

Nagorno-Karabakh: tensions escalating, with turbulent diplomacy in the background

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In the last week, the situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict area has further escalated. On 3 August, an Azerbaijani soldier was killed in an exchange of fire; two soldiers from the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic also died (around 20 were wounded) during a retaliatory operation by Baku. Azerbaijani forces also allegedly seized three strategically important hills. Shelling continued in the following days, but its intensity gradually decreased. On 4 August, Azerbaijani positions were said to have been shelled 12 times, and a further 10 on 7 August (the Armenian side – both Yerevan and the separatists – denied having opened fire). At the same time, consultations took place between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan with the President of the European Council and the US Secretary of State (the Armenian Prime Minister also talked to the Russian President).

Commentary

- The latest escalation of tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh was the most serious since March 2022. At that time, Azerbaijani forces occupied a village on the border between the para-state and the former so-called 'occupied territories' (a wide strip of land around it, controlled by Armenians until the 2020 war), and three Armenian soldiers were killed as a result of the hostilities. While it cannot be ruled out that local Armenians (seeking to force Yerevan to take a harder line with Baku on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh) or Russian peacekeepers (seeking to provoke a crisis to demonstrate their indispensability) were behind the current escalation of the situation, it was most likely provoked, as in March, by Baku. The attacks may have been motivated by impatience with the lack of progress in implementing the key provisions of the truce document of 9/10 November 2020. This mainly concerns unblocking the route through Armenia linking Azerbaijani territory to its exclave of Nakhichevan and running onwards to Turkey, but also the withdrawal of Armenian armed formations from the Karabakh para-state. Generating tensions is, on the one hand, a way of putting pressure on Yerevan and the intermediaries (Russia, the EU), while on the other serving as a show of force. It is also of some importance for Baku to consolidate its positions in Nagorno-Karabakh, including the establishment of new outposts. It is reasonable to assume that if the two sides do not reach an agreement on at least some of the contentious issues in the near future, there will be further escalations, which will additionally serve to discredit the Russian peacekeepers deployed in the conflict zone, who are unable to prevent them.

- Paradoxically, despite the aggravation of the situation, the conclusion of an Armenian-Azerbaijani agreement now seems more likely than ever, and the face-to-face meeting between the two countries' heads of diplomacy that took place in Tbilisi on 16 July served as a signal indicating that peace talks are at an advanced stage. However, an intra-Armenian conflict between the team of Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power following the spring 2018 revolution, and the former ruling camp which he ousted, but still rule in Nagorno-Karabakh, may stand in the way of a settlement. With a democratic mandate behind him – Pashinyan's party won decisively in early parliamentary elections in 2021 – the Prime Minister seems ready to make peace with Azerbaijan and normalise relations with Turkey. The former was declared *expressis verbis* in a parliamentary speech in April this year (see [Yerevan's radical turn in its Nagorno-Karabakh policy](#)). However, it remains to be seen whether his potential commitments will be accepted by the separatist government in Stepanakert (Az. Khankendi, Xankəndi), associated with former Armenian presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, and the influential circles in the Armenian diaspora. In this situation, Pashinyan – who is now unable to count on Moscow, which had traditionally been supportive of Armenia, and is not paying special attention to the Caucasus in the light of its aggression against Ukraine – is taking all sorts of international initiatives in an attempt to bring about a 'window of opportunity' when an agreement appears feasible.
- Another sign of the Armenian Prime Minister's activity was his telephone conversation with the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (11 July). This is part of the rapid intensification of contacts that the Caspian region (South Caucasus and Central Asia) states have been undertaking in recent weeks both among themselves and with other players, including Ankara and the EU. These initiatives include the new AUT format (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkey: the first meeting of these countries' heads of diplomacy and their ministers responsible for the economy and transport was held in Tashkent on 2 August); the Georgian Prime Minister's visits in July to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan; the Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy between the EU and Azerbaijan, signed in Baku on 18 July; and the initialling of the new Uzbek-EU Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (Brussels, 6 July). The common denominator of most of these projects is that they are intended to develop existing or create new infrastructure for parallel transport and energy links, but also create political ties, allowing the various parties to outflank Russia. This is directly related to the Western sanctions (and Russian counter-sanctions) imposed on Moscow, which are changing the transport map of Eurasia, and politically, to the progressive erosion of the previous regional order, in which Moscow retained its position as a major player and also acted as a stabiliser and guarantor of security.