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<p>Sunday, 11 February 2007</p>	<p>Home / News and Current Affairs / Security Watch / Nagorno-Karabakh summit ends in failure</p>	<p>Contact / Jobs @ ISN</p>
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But both sides agree that the most contentious issue was the "final status" of Nagorno-Karabakh itself.</p> <p>ICG analyst Sabine Freizer told ISN Security Watch she was severely disappointed that the summit's conclusion had not even resulted in the issuing of a joint statement, "a short document, something in writing that would have symbolized the will of the two presidents that an eventual agreement was possible".</p> <p>Toilet diplomacy</p> <p>Press reports in Azerbaijan maintained that the talks in Rambouillet were cut short by President Kocharian after a mysterious visit to the men's room at the palace. Followed by Russian OSCE co-chairman Yuri Merzlyakov into the restroom, Kocharian was said to have returned to the negotiating table with a new, unyielding negotiating tack. Kocharian then announced that the Armenian delegation would head back to Yerevan due to the death of Armenian Defense Minister Serge Sargsian's father.</p> <p>This bizarre version of events, whether true or not, has fast become part of the Nagorno-Karabakh mythology here in Baku.</p> <p>The "final status" issue has crystallized in recent months around a possible referendum in Nagorno-Karabakh, which would decide the region's ultimate status: as a part of Azerbaijan, an annexed oblast of Armenia, or an independent state.</p> <p>In recent years, the Armenians have said that they would prefer a "package" approach to a settlement, with issues such as peacekeeping troops in the region, confidence-building measures, investment incentives, and a final status for Nagorno-Karabakh parts of a comprehensive settlement. But President Aliiev has made it clear that his government would prefer a step-by-step approach, especially given the sensitive nature of any final status agreement that might fall short of full Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh.</p> <p>The Rambouillet framework seemed to reflect a hybrid approach, borrowing an array of interlocking facets from a package deal but implementing it in steps. However, the nature of the most critical link - the final status - may have brought into sharp relief just how far apart the two sides really are.</p> <p>In fact, most outside observers had not expected discussions relating to the final status to come up at all. Even the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmen may have been taken unawares. An informed source in the Armenian Foreign Ministry said he was "not surprised" by the lack of progress at Rambouillet.</p> <p>"It was the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmen who were surprised, because they expected that the mere convening of the meeting would somehow move the presidents' positions closer," he said.</p> <p>The general expectation by the world press was that the hybrid deal on the table would consist of an initial period during which Armenia would withdraw its military forces from five of the seven districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh that it currently occupies, followed by the return of IDPs, investment arrangements, and finally a plebiscite.</p> <p>According to this view, the referendum would take place either in the next two or three years (the Armenian preference) or after at least a decade (the Azerbaijani position).</p> <p>The notion that the Azerbaijani government was at least willing to consider a referendum had been encouraged in part by presidential spokesman Novruz Mammadov, who was quoted in the Baku press in late January as saying that while it was "premature" to discuss the possibility of a referendum, in any case such a plebiscite would be held only "in 15 to 20 years".</p> <p>Such flexibility was seen as consistent with the so-called Prague Process (from mid-2004 to the present) which has been characterized by constructive dialogue between the foreign ministers of the two nations - Armenia's Vartan Oskanian and Elmar Mammadyarov of Azerbaijan.</p> <p>Pearls on a silk thread</p> <p>In an interview with Armenian television in December, Oskanian seemed to be preparing Armenian citizens for a final settlement that would fall short of pleasing everyone. It would be "a compromise decision", he</p>	<p>Search</p> <p><input type="text"/></p> <p>ISN Website <input type="button" value="GO"/></p> <p>» Tell me more about ISN LASE</p> <p>» Comment on this story</p> <p>» Printer-friendly version</p> <p>» Forward this story to a friend</p> <p> Perspectives is a weekly column written by our Security Watch readers. To contribute, follow the instructions at the bottom of the OpEd column published by Security Watch staff every Wednesday or subscribe to the ISN Security Watch newsletter. Perspectives appears every Monday on ISN Security Watch.</p> <p> ISN and Creative Commons SOME RIGHTS RESERVED</p>

said. "It won't be the kind of decision that will be put on the table and the public will applaud. That won't be the case."

And in a now-famous metaphor, Mammadyarov referred recently to the delicacy of each step of a phased agreement being implemented in the correct order, "like pearls knotted on a silk thread".

But if the two incompatible approaches to the final status were enough to scuttle Rambouillet, the future of the Prague Process itself may suddenly be in doubt.

"We understand that the Prague process is based on an agreement that the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh will be decided upon later - not until Nagorno-Karabakh meets a series of conditions to organize a referendum," said Freizer.

She said not only did the Azerbaijanis back away from the referendum but that "the Armenian side is intent on getting the language of the referendum in the principles of a conflict settlement before agreeing to begin any withdrawal from occupied territories".

Moreover, presidential spokesman Mammadov's comments on the possibility of a plebiscite in the long-term were in stark contrast to an announcement made by President Aliev 12 days later when he told his cabinet that his government would never agree "today, tomorrow, or in 100 years [to allow] Nagorno-Karabakh to be removed from Azerbaijan".

The true nature of Azerbaijan's negotiating strategy

The Armenian government source claimed that the Azerbaijani firmness on the referendum was "not what the presidents agreed" to earlier. Thus, the deadlock at the summit over the referendum (or what the Azeris prefer to call the "final status" issue) begs the question of the true nature of Azerbaijan's negotiating strategy.

