

# Nagorno-Karabakh Peace: Real Luck or Next Illusion?

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The end of 2018 will be remembered by yet another surge of rumors about the possibility of peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict. There are genuine hopes and expectations that certain agreements finally might be reached to solve the problem in 2019. What is the reason for this optimism? Is there a real chance for the end of this 30 years old complex territorial dispute?

First, let us look at some of the things which boosted these hopes. This year Armenia has gone through a revolutionary change, which also ended the 20-year rule of the “Karabakh clan.” Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, the leaders of this clan, were the direct participants of the Karabakh war and even led some military operations. Although it is difficult to say with confidence that this factor had created a psychological barrier for them, which made them unable to compromise in the peace process, such views have always existed. Now they have been replaced by Nikol Pashinyan, who has some liberal views and a different vision. Regardless of the possible outcomes, it would not be wrong to evaluate this change as a new stage in the relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia as well as in negotiations over the resolution of the NK conflict. When Pashinyan became the prime minister, he also took over the responsibility for resolving all the problems of Armenia, including the Karabakh conflict. His first comment on the issue that the NK Armenian community should also be a part of the resolution process was perceived by Azerbaijani side as a destructive and a more radical approach to the negotiations compared to that of the Sargsyan era.

However, the subsequent events – the adoption of a joint statement based on the results of the meeting of foreign

ministers of the two countries held in Milan on December 5, and the Azeri Minister Elmar Mammadyarov's assessment of the meeting that "[after a long time, we have reached a mutual understanding;](#)" the official announcement on December 14 that the military posts and military units in the regions of Qazax and Agstafa (the Azerbaijani side of the Armenian border) are transferred from the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the State Border Service; and the election of a person with diplomatic skills as a head of Azerbaijani community of Nagorno-Karabakh (Tural Ganjaliyev, born in Shusha, who is the employee of Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry) on December 20 showed that Azerbaijan sees the possibility for the NK Armenian community to join the process. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan has one condition that along with the Armenian community, the Azerbaijani community should also join the process with the same rights. That is, there should not be just one community on behalf of NK. Such position means that the Azerbaijani side does not generally reject the idea of □ the new Armenian head of the government, but rather tries to give a constructive response to Pashinyan's proposal. Indeed, it would be a controversial issue whether the NK Armenians should participate in the process as an equal party or a community; however, in any case, it is clear that the process is moving ahead from the "dead point."

It is necessary to clarify the rationale behind Pashinyan's insistence on the participation of the NK Armenians in the peace process. This insistence is based on his unwillingness to make a unilateral decision concerning this crucial issue, which is seen as a "national problem" in Armenia. Pashinyan understands that in any solution option, the Armenian side will first have to return at least the surrounding five regions around NK. That is, after the agreement on mutual compromises, Armenia's steps will be more practical; in other words, even if the peace plan on the paper meets the interests of Armenia, its concessions will be more vivid in comparison with the concessions of Azerbaijan, which may lead to mass

protests against the Armenian government. There is no doubt that the revanchist opposition, namely the overthrown clan, will use this situation against the Pashinyan government. Since Pashinyan understands this danger, instead of taking the whole responsibility on his own, he wants the decision be made by the NK Armenians with their signature in the resolution document. There has been such practice in the recent past. The current ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, signed in April, 1994, was signed by Karen Baburyan as representative of NK Armenians as well as Nizami Bahmanov as a representative of NK Azerbaijani community.

During the establishment of the OSCE Minsk Group in 1992, Armenia and Azerbaijan were accepted as Parties of the conflict while the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities of NK were mandated as interested parties in the negotiations on the resolution of the conflict. Both communities have been involved in various negotiations since 1992. This configuration of the resolution can now be restored and the Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Mr. Mammadyarov [confirmed](#) the readiness of Azerbaijani side by speaking about the willingness of Azerbaijan to give a high degree of autonomy to the NK Armenians. The content of the Milan Statement, which was welcomed by Mammadyarov, says that:

- The Parties have agreed that they will continue to collaborate to ensure long-term peace;
- The OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs expressed their satisfaction with the reduction of the number of ceasefire violations and the number of victims in the border after the short conversation between the Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders in Dushanbe;
- The Co-Chairs urged the Parties to take concrete steps to prepare their citizens for peace;
- The Co-Chairs expressed their hope for the restoration of the high level meetings between the Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders in the near future.

In principle, there is no new provision here. When Mammadyarov said that they “had achieved mutual understanding,” probably he meant that after a considerable pause, he welcomes the adoption of a joint document and a constructive approach by his new Armenian colleague.

We have highlighted the events that led to the current optimism; however, based on our past experiences, we also need to mention our pessimistic expectations. In recent years, the Parties have been close to peace several times. If we look at the [Bishkek protocol](#), we can see that it is not just a technical document concerning cease-fire. The Protocol had important provisions towards the resolution of the conflict, such as signing of a legal document on the establishment of a mechanism to prevent the restoration of military operations, deployment of observers to the frontline, withdrawal of troops from the occupied territories, restoration of communications, and return of refugees to their homes. However, none of these provisions were subsequently fulfilled.

The meetings and negotiations between the Azeri President Heydar Aliyev and the Armenian President Robert Kocharyan on April 25, 1999 in Washington, and in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic on October 11, led to some hopes that peace agreement between the Parties could be reached during the OSCE summit in Istanbul in November of that year. However, shortly after the Nakhchivan meeting, a rare event happened on October 27: seven people were killed, including the Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsyan and speaker of Armenian parliament Karen Demirchian, as a result of the terrorist attack. Conspiracy theories about this murderous shooting continue to remain, but at that time the dominant speculations were that Russian security services were behind this attack aiming to prevent the NK peace deal, which was allegedly reached with the close involvement of the Western countries. Whatever the real motives behind that terrorist attack the ultimate result was that no document was signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Istanbul in November, 1999.

