <http://www.panarmenian.net/rus/news/212951/>.

<sup>37</sup> Lragir.am (2016), 'Draft Resolution on Secession of Armenia from Eurasian Union Has Been Introduced', 14 April 2016, <http://www.lragir.am/index/eng/o/politics/view/35616>.

<sup>38</sup> Thus Eurasia-sceptic demonstrations in Yerevan may have strengthened the Armenian leadership's hand in requests for the supply of Russian arms contracted under a 2015 agreement to be accelerated. Vzglyad (2016), 'Prem'er Armenii poprosil Medvedeva uskorit' postavki voennoy produktsii iz Rossii' [Armenian PM asked Medvedev to speed up the delivery of military supplies from Russia], 7 April 2016, <http://vz.ru/news/2016/4/7/804171.html>.



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## The scale of fighting

This far surpassed earlier incidents. Fighting involved the coordination of infantry, tanks and aviation (both helicopters and UAVs) across a wide range of locations along the LoC. For the first time since 1994, notoriously indiscriminate GRAD missiles were deployed. This represented a significant upscaling of operations relative to earlier incidents, and was reflected in the numbers of casualties. Armenian official sources confirmed 64 combatant fatalities, and at least 120 wounded; in addition 15 volunteers and four Armenian civilians were killed.<sup>39</sup> This brought the official Armenian fatality count for the outbreak to more than 80.<sup>40</sup>

Azerbaijani official sources have not updated their 5 April confirmation of 31 combatants and six civilians killed.<sup>41</sup> These figures contrast with significantly higher figures reported by Azerbaijani opposition media outside the country on the basis of funeral reports trawled from social media. These reports suggest that the Azerbaijani death toll may have reached three times the official figure.<sup>42</sup>

If true, as seems likely, the overall fatality count over those four days alone would reach 200, a massive increase over the previous worst annual total. Other unconfirmed sources have suggested total casualty numbers higher than 300; it will take some time before a reliable total figure can be attested.<sup>43</sup> An implausible discrepancy applies to the material losses admitted by each side: Armenian forces conceded the loss of 14 tanks, Azerbaijani forces only one tank and one helicopter. Azerbaijani losses may be assumed to have been significantly higher.

## Changes in territorial control

Even if fleeting or strategically marginal, changes in the pattern of territorial control took place for the first time since 1994. Claims vary as to the extent of territory that actually changed hands. On his return from the Vienna meeting with Azerbaijani and co-chair country officials, President Sargsyan claimed at a press briefing on 17 May that 800 hectares had been lost.<sup>44</sup> The Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that Azerbaijan had recaptured 2,000 hectares.<sup>45</sup> The final

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<sup>39</sup> Razminfo (2016), 'Reference (report) about the losses between 2–5 April – RA Ministry of Defense', <https://razminfo.wordpress.com/2016/04/14/reference-report-about-the-losses-between-april-2-5-ra-ministry-of-defense/>.

<sup>40</sup> Some counts include casualties subsequent to the 5 April ceasefire and are higher, totalling more than 90.

<sup>41</sup> Author's communication with Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 June 2016. Azerbaijani losses in terms of civilian lives and property are documented at [http://www.mfa.gov.az/files/file/T\\_\\_qdimat\\_Garaba\\_.pdf](http://www.mfa.gov.az/files/file/T__qdimat_Garaba_.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Azerbaijani officials have referred to the number of Azerbaijani fatalities between 2 April and 5 April as a state secret. A list of combatant fatalities compiled on the basis of new social media networks by the opposition, Germany-based TV station Meydan TV and published on 7 April listed 64 combatants killed. Meydan TV (2016), 'Spisok pogibshikh v boyakh v Karabakhe ot Meydan TV' [The death toll from Karabakh violence by Meydan TV], 7 April 2016, [www.meydan.tv/ru/site/opinion/13438/](http://www.meydan.tv/ru/site/opinion/13438/). Legal proceedings against 15 journalist stringers reporting for Meydan TV in Azerbaijan were opened shortly after, on 18 April. In a Russian TV interview on 25 April, Emin Milli, director of Meydan TV, alleged that 92 combatant fatalities had been verified by Meydan TV. See Dozhd', 'Za chto azerbaydzhanskikh zhurnalistov nazvali natspredatelyami' [Why Azerbaijani journalists were branded as traitors], 25 April 2016, [https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here\\_and\\_now/azerbaydzhanskikh\\_zhurnalistov\\_nazvali\\_natspredateljami-408142/](https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/azerbaydzhanskikh_zhurnalistov_nazvali_natspredateljami-408142/). A similar list published on 10 April by the Caspian Defense Studies Institute, a think-tank outside Azerbaijan, named 94 servicemen killed. The list indicated a further 43 injured, unnamed. Caspian Defense Studies Institute, 'ADLI SIYAHI: 94 hərbçi şəhid olub, 43 nəfər yaralamb – Yenilənir' [List of names: 94 soldiers killed, 43 people injured – Update], <https://caspiandefense.wordpress.com/2016/04/10/cəbhə-xəttində-həlak-olan-azərbaycan-hərbçilərinin-adları-və-fotoları/>.

<sup>43</sup> A US government source on 16 May cited a total casualty figure of 350 including civilians for 2–5 April, although it is not clear on what this is based. US Department of State (2016), 'Background briefing on Nagorno Karabakh', 16 May 2016, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/05/257263.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> Armedia (2016), 'President Sargsyan Summarises Results of Vienna Visit in Interview', 17 May 2016, <http://armedia.am/eng/news/34300/president-sargsyan-summarizes-results-of-vienna-visit-in-interview.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Author's communication with Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 June 2016. Higher claims on the Azerbaijani side may reflect calculations based on weapons ranges opened up by possession of high areas.

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number of front posts captured by Azerbaijani forces on 2 April appears to have been greater than originally reported: 14 in the Talish-Seysulan area and seven in the area of Lale Tepe.<sup>46</sup>

Commentary on both sides of the conflict, if for different reasons, emphasized the strategic aspects of Azerbaijani seizures of territory.<sup>47</sup> But there does not appear to have been a strategy to sustain and consolidate the gains made in the areas of Talish and Seysulan villages. This may reflect the higher strategic priority – and effort to recapture – accorded to these areas by the Armenian military command, as territory much closer to Armenian population points (Talish being an Armenian-populated village) than Lale Tepe, a remote and uninhabited area in the extreme south. Armenian forces recouped more positions in these areas than in the south, which Armenian officials initially described as strategically dispensable.<sup>48</sup> As high ground commanding views and enhancing the range of weapons, territory gained by Azerbaijan in Lale Tepe is nevertheless of local tactical importance.

In the broader strategic picture this does not signal a major change. But the primary objective in taking these slivers of territory may have been psychological. Their main significance is symbolic, deriving from a long-standing assumption that the heavily fortified LoC is impregnable to Azerbaijani penetration. On the evening of 2 April Azerbaijani governmental media published maps depicting regained territories, which rapidly evolved into popular maps circulated on Facebook depicting sizeable chunks of Armenian-controlled territory returned to Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani media subsequently reported that some displaced Azerbaijanis were now able to visit their former homes in the vicinity of Lale Tepe, as Armenian snipers on higher ground who had previously threatened these areas had been removed.<sup>49</sup>

## Experimentation with new technologies

The four-day duration of hostilities permitted wartime experimentation with new military and informational technologies. Azerbaijani forces reported the deployment of new weapons, including the Israeli-manufactured Harop ‘kamikaze’ or suicide drone. On 4 April one of these killed nine people when it destroyed a bus in Mardakert transporting Armenian volunteers from Sisian.<sup>50</sup> New Russian-manufactured TOS-1A 24-barrel thermobaric (long-distance flame-throwing) multiple-launch rocket systems, and Israeli-made ThunderB surveillance drones and Spike missiles, were also reported to have been deployed.<sup>51</sup> In the field of information warfare, techniques that had been in development over recent years<sup>52</sup> were immediately evident in Armenian attacks that temporarily

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<sup>46</sup> Author’s interview with Tatul Hakobyan, Civilitas, Yerevan, 9 June 2016.

<sup>47</sup> The Regional Studies Center, a Yerevan think-tank, concluded on 4 April that Azerbaijan had adopted ‘a new strategy to seize, secure and sustain control of territory’ (emphasis in original). Regional Studies Center (2016), *Nagorno-Karabakh Situational Assessment*, 4 April 2016.

<sup>48</sup> As claimed to Russian journalist Andrey Borodulin, ‘Sily ochen’ blizko nakhodyatsya drug ot druga’ [Forces are very close to one another], *Kommersant.ru*, 6 April 2016, [www.kommersant.ru/doc/2957159](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2957159).