The Armenian side has been seen as the winner from any package agreement, since it is in their interest to include language requiring a referendum. Whether in the near-term or a decade from now, an eventual referendum is widely regarded even by Azeri analysts as all but guaranteeing independence for Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Azerbaijani side, understanding this conclusion, had been viewed as preferring at least a delayed plebiscite, which would give them time to win over the Armenian-majority Karabakhi population.

But the outcome at Rambouillet may have revealed an altogether different Azerbaijani strategy: a phased approach requiring an Armenian military pullout from as many of the seven occupied regions as possible, with no commitment to a referendum down the road. In this way, Azerbaijan might have gained maximum concessions from the Armenian side and paid a very small price.

Russian influence?

Looming since the outbreak of conflict in the late 1980s is the shadow of Russia, the most powerful regional actor and a nation with a complex tangle of relations with Azerbaijan.

The Soviet Kremlin is often blamed for aiding Armenia with weapons and personnel during the full-scale war beginning in 1992, which eventually claimed more than 30,000 lives and forced hundreds of thousands of Azeris and Armenians into a miserable refugee existence.

Analysts in Baku and elsewhere sometimes point to an imperial Russia striving to buttress its southern flank by weakening Azerbaijan during the war and bringing it closer to Moscow just as the USSR was unraveling.

Professor Agalar Abbasbeyli, chairman of the International Relations Department at Baku State University, stressed the Russians' Caucasus strategy in a recent interview with ISN Security Watch. Former president Heydar Aliev, father of current president Ilham Aliev, was known for his wariness towards Russia, a country he was very familiar with thanks to his long career in the KGB (the Russian security service).

"Heydar Aliev many times officially stated that the key to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is in the hands of Russia," professor Abbasbeyli asserted.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a critical link in Russia's attempts to diminish US influence in Azerbaijan while bolstering its power in the region through its proxy Armenia, said Abbasbeyli: "Russia has two exclaves. One is Kaliningrad Oblast, separated by Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, and the second exclave in Armenia, separated by Georgia. In fact, it's a Russian oblast."

The alleged incident in the men's room at Rambouillet further underscores the role Russia plays in the foreign policy of Armenia, Abbasbeyli claimed.

"We were not placing too much hope in the Rambouillet talks. Because the person who dictates to Kocharian had not yet given him clear objectives. This person is in the Kremlin. Kocharian was going to the toilet. Yuri Merzlyakov followed him. And there were instructions that there would be no progress [in the negotiations]. Even Armenians say that this toilet diplomacy was unethical."

On 22 February, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Baku as part of the Kremlin's "Year of Russia in Azerbaijan", which is designed to highlight Russian-Azerbaijani cooperation in the region. Both the Russian foreign minister and President Putin have said that Russia was willing to act as a guarantor of any settlement of the conflict, a pledge repeated in Baku that same day.

The near-term options

A number of Azeri analysts and politicians are now suggesting that the referendum concept is dead and the Prague Process is threatened. If that is an accurate assessment, then Azerbaijan faces two options, both of them unpleasant: the eventual acceptance of a de jure Nagorno-Karabakh state by the international community or war.

The first option is certainly the least psychologically palatable because it gains nothing for Azerbaijan while entrenching the status quo. Thus someday, Azerbaijan may regret not taking what it could get today.

"The Azeris can take the five regions tomorrow morning in exchange for formalizing the right for the people of Nagorno-Karabakh to determine their own future," said the Armenian government source.

And while politicians such as opposition figure Iskander Gamidov have said that "maybe in a month, maybe in a year or two, but sooner or later war will be inevitable", few analysts believe that the Azerbaijani military will be ready for offensive operations anytime soon, despite the country's recent soaring defense budget.

A source in the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry stressed to ISN Security Watch a third option: recourse to international law. The basis for such an appeal might be contained in the four UN resolutions passed in 1993 concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh war - two of them condemning the seizure of Azerbaijani territory and three of the four demanding the withdrawal of "occupying forces" from all "occupied areas of the Azerbaijan Republic". Even the Armenian government has never recognized the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh "Republic".

Similarly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted Resolution 1416 last year, which also calls for the withdrawal of "military forces from any occupied territories" and notes that "considerable parts of the territory of Azerbaijan are still occupied by Armenian forces, and separatist forces are still in control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region".

But the legal route is considered by most analysts to be impracticable, since it is very unlikely that a case between Armenia and Azerbaijan will be heard in a forum such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

The Foreign Ministry source repeated assurances given recently by President Aliiev that the government was ready to "provide the Nagorno-Karabakh region with the highest degree of self-rule within Azerbaijan. The best international and European practice can be used in elaboration of the model of such self-rule".

Last year's ICG report on Nagorno-Karabakh ("Nagorno-Karabakh: A Plan for Peace") mentioned that an "Azerbaijani official" suggested Scotland, which enjoys considerable autonomy within the UK, as one possible model.

But the source also repeated the president's warning: "We will not surrender an inch of our territory to anyone. Only the withdrawal of the Armenian armed forces from all occupied territories will help restore our trust and confidence in Armenia. Azerbaijan does not want war, but if forced by deliberate actions aimed at the annexation of our territory, it will be ready to resort to any other available measures to legitimately restore the state's territorial integrity."

The Rambouillet summit's failure will be discussed at the next session of the OSCE Minsk Group, scheduled for early March in Washington.

Karl Rahder has taught US foreign policy and international history at colleges and universities in the US and Azerbaijan. In 2004, he was a Visiting Faculty Fellow in Azerbaijan with the Civic Education Project, an academic program funded by the Soros Foundations and the US Department of State. He is currently based in Baku.

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