

Nagorno-Karabakh: the war with diplomacy in the background

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After the spectacular successes achieved by Azerbaijani forces last week (including cutting off the Karabakh para-state from the border with Iran; see map), the intensity of the fighting has weakened in recent days. At present it is taking the form of artillery and rocket fire targeted at the conflict zone, and occasionally also outside of it, both within Armenia and more distant locations in Azerbaijan. In the north, east and the especially south-west of the conflict zone, land clashes are continually taking place.

The ongoing fighting has invalidated yet another ceasefire, which should have come into force (for humanitarian purposes) from the morning of 26 October. It had been negotiated by the US Secretary of State, who held separate meetings with the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Washington on 23 October. This was the third attempt to stop the fighting, a continuation of the two previous attempts which had been agreed upon with the mediation of Russia's foreign minister. Another round of talks are scheduled to take place on 30 October in Geneva, this time under the aegis of the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia and the US; this body was established in 1992 and is responsible for the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. Iran has also put forward its own peace initiative, the details of which are to be presented by the deputy foreign minister; he began a visit to Baku on 28 October (from where he will head to Moscow, Yerevan and Ankara).

Commentary

- The fighting, unprecedented in its scale, has now assumed the character of a full-scale war, and is now comparable in terms of the resources involved to the Karabakh war of the early 1990s. In Azerbaijan, Armenia and the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, martial law has been imposed and mobilisation announced. Both sides are now using all the military technology available to them, especially artillery and aviation (as well as drones). Baku, faced with a lack of prospects for a negotiated solution to the conflict that would satisfy it, and coming under increasing public pressure, has been working to change the *status quo* that has been in force since 1994. The decision to undertake such large-scale offensive action was certainly influenced by the support which Turkey has provided – both political, but also military, including training and equipment. The Azerbaijani-Turkish side denies that that Turkish soldiers and militants from Syria (transferred to the combat zone by Turkey) are taking part in the military

operations (Russia's president Vladimir Putin referred to their presence in a conversation with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on 27 October). However, the government in Ankara has reiterated its assurances that they are ready to send regular troops to Nagorno-Karabakh if Baku so requests.

- The capture of new areas by Azerbaijani forces (see map) is of great psychological importance (the course of the campaign so far indicates significant success for Azerbaijan and severe defeat for Armenia). In the military dimension, in the northern part of the conflict region, the takeover of the positions in the Murovdag range has been facilitated by shelling the northern road linking Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh, and the gains in the vicinity of Talish and Madaghiz (renamed Sugovushan) include a water reservoir on the Terter River, together with a nearby hydroelectric power plant, which is important for local agriculture. In the south, Azerbaijani forces have occupied the entire strip of land between Nagorno-Karabakh and Iran (previously under Armenian control) and reached the meeting point of the internationally recognised borders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran. From there they have moved north along the border with Armenia, and on 23 October they came to within about 15 km of Lachin, along which the main road from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh runs. However, their advance has now been halted, and perhaps even turned back (the reports from the battlefield are contradictory and often difficult to verify, as both sides have prevented independent journalists from reaching the conflict area). Nevertheless the initiative still lies with the Azerbaijani forces, and it must be assumed that they will continue their offensive.
- Despite these successes for Azerbaijan, the most strategically and symbolically important places remain in Armenian hands. On the one hand, these include Lachin and the Lachin corridor, along which most of the enclave's supplies reach it; and on the other, the city of Shusha near Stepanakert, which until the 1990s was a majority-Azerbaijani area. These places will be more difficult to take over than the areas captured so far because the Armenian defence forces are concentrated there; moreover, they are less accessible (they are much higher up in the mountains) and more distant from the bases in Azerbaijan, which will create logistical problems for the attackers. Yerevan will continue its efforts to 'internationalise' the conflict, and in particular to persuade Moscow to intervene on its side. This will be helped by publicising the cases of shelling on the territory of Armenia; recently, the infrastructure on the Armenian-Iranian border has been reported to be targeted. Azerbaijan, in turn, has accused Armenia of shelling Ganja, Terter and Barda, among other sites. Both sides have denied that they are carrying out such actions.
- Recent statements by President Putin indicate that Russia will not provide further aid to the Armenians unless the attacks reach Armenia itself, which has Russian security guarantees under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO; so far, the fighting has been taking place on what is *de jure* Azerbaijan's territory). The main reason for this approach is the Kremlin's desire to maintain its status as an intermediary, which requires neutrality. On the other hand, continuing to push for peace initiatives when there is a high risk of their failure – as in the case of the previous two ceasefire agreements – undermines Russia's prestige. It is therefore unlikely that Moscow will continue to

undertake such initiatives on its own (although it may submit them within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group). The Kremlin's reluctant attitude may also be influenced by its lack of trust in the Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power as a result of a 'colour revolution', and has previously called for Armenia's foreign policy to resume a more pro-Western orientation (the Kremlin has been sending signals that it would prefer to hold dialogue with people centred around the Republican Party of Armenia, which ruled the country until 2018). Moscow also wants to end the fighting and de-escalate the conflict, as well as to maintain its position as the most essential and important regional mediator. We should therefore expect that it will ramp up its activities within the Minsk Group, while also taking advantage of the fact that Washington is paying less attention to its foreign policy in the run-up to the elections.

- It is possible that Russia will support the extension of the current format of talks to include Turkey, as Putin suggested during his speech on 22 October at the meeting of the Valdai discussion club. However, Moscow's ambitions may reach even further, including the creation of a new format under its patronage, in which the role of the Western co-chairs of the Minsk Group would be marginalised, and Turkey and Iran would take their place. Tehran's recent diplomatic activity may be a sign of this: President Hassan Rouhani held a conversation last week with Erdoğan, and Iran has appointed a special representative for the Karabakh conflict, in the person of Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, whose first trip took in Baku, Moscow, Yerevan and Ankara. Details of the plan he presented in these capitals are unknown, but it is sure that it assumes the maintenance of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Possible mediations on Karabakh under the auspices of Russia, Turkey and Iran would repeat the format of the so-called Astana peace process which was devised for the talks on Syria.

Map. Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict area (29 October 2020)



Source: author's own research based on reports from Censor.net and press agencies.