<sup>49</sup> Governmental news site Haqqin.az reported that internally displaced Azerbaijanis were able to visit graves in the village of Chodzhug Marjanli, previously within range of Armenian snipers. Haqqin.az (2016), ‘Bezhtensy vozvrashchayutsya v selo Chodzhug Mardzhanly [Refugees return to the village of Chodzhug Marjanli], 7 April 2016, <http://haqqin.az/news/67543>.

<sup>50</sup> Eckel, M. (2016), ‘Nagorno-Karabakh Witnesses Debut of ‘Kamikaze’ Drone’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 6 April 2016, [www.rferl.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-kamikaze-drone-debut/27658645.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-kamikaze-drone-debut/27658645.html).

<sup>51</sup> Kucera, J. (2016), ‘Karabakh Fighting Highlights Azerbaijan’s New Israeli Weapons’, Eurasianet, 6 April 2016, [www.eurasianet.org/node/78181](http://www.eurasianet.org/node/78181).

<sup>52</sup> Reciprocal cyber attacks were reported in January–February 2016, when Azerbaijani hackers defaced the website of Armenia’s mission to NATO and Armenian hackers carried out distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks – when bandwidths are flooded to breakdown – on several Azerbaijani government websites. See Hackread (2016), ‘Azerbaijani Hackers Deface NATO-Armenia, Embassy Websites in 40 Countries’, 24 January 2016, [www.hackread.com/Azerbaijani-hackers-defac-nato-armenia-embassy-sites/](http://www.hackread.com/Azerbaijani-hackers-defac-nato-armenia-embassy-sites/); Hackread (2016), ‘Armenian Hackers DDoS Azerbaijani Government Portals, Leak a Trove of Data’, 31 January 2016, [www.hackread.com/armenian-hackers-ddos-Azerbaijani-government-portals/](http://www.hackread.com/armenian-hackers-ddos-Azerbaijani-government-portals/).

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brought down the Azerbaijani Press Agency website and hacked the Twitter feed of the Azerbaijani embassy in Moscow. A Turkish group, the ‘Turk Hack Team’, identified itself as supporting the Azerbaijani side. Fake Twitter accounts disseminated misinformation on casualties and deployment locations, and fake defeatism among accounts purporting to belong to the other side.<sup>53</sup>

## Attribution and intentionality

Predictably, each side blames the other for the April outbreak, and proportions and attributions of intentionality remain conjectural and contentious. Azerbaijani official sources claim that Azerbaijani deployments were a response to heavy Armenian shelling across the LoC. Armenian sources claim that a substantial Azerbaijani offensive was planned, targeting three locations along the LoC in a kind of blitzkrieg.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, the primary risk highlighted by many international and local observers prior to the outbreak was accidental escalation. Examination of the dynamics just before and during the violence indicates that a combination of intentionality and runaway rules of engagement may have generated a more serious escalation than was perhaps originally planned.

Few disagree that the overall strategic context points to Azerbaijani interests in destabilizing the LoC as the front line of occupying forces. Senior Azerbaijani policy-makers have repeatedly rejected confidence-building measures along the LoC, such as the withdrawal of snipers or the introduction of an incident investigation mechanism, unless such measures are tied to territorial withdrawals by Armenian forces.<sup>55</sup> In effect they argue that security – a primary Armenian demand – is conditional on progress, envisaged incrementally, in the negotiations. Their Armenian counterparts have broadly supported these confidence-building measures.

This is not to suggest that ceasefire violations are one-sided. Previous incidents, which have included Azerbaijani civilian casualties, show that Armenian forces are also committed to demonstrating their capacity to hold their positions.<sup>56</sup> A doctrine of ‘disproportionate response’, blurring the distinction between offensive and defensive action, has informed Armenian strategic thinking for several years. This was reinforced by Armenian Deputy Defence Minister David Tonoyan’s announcement of active deterrence as Armenia’s official military doctrine at an OSCE seminar on 18 February 2016.<sup>57</sup> The April violence was thus the first major incident since that doctrine was announced.

The strategic context; the scale, operational coherence and geographical coordination of Azerbaijani forces on 2 April; the capture of several Armenian front posts on that day; Azerbaijani media reporting that an offensive was under way; and the heavy media coverage given to Minister of Defence Zakir Hasanov in the preceding week – all suggest a planned Azerbaijani operation. But its intent is debatable. Was this a major offensive aimed at achieving strategic military goals and

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<sup>53</sup> Martirosyan, S. (2016), ‘First Information War’, JAMnews, 7 April 2016, [www.jam-news.net/Publication/Get/en-US/1632](http://www.jam-news.net/Publication/Get/en-US/1632).

<sup>54</sup> Karabakh Armenian sources reported that an Azerbaijani special forces probe was encircled in the area of Talish at 0230 on 2 April. Sanamyan (2016), ‘April 2016 war in Karabakh: a chronology’.

<sup>55</sup> Author’s interview with Azerbaijan’s Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov, Baku, 20 February 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Civil monitoring of ceasefire violations in the area of the *de jure* Armenian–Azerbaijani border in the Tavush/Tovuz regions clearly shows that such violations are reciprocal. Armenia–Azerbaijan Protect Civilians Project, [www.protectcivilians.org/](http://www.protectcivilians.org/).

<sup>57</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2016), ‘Armenia to switch to Karabakh ‘Deterrence’ Strategy’, 19 February 2016, [www.rferl.org/content/armenian-karabakh-strategy-change-azerbaijan/27562092.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/armenian-karabakh-strategy-change-azerbaijan/27562092.html).

‘redrawing the map’? This interpretation implies an attempt to replicate the Georgian operation of July 2006 in the Kodori gorge in Abkhazia, which led to the return of a strategically marginal area of Abkhazia to Georgian government jurisdiction. It was renamed ‘Upper Abkhazia’ and, in a symbolically resonant move, became the relocated seat of the ethnically Georgian Abkhaz government-in-exile. Did Azerbaijan intend a similar reshaping of the LoC, or a more limited engagement aimed at achieving political goals beyond the battlefield? Several factors point in the latter direction.

First, the absence of a strategy to consolidate most of the initial territorial gains indicates that these were either not anticipated or seen as symbolic and dispensable, rather than as the core strategic objectives of a major offensive. Second, the Azerbaijani media strategy suggests a lack of preparedness for a major offensive. Governmental media reporting on 2 April was hesitant, apparently unsure whether to report that an Azerbaijani offensive was under way.<sup>58</sup> The fact that the Ministry of Defence got its Facebook and Twitter accounts online only on 4 April also suggests a lack of preparation for an all-out war. This ceded crucial informational space about initial developments on the ground to already established Karabakh Armenian sources. Third, the fact that the operation began within just a few hours of President Aliyev’s departure from Washington is highly suggestive of a political, rather than military, logic. Few developments could have more effectively substantiated arguments, perhaps made during meetings with US Vice-President Joe Biden or Secretary of State John Kerry, that the status quo was untenable.

The most plausible scenario, therefore, is that Azerbaijan envisaged a limited but still significant operation, designed to reprioritize the NK conflict internationally on terms more favourable to it. The operation was most likely intended as an incremental, rather than militarily decisive, increase in scale relative to the outbreaks of March and September 2015, and possibly a testing of Armenia’s newly introduced doctrine of disproportionate response. It seems clear that this was indeed the response, resulting in a much larger-scale engagement than was perhaps intended. Such a scenario points to the presence of both planned and ‘runaway’ factors in explaining the scale of hostilities. It underscores a combustible combination of the use of force to achieve political goals and a tenuous ability to control limited military engagements.

## A diversionary war?

The role of recent economic problems in Azerbaijan in motivating diversionary violence also needs to be considered. Since the mid-2000s a rentier political economy dependent on oil revenues has emerged in the country. These financial flows accounted for 90 per cent of Azerbaijan’s exports and half of its GDP in 2014. Transfers of such flows from the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan (SOFAZ) are critical to balancing the budget, having accounted for 47 per cent of state budget revenues (and 88 per cent of SOFAZ expenditures) in 2015.<sup>59</sup> The impacts of the fall in oil prices since June 2014 have

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<sup>58</sup> The line reported by Azerbaijani media was inconsistent. Initially reports cited a Ministry of Defence statement that an Azerbaijani offensive was under way on 2 April. Subsequently a different line emphasized Azerbaijani responses to heavy Armenian shelling along the LoC.