The introduction of the Madrid Principles on the conflict resolution in November 2007 and the renewal of the Madrid Principles in November 2009 were a major step forward in clarifying the framework of the negotiations and building a basis for a peace treaty; however, there has yet to be any progress after nine years.

In June 2011, the Presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia were expected to sign a document on basic principles in Kazan (Russia), but these expectations were not realized. In April 2016, Azerbaijan demonstrated its improved military capability and for the first time achieved some local success. After these clashes along the NK contact line between two countries, intensified meetings gave hope that this time serious progress towards the resolution would be achieved. The meetings of the Presidents in Vienna in May, 2016 and in St. Petersburg in June that year showed that the negotiations were not aimed at the resolution of the conflict; instead, the main topic of discussions was about establishing a special mechanism to prevent cease-fire violations and local clashes on the contact line. As a result, the construction of this mechanism has not been realized yet.

We emphasized that the basis of the peace negotiations was the renewed Madrid principles. Now let us recall those principles contained in the [Joint Statement](#) of the Nagorno-Karabakh OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries – the United States, France, and Russia – during the G8 summit in July 2009 in L'Aquila, Italy:

- Return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control;
- An interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance;
- A corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh;
- Future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will;

- The right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and
- International security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.

This framework was reiterated in the statement by the presidents of the OSCE Co-Chair countries in the G8 Summit in Muskoka, Canada in June 2010. At the OSCE Summit in Astana on December 1, 2010, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a joint statement with the leaders of the OSCE Co-Chair countries (the United States was represented by the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton). The statement confirmed that the conflict resolution process should be based on the norms and principles of international law, the UN Charter, the OSCE Helsinki Final Act, as well as the L'Aquila and the Muskoka statements by the American, the Russian, and the French Presidents. Thus, the Parties to the conflict – Azerbaijan and Armenia – have endorsed their verbal agreement that the conflict should be resolved on the basis of the “renewed Madrid Principles.” This means that these principles should constitute the framework of a peaceful resolution of the conflict and the Parties to the conflict affirm it with their signatures. At the G8 summit in Deauville, France in May 2011, the OSCE Co-Chair countries adopted a similar statement for the third consecutive time.

Despite the fact that the Parties of the conflict agree to the general principles, they are unable to reach the final agreement. The main reason behind this situation is that while Azerbaijan proposes a stepwise procedure concerning the implementation of these provisions in a peace treaty, Armenia wants these provisions to be reflected as a package. Azerbaijan states that the first provision involves the withdrawal of the troops from the surrounding areas of NK, and Armenia must follow this procedure in order to enable the resolution process to begin. On the other hand, since Armenia believes that the referendum in the NK will result with the

secession of this area, Armenia claims that initially Azerbaijan should make a commitment to accept the results of that plebiscite. Moreover, Armenia claims that the corridor between Armenia and the NK should be very large, covering Lachin and Kalbajar, and the Azerbaijani Armed Forces should not enter to the regions surrounding the NK. So it is unclear how this conflict will be solved.

If the OSCE Co-Chair countries decide that it is time to end this problem and come to an agreement to put pressure on the Parties, the conflict can be resolved. It should be noted that in recent years, the only problem that these three countries agreed so easily has been the NK conflict. Given the fact that Russia has a historical and contemporary relationship with Armenia and Azerbaijan, and that Russia has a real influence over two countries, the West (U.S.A. and France) did not dispute that Russia could take a step forward as a mediator on this issue. The West is well aware that Russia is a factor that prevents a new war in the region and reduces the willingness of Azerbaijan to take back its occupied territories by military means. Therefore, Washington and Paris are not concerned about Moscow's unofficial leadership in the peace process. The view that "the key to conflict resolution is in the pocket of Moscow" is not unfounded.

However, so far Russia has not been persistent in resolution of this conflict. There are many speculations surrounding the issue. One of them is that Russia considers resolution of this conflict dangerous to its regional interests. There is no guarantee that Azerbaijan and Armenia will not think about Euro-Atlantic integration after escaping this heavy burden, which has historically been used as a pressure tool by Russia. The main potential and energy of the Armenian people are concentrated in the West and attract poor Armenia as a magnet. Similarly, Azerbaijan, which established its first republic based on the Western political model in 1918 and declared itself the successor of that republic after its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, has energy projects with the

West, more than half of its exports are directed to the West, EU is the biggest trade partner of Azerbaijan and it has a very close relationship with the NATO country Turkey. That is, from the perspective of Russia, there is a danger that the South Caucasus will be completely lost. Moscow would only be interested in the resolution of the conflict if its regional interests are firmly secured. Recently, we have begun to observe some suggestions and initiatives aimed at this end. The issue is that Azerbaijan can somehow be involved in the Russian led Eurasian Economic Union and the security system dominated by Russia. The establishment of an observer and partner country status within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has already begun to be discussed. Azerbaijan might initially be accepted to the CSTO as an observer or as a partner country instead of a full membership. We know that Kazakh president Nazarbayev and Belorussian head of state Lukashenko even proposed to invite the Azerbaijani President to the November meeting of the [organization](#).

Russia would like Azerbaijan to join its amorphous integration projects since Azerbaijan would bring new breath and dynamism to these projects. However, here is a need for serious progress in the resolution of the NK conflict in order to prevent Armenia from using its veto power in these organizations. If Azerbaijan and Armenia are represented in a unified economic and security space, they would somehow return to the same situation during the Soviet times, which would facilitate the resolution of the conflict – we think that this is the view of Russia.

As we have seen this is a complicated and intricate issue. Will it be possible to bring an end to the stalemate? Let us wait to see what will happen in 2019.