<sup>59</sup> Ingilab Ahmadov (2016), ‘Azerbaijan’s New Macroeconomic Reality: How to Adapt to Low Oil Prices’, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 83, 21 April 2016, p. 3.

therefore been severe.<sup>60</sup> The national currency has been a particular casualty: with a first devaluation in February 2015, and a second in December of the same year as it was floated freely, the Azerbaijani manat lost more than 60 per cent of its value *vis-à-vis* the US dollar in 2015. Interventions to support it reportedly depleted Azerbaijan's foreign-currency reserves by more than half, from \$14.9 billion in November 2014 to \$6.2 billion in November 2015.<sup>61</sup> Lay-offs at major enterprises were reported, and a number of small-scale and uncoordinated protests ensued across the country in January 2016.<sup>62</sup>

These developments have posed multiple challenges. While undermining the economic basis of the social contract, they have also imposed new and limited horizons on the military spending and high-cost lobbying that have underpinned Azerbaijan's policy towards the NK conflict in recent years. The military budget, a totemic icon of the country's capacity to win an arms race with Armenia, appears likely to drop by 40 per cent in 2016, creating the sense of a limited window in which the military balance is more favourable to Azerbaijan.<sup>63</sup> These developments point both to the domestic utility of diversionary violence and to transience in a military balance perceived as advantageous to Azerbaijan.

But the extent to which this was the primary intent behind the operations on 2 April remains questionable. At a time of unprecedented economic problems arising from the fall in oil prices, the effect of the violence has certainly been to unite society and deflect incipient protest away from socio-economic issues. However, the diversionary thesis is too imprecise to explain specific timings. As already noted, the escalatory dynamics of the past two years preceded Azerbaijan's current economic difficulties. The significance of scattered and largely apolitical protests in January 2016 should not be overstated; the Azerbaijani government weathered previous episodes of protest in March 2012 and January 2013 without difficulty.<sup>64</sup> In the carefully choreographed world of Azerbaijani political messaging, the coincidence of the outbreak with a diplomatically significant visit by the head of state to the United States, a lead mediator, further points to the likelihood that its purpose was as an external signal.

The consolidation of domestic arenas and deflection of attention from economic problems are important outcomes of the April violence. Yet an excessive focus on these internal agendas may miss the wider range of political intentions, including those long visible before the fall in oil prices and motivated by issues of national identity and prestige that will outlast current economic conditions.

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<sup>60</sup>The Brent crude oil price plunged from \$115 per barrel in June 2014 to an 11-year low of \$36 per barrel in December 2015. *Financial Times* (2016), 'Commodities: ICE Brent Crude Oil price Month', <http://markets.ft.com/research/Markets/Tearsheets/Summary?s=IB.1:IEU>.

<sup>61</sup> Reuters (2015), 'Update 4-Azerbaijan cuts its Currency Loose, Triggering 32 pct Plunge', 21 December 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/azerbaijan-rate-idUKL8N14AoBU20151221>.

<sup>62</sup>For an overview, see 'Low Oil Prices: Economic and Social Implications for Azerbaijan', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 83, 21 April 2016, <http://www.laender-analysen.de/cad/pdf/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest83.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup>Caffrey, C. (2016), 'Azerbaijan to cut defence spending by 40%', *IHS Jane's 360*, 27 January 2016, <http://www.janes.com/article/57500/azerbaijan-to-cut-defence-spending-by-40>.

<sup>64</sup>Farid Guliyev emphasizes the uncoordinated and largely apolitical nature of these 'pocketbook protests'. Guliyev, F. (2016), 'Azerbaijan: Low Oil Prices and their Social Impact', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 83, 21 April 2016, p. 20.

## 4. The Ambiguity of Deterrence

The April violence has exposed the security vacuum in which the NK conflict is suspended. This locks Armenia and Azerbaijan into a security dilemma in which each sees rearmament as imperative for its own defence, driving a regional arms race enabled primarily, as noted, by Russian arms sales and deliveries. Three aspects of this situation – relating to the OSCE mandate, Russia’s role and the attitude of international actors – urgently demand attention and rethinking.

### **An obsolete mandate**

First, April’s violence has emphatically demonstrated the discrepancy between the scale of violence constituting the ‘new normal’ along the LoC and the scope of the OSCE’s monitoring mandate. The Minsk Group’s mandate features six civilian field observers, led by the Personal Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office (CiO), Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk, who conduct twice-monthly inspections of the LoC with the prior consent of the parties. This narrow mandate is purely symbolic. It serves more as an information-sharing channel between the Minsk Group and national commanders deployed on the ground. In an earlier era, the symbolism was positive: the ceasefire really was self-regulating and did not need more enforcement. Today, the symbolism is negative: as the ceasefire has decayed, the OSCE has become powerless to reinforce it.

Minsk Group officials have been caught between preserving their neutrality and ‘naming and shaming’ the parties responsible for ceasefire violations. Armenian commentators in particular have criticized the co-chairs for failing to acknowledge what they see as Azerbaijan’s primary role in such violations. In January 2015 the co-chairs broke with their usual neutrality to call ‘on Azerbaijan to observe its commitments to a peaceful resolution of the conflict’.<sup>65</sup> They nevertheless also called on Armenia ‘to take all measures to reduce tensions’. Following further violence in September 2015, the co-chairs called ...

[...] for the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan to accept an OSCE mechanism to investigate ceasefire violations. Without such a mechanism, the sides will continue to blame each other for initiating deadly attacks on the Line of Contact and Armenia–Azerbaijan border. Armenia has agreed to discuss the details of the mechanism, and we urged Azerbaijan to do the same.<sup>66</sup>

As already noted, Azerbaijan has rebuffed such enjoinders, arguing that security confidence-building measures are conditional on significant, parallel and results-oriented progress on political issues in the negotiations. Baku’s key concern here is to avoid a situation in which security infrastructure embedding the LoC is introduced without tangible political gains in return. This position has hardened in tandem with the impasse at the negotiating table. OSCE officials, in turn, insist that they cannot impose ceasefire-support infrastructure on the parties. As a result, there are

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<sup>65</sup> OSCE (2015), ‘Press Release by the Minsk Group Co-Chairs’, Krakow, 27 January 2015, [www.osce.org/mg/136876](http://www.osce.org/mg/136876).

<sup>66</sup> OSCE (2015), ‘Press Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group’, New York, 26 September 2015, [www.osce.org/mg/185746](http://www.osce.org/mg/185746).



few political costs associated with violating the ceasefire. This impunity has allowed ceasefire violations to become an additional political lever in the repertoire of the belligerents.

## Managed ambivalence

A second dimension of security arrangements is their tacit delegation to one of the lead mediators, Russia. No other single actor has at its disposal the same range of legacy effects and military linkages, which extend to a military base and other installations in Armenia, both collective and bilateral treaties with that country, and extensive procurement contracts with both conflict parties. Through a system of what might be called 'managed ambivalence', Russia has sought to construct a dynamic of deterrence capable of restraining a calculus for war despite growing capabilities and intent among the belligerents.<sup>67</sup> Managed ambivalence covers a spectrum of strategies, including symmetric rearmament and military alliance with the smaller party, Armenia, as well as implicit or explicit promises and threats to extend or withdraw military support, or otherwise ambiguous discourse designed to make the extent of this support uncertain.

Russia's symmetric rearmament has attracted plentiful criticism in Armenia, where it is seen as contradicting its alliance commitments; and among Western policy circles, where Russia is accused of contravening its role as mediator. Russia has defended this strategy as the guarantor of deterrence, and its role as mediator would certainly be more questionable if it were arming only one of the parties. After the 5 April ceasefire, Russian politicians were quick to deflect criticism of their strategy of symmetric rearmament. On 8 April Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, speaking in Baku, proclaimed the deterrent function of arms sales to both parties, and affirmed that they would continue.<sup>68</sup> Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev also defended Russian arms sales with a well-used argument that they are correlated so as to construct deterrence; if other arms suppliers took Russia's place, this argument goes, this carefully calibrated deterrent would be lost.<sup>69</sup>

Another component of this deterrent structure is the presumed contribution of multilateral alliances. Armenia's primary security guarantees derive from its bilateral arrangements with Russia. But Armenia's membership of the CSTO has also been framed as providing security dividends not only in terms of privileged access to arms sales and modernization, but through the putative guarantee of the CSTO Charter's Article 4. This commits members, in the style of NATO's Article 5, to treat an attack on one as an attack on all. But two ambiguities have attached to the CSTO collective security guarantee. The first is whether other CSTO members would actually commit to collective action in the event of an attack on Armenia. CSTO members noticeably failed to rally appropriately around Russia when Turkey shot down a Russian jet in November 2015.<sup>70</sup> CSTO reluctance to commit to the organization's founder and leading member in an hour of need does not bode well for collective commitments to its smallest and most peripheral one.

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<sup>67</sup> Minasyan, S. (2016), *Sderzhivanie v karabakhskom konflikte* [Deterrence in the Karabakh Conflict], Yerevan: Caucasus Institute.

<sup>68</sup> Contact.az (2016), 'Rogozin: Russia will continue to supply weapons to Azerbaijan', 8 April 2016, [www.contact.az/docs/2016/Politics/040800152244en.htm#.VydrG3AbZek](http://www.contact.az/docs/2016/Politics/040800152244en.htm#.VydrG3AbZek).

<sup>69</sup> The issue of whether Russian's arms sales are made to match supplies from other countries is moot. For an earlier exposition of this argument, see Tovmasyan, S. (2015), 'Russian Arms Deliveries are not disturbing parity, says CSTO chief', *Armenianow.com*, 18 June 2015, [http://armenianow.com/karabakh/64504/armenia\\_csto\\_bordyuzha\\_weapons\\_russia\\_azerbaijan\\_sale](http://armenianow.com/karabakh/64504/armenia_csto_bordyuzha_weapons_russia_azerbaijan_sale).

<sup>70</sup> Gottesman, E. (2015), 'The Limits of Collective Security in Eurasia', *The Diplomat*, 24 December 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/the-limits-of-collective-security-in-eurasia/>.

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Embedded within the first ambiguity is the second – the question of what constitutes ‘Armenia’. Other CSTO members have made their antipathy to secessionist movements clear on several occasions, ranging from refusal to recognize Russian revisions of *de jure* borders in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea to insistence that Armenia’s accession to the EAEU does not encompass NK.<sup>71</sup> Their position is clearly not to support the patron states of secessionist entities. In April, cracks in the collective façade of the CSTO were quick to appear. While the violence was still ongoing, Belarus released a statement emphasizing territorial integrity and the inviolability of borders in resolving the conflict, a statement congruent with Azerbaijan’s position.<sup>72</sup> In its aftermath Kazakhstan pointedly requested that an EAEU meeting scheduled to take place in Yerevan on 8 April be relocated to Moscow.

CSTO member states are one thing. But even the Russian head of the CSTO, Nikolay Bordyuzha, has cultivated a sense of ambiguity around the mutual security clause. In June 2015 he balanced affirmations of Armenia’s ‘right to get assistance from allies in case of negative developments on its territory’ with affirmations that the CSTO has no right to interfere with the settlement process.<sup>73</sup> While his initial response on 2 April 2016 referred to ‘Azerbaijani actions’, subsequent pronouncements have steered an ambivalent path between being supportive of Armenia and non-committal.<sup>74</sup> Doubt regarding Russia’s support for Armenia in the event of a wider-scale conflict is likely to embolden Azerbaijan to test that commitment further.

In ways both ironic and ambiguous, April’s violence has both undermined and validated Russia’s deterrent structure. On the one hand, presumptions of restraint based on ambivalent calibrations of belligerent capabilities and collective security guarantees have been proved false. Rather than restraining the parties, Russia’s managed ambivalence has fortified them, allowing them to read into it what they will, and has led in a direction that exposes embarrassing fractures in the project of Russian-led regionalism. Furthermore, it has conferred capabilities far beyond those that an OSCE mandate dating from the mid-1990s can monitor. As a result neither the OSCE, bearing the legal mandate to monitor the belligerents, nor Russia, with less influence over the status quo challenger (Azerbaijan) than over the status quo power (Armenia), has effective leverage to prevent violence from breaking out.

On the other hand, even if it has enabled belligerent capacities to go to war, the speed with which Moscow was able to broker a lasting ceasefire demonstrates its capacity to stop hostilities once they have started. While Russia’s deterrent structure both tolerates and encourages low-intensity warfare, it does appear to hold against an all-out war. Ironically, it could thus be argued that managed ambivalence is the least of many possible evils, a better alternative to a malign neglect permitting the parties to go it alone in a regionally disastrous new war. But this is a deterrent that incites lower-level violence. It is insufficient to preclude major escalations over which the parties’

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<sup>71</sup> Michel, C. (2014), ‘The Confusing Direction of the EEU’, *The Diplomat*, 7 October 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/the-confusing-direction-of-the-eeu/>; see also News.am (2014), ‘Kazakhstan and Belarus want Armenia-Karabakh customs checkpoint?’, 11 September 2014, <http://news.am/eng/news/228359.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Belarus News (2016), ‘Belarus advocates for peaceful settlement of Nagorny Karabakh conflict’, 4 April 2016, <http://eng.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-advocates-for-peaceful-settlement-of-nagorny-karabakh-conflict-90198-2016/>.

<sup>73</sup> Ghazanchyan, S. (2015), ‘Armenia will get assistance from CSTO partners if necessary: Nikolay Bordyuzha’, Public Radio of Armenia, 18 June 2015, [www.armradio.am/en/2015/06/18/armenia-will-get-assistance-from-csto-partners-if-necessary-nikolay-bordyuzha/](http://www.armradio.am/en/2015/06/18/armenia-will-get-assistance-from-csto-partners-if-necessary-nikolay-bordyuzha/).

<sup>74</sup> Martirosyan, N. (2016), ‘Nikolay Bordyuzha: Flare-up of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict “will blow up the entire Caucasus”’, Arminfo, 27 April 2016, <http://www.arminfo.info/index.cfm?objectid=9D2D3A10-0C51-11E6-A8840EB7C0D21663>.

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control is questionable, and it yields diminishing effectiveness as episodes of violence recur. Given the scale and diversity of weaponry deployed in April, military commanders in future incidents will have no reason not to assume first use by the other side of the full range of heavier armaments. Restraints on the first use of a wide spectrum of weapons have thus been significantly reduced.

## International actors: a security commitment dilemma

Managed ambivalence is possible because of a third aspect of the security context: the absence of publicly stated international assurances regarding post-settlement security. Particularly for Armenia and NK, as the parties prioritizing security concerns, there is no plausible vision of post-settlement security that can be cited to offset political compromises. The absence of such a vision is a primary driver of resistance to contemplating withdrawals from territories around NK, and, at the more radical end of the spectrum, drives some Armenian claims that the ‘buffer zone’ should be expanded. Armenians in NK flatly reject international security guarantees, expressing more confidence in their own army.<sup>75</sup> Embedded insecurity on the Armenian side in turn precludes the return of displaced Azerbaijanis to areas around NK and, especially, to NK itself. Ultimately if the Armenian–Azerbaijani security dilemma is to be resolved, clear international commitments to post-settlement and transitional security arrangements are needed. Without them there is no other force but Russia to fill the security vacuum.

Defining these arrangements is an urgent but elusive imperative today.<sup>76</sup> Few international actors will countenance security assurances, still less logistical inputs, in the absence of a sincere political process. In the words of one former Minsk Group official: ‘No deal, no security: security in the post-agreement period has to flow from the authority of the agreement, not the other way round.’<sup>77</sup> Another obstacle is that the mandate to develop a concept for a peacekeeping force is rather diffuse. The Minsk Group co-chairs are authorized to ‘assist the Chairman-in-Office in developing a plan for the establishment, composition and operation of a multinational OSCE peace-keeping force’.<sup>78</sup> A High-Level Planning Group (HLPG) was tasked in 1995 with developing recommendations on such a force. Based in Vienna and originally planned as deploying 31 officers, the HLPG is staffed by five officers on secondments lasting three to four years. It has developed different possible scenarios for peacekeeping deployment, but effectively works in a vacuum because deployments are contingent on the still-unknown content of any eventual peace agreement.

In practice, planning for peacekeeping is mired in the wider political negotiation of the hierarchy and sequencing of the Madrid Principles. It is also hindered by the generally negative demonstration effects of peacekeeping operations elsewhere in the South Caucasus, and by a persistent ambivalence surrounding the OSCE’s peacekeeping capability.<sup>79</sup> Although the OSCE has fielded substantial operations such as the Kosovo Verification Mission (1999) and the Special

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<sup>75</sup> Former de facto official from NK, speaking under the Chatham House Rule at a seminar in Washington, DC, December 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Conciliation Resources (2015), *Securing an Armenian–Azerbaijani agreement: the roles of international and local security providers*, discussion paper, June 2015, [www.c-r.org/downloads/150714\\_Securing%20ENG.pdf](http://www.c-r.org/downloads/150714_Securing%20ENG.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> Former diplomat speaking under the Chatham House Rule, London, May 2016.

<sup>78</sup> OSCE (1995), ‘Mandate of the Co-Chairmen of the Conference on Nagorno Karabakh under the auspices of the OSCE (“Minsk Conference”)', March 1995, <http://www.osce.org/mg/70125?download=true>.

<sup>79</sup> According to the leaked Madrid Principles draft dating from 29 November 2007, peacekeeping forces (PKF) would be drawn from nations volunteering them (Point 6). The text goes on: ‘The selection of troops for the PKF shall be done by the parties by mutual consent. Each party has the right to veto the other’s choice.’

Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (2014), it has never mounted a ‘traditional’ peacekeeping operation.<sup>80</sup> Lack of mission experience is one issue. Another is justifying the expense of an operation in a context in which to date the parties have not committed to a viable political process. As a result, multilaterally conceived security arrangements suffer from a lack of credible commitment. This enables numerous speculative interpretations that peacekeeping will be monopolized and ‘geopoliticized’ through Russian dominance, following the tacit delegation of security arrangements to Moscow.<sup>81</sup> Ironically, one of the few issues on which Armenia, NK and Azerbaijan all agree is the need to avoid this outcome. Armenians, especially in NK, see a zero-sum relationship between peacekeepers and their own military capacity in NK.<sup>82</sup> Speaking in February 2015, Azerbaijan’s Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov noted:

We would accept OSCE peacekeeping forces, but not CIS, CSTO or unilateral Russian deployments. We need to find solutions in combined deployments – French, Pakistani, Italian. We can accept some Russian presence but not unilaterally.’<sup>83</sup>

The April hostilities have crystallized the resulting dilemma. As it becomes ever clearer that there is ‘no peace to keep’, multilateral commitment to peacekeeping will not be forthcoming. Without this commitment, mutual insecurity is likely to drive further militarization, solidifying Russian influence and bringing the de facto security framework full-circle to managed ambivalence. Having privileged force over politics in their relations for so long, the conflict parties are unlikely to resolve this dilemma on their own. This context points to the urgent need for a more robust and defined strategic focus on Armenian–Azerbaijani security from the Minsk Group, in its co-chair and wider formats, and from the OSCE CiO and the OSCE more widely. Unfortunately, only a major flare-up in NK, transforming this conflict into a clear and present threat to international interests, could create this focus – and indeed perhaps this was the primary goal driving the violence in April 2016.

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<sup>80</sup> Kemp, W. (2016), *OSCE Peace Operations: Soft Security in Hard Environments*, New York: International Peace Institute, [https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/1606\\_OSCE-and-Peace-Operations.pdf](https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/1606_OSCE-and-Peace-Operations.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> Author’s conversations in Armenia and Azerbaijan, 2014–15.

<sup>82</sup> Author’s interviews in NK, September 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Author’s interview with Araz Azimov, deputy foreign minister of Azerbaijan, Baku, 20 February 2015.

## 5. A Defaulting Peace Process

Alongside security challenges are the political challenges that the April crisis has thrown at the Minsk Group. First among them is the resumption of negotiations. If it is accepted that Azerbaijan directed its operations of 2 April primarily as a political message, what can the Minsk Group do to 'reset' the negotiations? Being seen to reward violence will be a concern, but all agree that the Minsk Process has stagnated in recent years. Remaking this peace process had been called for long before April 2016.<sup>84</sup>

A second challenge is to provide incentives for Armenia to participate in reset negotiations. Its assumptions that a dysfunctional peace process can continue indefinitely, and that putative allies will assist, have been undermined. At a vulnerable time of constitutional transition to a parliamentary system after a flawed referendum in December 2015, Armenian instincts are to hunker down, as reflected in increased calls for the formal recognition of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.<sup>85</sup>

A third challenge is to manage the Minsk Group's own identity as a multilateral, composite structure whose individual components are rivals in nearby theatres. A welcome assertion of its multilateral effectiveness came with the 16 May Vienna meeting between presidents Aliyev and Sargsyan, convened by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, US Secretary of State John Kerry and French State Secretary for European Affairs Harlem Desir. The conflict parties' verbal commitments were secured on several key agenda items, including the expansion of the OSCE mandate, the institution of an investigation mechanism, information exchange on missing persons and movement towards comprehensive negotiations.<sup>86</sup>

A more ambiguous meeting convened in St Petersburg on 21 June by President Vladimir Putin in a trilateral format, without the participation of France or the United States, followed the Vienna meeting. Leaders were characteristically cryptic in the aftermath of the Petersburg meeting, before engaging in a war of spin on what was or was not agreed. Only the relative quiet along the LoC between the May and June summits offered a tangible indication of intent to negotiate. The flurry of diplomatic activity notwithstanding, there remain numerous longer-term challenges arising from multiple erosions of Minsk Group capacity and coherence.

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<sup>84</sup> de Waal, T. (2010), 'Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process', *Survival* 52, 4: pp. 159–76.

<sup>85</sup> It is difficult to see what this step, regularly called for in recent years by some opposition politicians, would achieve other than a purely symbolic first recognition for NK. Without other recognitions, no new diplomatic and economic relations allowing for a strengthening of a polity in NK would follow. It would predetermine Armenia's position on the status of NK and thereby complicate its continued role as a negotiating party in the Minsk Process.

<sup>86</sup> OSCE (2016), 'Joint Statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Secretary of State of the United States of America, and State Secretary for Europe Affairs of France', 16 May 2016, <http://www.osce.org/mg/240316>.

## Challenges to Minsk Group mediation

External leverage over the conflict parties in the direction of peace has declined since the Minsk Group's most productive era in 1997–2007.<sup>87</sup> By nature and design, Azerbaijan's main strategic linkages with the outside world – its Caspian extractive industries – have weakened Russian and Western leverage and enabled rearmament. While Russian leverage over Armenia has increased, it has been used for goals other than inducing Armenian compromises in the peace process. This has prompted a consistent preoccupation among analysts as to what Russia's motives really are.<sup>88</sup> Regional integration projects, whether oriented towards Brussels or Moscow, carry little leverage in terms of inducing conflict resolution.

The capacity of the Minsk Group has also been weakened by the gradual substitution of real with symbolic cooperation between its Russian and Western members. Perhaps surprisingly, the Minsk Group has survived intact despite their fierce confrontation over Georgia, Ukraine and other theatres beyond the post-Soviet space. Insiders close to the process say that the Russian–Western conversation on NK is of an entirely different tenor from that on Georgia. But while the day-to-day and interpersonal mechanics of the Minsk Group provide displays of symbolic cooperation, geopolitical rivalries beyond NK have contributed to the dearth of strategic visions for more substantive cooperation. Generating that level of cooperation today involves meticulously isolating cooperation on NK from rivalries in neighbouring theatres, on which outcomes in NK would have an inevitable effect.

Generally minimalist interpretations of the Minsk Group's mandate among individuals on its staff have also weakened its capacities. Co-chairs are mandated 'upon consultation with the CiO, [to] maintain necessary contacts with the ICRC, the UNHCR and *other relevant international and regional organizations and institutions*' (emphasis added).<sup>89</sup> Unfortunately co-chairs have very rarely acted on this part of their mandate to reach out to non-governmental circles across the conflict. Likewise, a neglected aspect of the mandate of the CiO's Personal Representative is to 'assist the parties in implementing and developing confidence-building, humanitarian and other measures facilitating the peace process, in particular by encouraging direct contacts'.<sup>90</sup> The resulting approach of the Minsk Group has offered little resistance to the top-down, secretive and exclusive approaches of the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents. This has facilitated the Janus-faced combination of negotiable pragmatism and nationalist maximalism by which the presidents have, on the whole, managed the conflict respectively inside and outside the peace process.

These contradictions were acknowledged but ignored by the international community for as long as there was no immediate danger of war. Lacking positive inducements and engrossed in dealing with multiple other flashpoints, mediators and regional powers defaulted to managing the conflict rather than resolving it.

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<sup>87</sup> For a detailed exposition of this argument, see Broers, L. (forthcoming), 'Diffusion and default: A linkage and leverage perspective on the Nagorny Karabakh conflict', *East European Politics*.

<sup>88</sup> Romashov, V. and Rytövuori-Apunen, H. (2016), 'The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Steps of Settlement Marked Out by Russia's Interests?', presentation to the Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, Columbia University, 15 April 2016.

<sup>89</sup> See OSCE (1995), 'Mandate of the Co-Chairmen of the Conference on Nagorno Karabakh under the auspices of the OSCE ("Minsk Conference")'.

<sup>90</sup> 'Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk – Mandate', <http://www.osce.org/cio/andrzej-kasprzyk>.



## Russia takes the initiative

Since the escalations of 2014 there has been evidence of a renewed Russian-led push within the Minsk Group for a set of ideas sometimes referred to as the ‘Lavrov plan’ or ‘Lavrov proposals’, after their proponent, Foreign Minister Lavrov. The content of these ideas can only be conjectured. There are probably different iterations of them, and it would be unwise to ascribe more definition to them than they actually have. However, what does seem clear is that they derive from the Madrid Principles and would involve their partial implementation. In this sense, the term ‘Lavrov plan’ is a misnomer in implying something distinct from the Madrid Principles. Rather, the proposals might be interpreted as a ‘Madrid-lite’: an attempt to recombine, rather than replace, some of the ideas that have already been on the negotiating table for a decade.

Lavrov’s initiative has invited intense speculation that unilateral geopolitics is encroaching on multilateralism, and criticism that France and the United States have ceded the initiative to Russia. Russia seized all the opportunities in the aftermath of the April outbreak, brokering the ceasefire and dominating shuttle diplomacy. Some commentators see in Lavrov’s initiative a manoeuvre enacted in spite of, rather than through, the Minsk Group, and a project aimed at securing the presence of Russian peacekeepers on the ground in NK.<sup>91</sup> It is indeed striking that the foreign minister, rather than the Russian co-chair, is leading Russian diplomacy on the NK conflict, with no such visibility for his counterparts John Kerry or (the recently appointed) Jean-Marc Ayrault or his predecessor, Laurent Fabius. But according to those close to the process, Lavrov’s initiative has been pursued in a collegial way and has been framed by Russian diplomats as consistent with, not displacing, the Minsk Group format.<sup>92</sup> Prominent Russian analysts concur with this view.<sup>93</sup>

Historically, what little progress has been achieved at different moments in the NK peace process has resulted from single-mediator initiatives.<sup>94</sup> And concerns that Russia is taking over the process are not new. Russia has often, overtly or covertly, asserted its role as ‘first among equals’ in the Karabakh peace process. It has more levers than any other actor, and it prioritizes the NK conflict to an extent that no other external power does. Until the other co-chair countries allocate sufficient attention and resources to NK, Russian leadership is the default outcome. Certainly, in the light of Russia’s wider foreign policy deployments in the post-Soviet space, there is little reason to assume that Russian commitment to multilateralism in NK is anything other than instrumental. Yet in seeking to avoid a major war, Russia is promoting interests that converge with those of all other external actors. It may well be that Russia is re-examining its own policy of managed ambivalence in the aftermath of increasing escalations, and finding it wanting. A question that Sergey Lavrov’s initiative poses, then, is that if it is the only show in town, is it sufficiently legitimate for the wider international community to support it? A brief discussion of the possible contents of a ‘Madrid-lite’ scenario indicates that Russia has good reasons not to go it alone.

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<sup>91</sup> Grigoryan, A. (2015), ‘Russia advocates peacekeeping mission as tensions flare over Nagorno-Karabakh’, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 13 October 2015, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13290-russia-advocates-peacekeeping-mission-as-tensions-flare-over-nagorno-karabakh.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Author’s conversations, March 2015.

<sup>93</sup> See the comments made by Sergey Markedonov at the Valdai Discussion Club. EurAsia Daily (2016), ‘Poka Aliiev ne prevratitsya v Saakashvili, Rossiya ne budet lomat’ status-kvo v Karabakhe: ekspert’ [As long as Aliyev does not turn into Saakashvili, Russia will not change the status quo in Karabakh: expert], 15 May 2016, <http://eadaily.com/ru/news/2016/05/15/poka-aliev-ne-prevratitsya-v-saakashvili-rossiya-ne-budet-lomat-status-kvo-v-karabahe-ekspert>.

<sup>94</sup> de Waal (2010), ‘Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process’.

## Madrid-lite: squaring old circles?

As already noted, discussion of the contents of any ‘Madrid-lite’ initiative is pure conjecture. But a partial implementation of the Madrid Principles would presumably involve the return to Azerbaijani jurisdiction of some of the Armenian-occupied territories to the east, south and southwest of NK (see Map 1). The de facto authorities in NK would re-enter the peace process, and pending rehabilitation of these territories, a majority of displaced Azerbaijanis would be enabled to exercise a right of return.

These steps would have significant ramifications for wider regional connectivity, entailing new transport and communications corridors to enable the now possible restoration of Iranian access to the region. A corridor to the west across the Armenian–Turkish border, this time presumably supported by Azerbaijan, would be a second important opening, if recently complicated by Russian–Turkish tensions.

But old conundrums accompany such a vision. Any partial implementation of the Madrid Principles implies that its single most challenging element – determination of the final status of NK – would not be implemented first. This means that a ‘Madrid-lite’ solution cannot avoid a long-standing dilemma between comprehensive ‘package’ and incremental ‘step-by-step’ approaches to an Armenian–Azerbaijani agreement. Any proposal that defers the determination of the final status of NK will encounter resistance in Armenia, and especially NK itself. For Armenians deferral of status is deferral of resolution. A legitimate rejoinder is that transformation would be better than the status quo: a Cyprus scenario is far preferable to the current situation in NK. But that will be a hard sell for as long as Karabakh Armenians see themselves as being under diplomatic quarantine and military siege.

Recent statements by both sides suggest that the package/step-by-step dilemma is still salient. On 8 April President Sargsyan expressed Armenia’s willingness to see a deployment of peacekeepers, but only in the context of ‘a complete and final solution’ (i.e. a comprehensive package) to the conflict.<sup>95</sup> In Azerbaijan anti-Russian rhetoric prior to the April conflict was followed by affirmation of Lavrov’s proposals. On 7 April, at the pre-scheduled summit of Russian, Iranian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers, Elmar Mammadyarov (the Azerbaijani foreign minister) announced: ‘We are working on the ideas put forward in the middle of last year by Sergey Lavrov ... We support a solution within this framework.’<sup>96</sup> The closeness of Mammadyarov’s and Lavrov’s statements on 7 April is – again – suggestive that a proxy war interpretation aligning Russia with Armenia is misplaced and that a much more complex dynamic is at work. This also fuels Armenian fears of a Russian–Azerbaijani tandem.

A further embedded problem is whether the opening of Armenia’s borders would balance out the deferral of final status determination. This surely depends on the international security commitment. As noted, if there is one issue on which Armenians and Azerbaijanis have so far

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<sup>95</sup> Armenpress (2016), ‘Serzh Sargsyan: We are not against deployment of peacekeepers, but Nagorno Karabakh conflict should find final solution’, 8 April 2016, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/842743/serzh-sargsyan-we-are-not-against-deployment-of-peacekeepers-but-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-should.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Haqqin.az (2016), ‘El’mar Mamed’yarov: My rabotaem nad predlozheniyami Lavrova’ [Elmar Mammadyarov: We are working on Lavrov’s proposals], 7 April 2016, <http://haqqin.az/news/67539>.

agreed, it is the rejection of Russian-only peacekeepers. This suggests that even if Russia could 'go it alone' in terms of process, in terms of content the implementation of a 'Madrid-lite' solution requires multilateralism. Only a credible multilateral commitment to post-settlement security could make the deferral of final status determination that 'Madrid-lite' implies imaginable.

In the current situation there appear to be just two points of consensus: among external parties on avoiding a major new war, and among the conflict parties on avoiding unilateral Russian security provision. This double negative has sustained the shaky status quo of recent years. But there is nothing to prevent further escalations of the sort seen in April. With each recursive episode of violence, incumbents on all sides are under mounting domestic pressure, largely of their own making, to emerge victorious. If ejection from power were at stake, Russia's leverage to tame the tigers it has created could be less effective than it was on 5 April.

## 6. Policy Implications

Presidents Aliyev and Sargsyan reportedly agreed to a number of measures at their meeting in Vienna on 16 May. These included two long-advocated changes: expanding the mandate of the existing Office of the Personal Representative of the OSCE CiO, and introducing an OSCE investigation mechanism. These measures, which accord with an Armenian preoccupation to enhance security, appeared to be balanced by a commitment to comprehensive negotiations, which accord with an Azerbaijani preoccupation to see tangible progress towards partial implementation of the Madrid Principles. The tandem between these vectors is key; whether parallel progress can be achieved is far from certain, as various contradictory and distancing statements by Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders since 16 May attest.

### Improving security

Some short-term symbolic steps could be taken to strengthen the existing monitoring mandate, pending or concurrently with its putatively agreed expansion. Co-chairs have in the past crossed the LoC at key junctures in the peace process. A symbolic crossing of the LoC not only by the co-chairs but also by senior CiO or other OSCE representatives could reinforce the narrow mandate of the Personal Representative and signal international commitment to its augmentation. The fact that presidential summits are consistently held in distant capitals also inherently betrays dysfunction. There has long been a need for the peace process to be brought home. A presidential meeting in, for example, Azerbaijan's exclave in Nakhchivan would resurrect the lost practice of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders 'owning' meetings on their own turf.

Beyond such purely symbolic moves, a concept identifying security needs and soliciting multilateral commitments to post-settlement security would reduce the existing state of ambiguity. This would counter the current submergence of this issue within sequencing hierarchies of the Madrid Principles favouring one or other of the conflict parties' preferred outcomes, and its siloing within the OSCE as a technical matter at the level of the HLPG. Defining a multilateral commitment to security could encourage the parties to move to political agreement, and to begin crafting an alternative to managed ambivalence. This could be undertaken by the Minsk Group itself within its current mandate to develop a plan for a peacekeeping operation, but at a level higher than the HLPG, in order to serve notice of political will.

In the medium term, civilian monitoring initiatives can allow local communities to assume responsibility for their own security, and generate alternative sources of data on the extent and character of ceasefire violations. Several precedents for such initiatives exist in the South Caucasus, providing citizen-based information on ceasefire violations affecting civilian lives and property. Since January 2014 the international NGO Saferworld has supported a project that logs ceasefire

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violations affecting civilians in the area of the *de jure* Armenian–Azerbaijani border.<sup>97</sup> Elsewhere in the region, Saferworld has supported text message-based community security networks for gathering daily data on incidents in areas bordering South Ossetia.<sup>98</sup> Such initiatives take time and of course require government buy-in to allow them to happen. But they do not necessarily need to be bilateral to have impact. The unilateral organization of civilian monitoring, and its enablement by national governments, would mark an important step in demonstrating good faith and could serve as a precursor to hybrid peacekeeping at a future date.

Civilian security should also be given priority through an independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding the civilian deaths during the fighting in early April.

## Revitalizing dialogue

International actors will have little incentive to invest in or commit to securing an Armenian–Azerbaijani agreement unless the parties make a corresponding investment in politics, rather than persisting with securitized relations predicated on threats or the actual use of force. Neither the OSCE nor any other multilateral actor will see mileage in commitment to keeping a non-existent peace. Furthermore, stalling multilateralism creates the opening for more unilateral third-party (that is, Russian-dominated) approaches to security provision, which the parties say they do not want. The colonization of the Karabakh peace process by presidential interests undermines the capacity of the negotiations to meet this political challenge. A very wide range of issues confronts Armenian–Azerbaijani negotiations, yet the process is monopolized by the presidents, foreign ministers and their aides. The inverse relationship between the number of issues and the size of the negotiating table inevitably creates a dysfunctional emphasis on results because there is no process. Calls have long been made for Armenian–Azerbaijani talks to be diversified, for example through the establishment of working groups on specific issues.<sup>99</sup>

One anomaly that should be immediately addressed is the absence of a direct or constant backchannel between Armenia and Azerbaijan to enable ongoing contact between presidential summits. The lack of responsibility taken by the conflict parties for progress in the negotiations mirrors the impunity they enjoy for ceasefire violations, and needs to be addressed. Responsibility has been displaced on to the co-chairs for too long, and the Minsk Group should push for a backchannel as a minimum commitment by the parties and prerequisite for renewed international engagement. There is a precedent in the diplomatic initiative between Vafa Guluzade and Gerard Libaridian, which functioned well, if briefly, in the mid-1990s.<sup>100</sup> Those involved in such a dialogue track need to have the full trust of, and direct access to, their respective principals. While the current top-down and distrustful attitude of power-holders militates against this kind of forum, it

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<sup>97</sup> Armenia–Azerbaijan Protect Civilians Project, <http://www.protectcivilians.org>.

<sup>98</sup> Sifry, M. L. (2012), 'In Georgia's Troubled Border region, Text Messaging is Fostering Community Safety', Techpresident, 28 August 2012, <http://techpresident.com/news/wegov/22789/georgias-troubled-border-region-text-messaging-fostering-community-safety>; Krikorian, O. (2013), 'Elva, crowd-sourcing conflict in the South Caucasus', Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, 15 May 2013, [www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Georgia/Elva-crowd-sourcing-conflict-in-the-South-Caucasus-135608](http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Georgia/Elva-crowd-sourcing-conflict-in-the-South-Caucasus-135608).

<sup>99</sup> Freizer, S. (2014), 'Twenty years after the Nagorny Karabakh ceasefire: an opportunity to move towards more inclusive conflict resolution', *Caucasus Survey* 1: 2, pp. 109–22.

<sup>100</sup> Remler, P. (2016), *Chained to the Caucasus. Peacemaking in Karabakh 1987–2012*, New York: International Peace Institute, p. 69. Gerard Libaridian, a scholar and adviser to Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, met with Vafa Guluzade, presidential adviser and former Soviet diplomat, through 1996.

does not have to be dependent on open political systems. For example, backchannel negotiations between envoys Tariq Aziz and Satinder Lambah played a significant role in the negotiations in the 2000s between India and Pakistan – another long-term rivalry punctuated by violent episodes.

Between the external consensus on averting a new all-out war and the parties' consensus on preventing all-Russian security lies a space that only greater multilateral cohesion and purpose can fill. Calls for the Minsk Group to be replaced or substantially reformed are off the mark, and would not find consensus in the OSCE today. Given the risk of endless wrangling over a new process, there is more traction in making the existing structure more effective.

In the first instance this means constructively offsetting the ceding of the initiative to Russia. Sergey Lavrov's intensive engagement with the NK issue needs to be matched by a commensurate engagement on the part of the other co-chair countries, supported by the CiO, in order to demonstrate that the Minsk Group can reassert itself. This may involve more explicit acceptance by France and the United States of secondary but supportive roles in developing Foreign Minister Lavrov's ideas, and by Russia that it cannot go it alone. US–Russian interactions in the Syrian context have shown that prestige is an important driver of engagement.<sup>101</sup> Russia has both interests and prestige at stake in the NK conflict; managed ambivalence may serve the former, but has put the latter at risk.

Where the Minsk Group's structure does invite some modernization is in the inclusion in its wider format, the most clearly underutilized of its existing structures, of several countries with tangential stakes, unclear roles and little leverage. It is anomalous that this wider format includes four member states of the EU (Finland, Germany, Italy and Sweden), yet that there is no direct conduit for the EU's considerable resources and experience in post-settlement situations to be brought to bear: its role has so far been limited to supporting non-governmental initiatives. Too often discussion of increasing the EU's role has been unhelpfully linked with a diminution of France's role. The spectrum of roles from high diplomacy to the provision of expertise and resources on specific issues means that this is not a zero-sum equation. Calls have been made for the EU to become a member of the wider format through the offices of the EU member state that holds the rotating EU presidency.<sup>102</sup> Observer status is another option to be considered. These steps could perhaps take the wider Minsk Group in the direction of greater relevance and active support of co-chair diplomacy.

Two other actors that have significant stakes in the non-resumption of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan, yet that are currently relegated to passive bystander roles, are Georgia and Iran. Armenian–Azerbaijani tension compounds Georgia's regional isolation, and several observers have indicated concern at agitation during the April escalation that was aimed at mobilizing Georgia's Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities, long upheld as examples of peaceful coexistence.<sup>103</sup> Iran's re-entry into regional and international politics following the nuclear deal agreed in July 2015 has

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<sup>101</sup> Scharf, D. (2016), 'Analysts: Russia Cynical on Syria, Goal is International Prestige', Voice of America, 5 May 2016, <http://www.voanews.com/content/russia-cynical-on-syria-international-prestige/3316442.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Paul, A. and Sammut, D. (2016), 'The EU cannot remain a passive observer of the Karabakh conflict', European Policy Centre, 7 April 2016, [www.epc.eu/pub\\_details.php?cat\\_id=4&pub\\_id=6447](http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=4&pub_id=6447).

<sup>103</sup> Kanashvili, G. (2016), presentation to the roundtable 'Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: recent military and political trends and diplomatic prospects', Caucasus Institute, Yerevan, 31 May 2016; Krikorian, O. (2016), 'Karabakh: The View from Georgia', World Policy Blog, 18 April 2016, <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2016/04/18/karabakh-view-georgia>.



potentially significant implications for regional connectivity and infrastructure. Iran was chastened by an unsuccessful early effort to mediate in the Karabakh conflict in May 1992, and has been a geographically close but politically distant bystander in the NK conflict since then. Improving knowledge is one need that can immediately be identified: an excessive focus on the economic opportunities opened up by Iran's re-entry into the region, without proper awareness among Iranian diplomats of the state of Armenian–Azerbaijani negotiations, is a recipe for disappointment.

## Strengthening Track-2

Emphasis on international diplomacy needs, in turn, to be balanced by a domestic focus on working with Armenian and Azerbaijani societies. This is essential in order to narrow the discursive gap between the peace rhetoric directed at international audiences and the war rhetoric propagated at home. This level of work is also critical to revalidating the idea of Armenian–Azerbaijani cohabitation in the same space as an alternative to ethnic cleansing.<sup>104</sup> Since the total segregation of the mid-1990s, discussion of the practicalities of any future cohabitation has been taboo. Details of power-sharing arrangements – whether for Karabakh Armenians in the Azerbaijani state or Karabakh Azerbaijanis in NK – have never been specified. The murders of civilians in April this year provided a chilling reminder of the massacres of the 1988–92 period, to date a primary source of mutual alienation between societies across the conflict.

Civil society-driven peacebuilding, or Track-2 work, confronts the uncomfortable reality that there has been no substantive change in the parties' positions since the early 1990s. Several fundamental assumptions about Track-2 as a support to dynamism in Track-1 (that is, intergovernmental) negotiations therefore do not apply. Without commitment to a political peace process at Track-1 level, Track-2 work is restricted to maintaining limited 'oases' of contact. Furthermore, peacebuilding civil society work is inseparable from the wider political context for civil society activity, which is to varying extents challenging across the region.<sup>105</sup> This has been compounded by new divisions within civil societies that appeared during the April violence. In the words of one veteran of Armenian–Azerbaijani initiatives, the April outbreak demonstrated how 'if an Azerbaijani impetus towards peacebuilding collapses with the first military success, an Armenian impetus collapses with the first military failure'.<sup>106</sup>

The EU is the primary supporter of Track-2 work through the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK).<sup>107</sup> Initiated in 2010, the EPNK has passed through two phases running to 2015. It has been criticized for a lack of impact and visibility. However, it is rarely acknowledged that these criticisms largely coincided with the deterioration of the overall security context in 2014–15, and with the securitization of dialogue in

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<sup>104</sup> Caspersen, N. (2016), 'Will there be peace in Nagorno-Karabakh? Two things stand in the way', 31 May 2016, *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/31/nagorno-karabakh-frozen-conflict-has-two-big-obstacles-to-a-peaceful-solution/>.

<sup>105</sup> Aliyev, H. (2016), 'Assessing the European Union's Assistance to Civil Society in Its Eastern Neighbourhood: Lessons from the South Caucasus', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 24, 1, pp. 42–60.

<sup>106</sup> Author's conversation with NGO activist, Tbilisi, 12 June 2016.

<sup>107</sup> The main initiative is known as the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK), <http://epnk.org>.

Azerbaijan in particular. Several Azerbaijani organizations engaged in cross-conflict initiatives, like other NGOs, were effectively shut down, with bank accounts frozen, staff laid off and significant personal risk for those continuing to engage across the conflict.

Recent signals from the government of Azerbaijan indicate that it may be ready to relax inhibitions on civil society activity.<sup>108</sup> This would be consistent with a context of more dynamic and comprehensive negotiations, as foreseen at the Vienna meeting on 16 May, in which the supportive purpose and tandem function of Track-2 would come into its own. The EPNK and other initiatives contribute to a civic fabric through which undoubtedly controversial agreements must ultimately pass. A vibrant web of civil society networks across the conflict is a necessary, albeit in itself insufficient, condition for the legitimacy of an eventual agreement, and must therefore continue.

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<sup>108</sup> Ann.az (2016), 'Government lifts the ban on NGO accounts', 6 April 2016, [ann.az/en/government-lifts-the-ban-on-ngo-accounts/#.V1FS69cbZem](http://ann.az/en/government-lifts-the-ban-on-ngo-accounts/#.V1FS69cbZem).

## 7. Conclusions

The NK conflict remains the regional outlier – geographically, structurally and geopolitically – among Eurasia’s secessionist conflicts. Its fragmented straddling of geopolitical fault lines diffuses the potential for decisive movement in the direction of either all-out war or a negotiated outcome. Russia’s deterrent system of managed ambivalence meanwhile offers both incitements and constraints to the use of force. This deterrent is likely to perpetuate both violence along the LoC, with the perennial risk that the parties will lose control and outside actors may be dragged in, and the mutual insecurity that is a major driver of the conflict.<sup>109</sup> Yet the alternatives are either improbable (concentrated international action to resolve the conflict, Dayton-style) or unpalatable (leaving the parties to fight it out).

The April 2016 violence has, if anything, weakened the hands of the two countries’ presidents in negotiating compromises. Both Azerbaijani and Armenian societies have experienced surges in nationalist sentiment. President Aliyev of Azerbaijan will need demonstrable and tangible gains to offset any introduction of a ceasefire-monitoring infrastructure that would preclude a repeat of April’s operations. Armenia’s President Sargsyan, already weathering domestic disappointment, will be hard pressed to offer significant compromises without further risk to his credibility. While the indications coming out of the Vienna meeting were positive, the medium-term negotiation context offers few grounds for optimism. If the limited external leverage that international actors bring to this conflict is to be maximized, international attention must be coordinated and sustained.

In 1992 the OSCE’s predecessor, the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), mandated a Minsk Conference to discuss the NK conflict. It is in preparation for this conference, suspended in permanent deferral, that the co-chairs have been working ever since. ‘Preponing’, rather than indefinitely postponing, the Minsk Conference would meet the need for coordinated and demonstrative diplomacy. There are certainly legitimate concerns across the board that a Minsk Conference would lack a cohesive agenda, reward violence and reveal the lack of appetite for resolution. Significant preparation would be needed, as the Minsk Conference was originally envisaged as the culmination of an Armenian–Azerbaijani process. Meaningful joint agreements would need to be internationally legitimated at the conference for it to have real effect. In its perpetual deferral, however, the Minsk Conference is a disconcerting demonstration of international indifference to this conflict.

The pressures for such a deferral are strong. Western and Russian policy-makers alike find the cooperative alternative to pre-set paradigms of rivalry difficult to envisage. Expectations of instrumentalism are high in a theatre of secondary importance to more ideologically inflected confrontations nearby, where more is at stake. International actors also see very little from the conflict parties that would encourage them to invest political capital in a negotiated settlement.

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<sup>109</sup> de Waal, T. (2013), *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, rev. edn, New York and London: New York University Press, p. 311.

National stakeholders have enmeshed themselves within intense domestic pressures to maintain hard lines. After decades without substantive reform, incumbents are vulnerable to the resulting economic strains and their resort to symbolic nationalism is symptomatic of their narrowing political repertoire. Expectations have been raised rather than dampened by the April 2016 escalation, and the stakes in the next major incident will be much higher. Left untended, today's patterns of international default to the status quo and conflict party default to recursive violence make real the risk of a major regional war.

## Note on Terminology

Armenians and Azerbaijanis refer to the conflict between them differently. Azerbaijani sources generally refer to the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, sometimes the Armenia–Azerbaijan–Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, emphasizing its interstate quality. This is sometimes tied to the claim that because the international community upholds Azerbaijani territorial integrity, NK is not disputed. This bypasses the role of Karabakh Armenians.

Armenians, especially in NK, often refer to the Azerbaijan–Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, emphasizing NK’s separate identity and role and bypassing the centrality of Armenia to the conflict.

In this research paper I have used ‘Nagorny Karabakh conflict’ as a formula avoiding specific inferences as to the structure and number of parties to the conflict. I acknowledge, however, that the conflict has three core dimensions. These are the interstate dimension between Armenia and Azerbaijan; the intrastate dimension between Baku and the de facto authorities in NK; and the inter-communal dimension between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis of NK, and between displaced persons of both, and other, nationalities and their former communities of origin. Today the interstate dimension dominates to the exclusion of all others.

Armenians and Azerbaijanis overwhelmingly use the formula ‘Nagorno-Karabakh’ as both a noun and an adjective for ‘republic’ and ‘region’ respectively. I prefer the term ‘Nagorny Karabakh’ for its grammatical accuracy and its emphasis on geography. Today’s unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic encompasses considerably more territory than a strictly geographical concept of Nagorny Karabakh (‘mountainous Karabakh’) and the territory originally disputed between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in 1988. I believe this is a useful distinction to maintain.

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NKR Defence Army soldier carries out normal duties at a post near Martuni on 21 May 2016 as the situation on the Line of Contact stays relatively calm.

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