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Azerbaijan: Is War Over Nagornyy Karabakh a Realistic Option?

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Key Points

- * There is a growing trend of clashes along the Nagornyy Karabakh cease-fire line.
- * Azerbaijan has been investing heavily in military hardware, with a defence budget greater than the whole of Armenia's public spending. But manpower management and training standards still leave much to be desired.
- * Domestic political pressures ensure that there is no incentive towards conciliation on either side.

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Introduction

There can be little doubt that the ongoing dispute between Azerbaijan, Armenia and ethnic Armenians from the unrecognised Nagornyy-Karabakh Republic (NK) remains one of the most serious threats to peace in the former Soviet region. Many observers would concur with the view of the International Crisis Group (ICG) that the parties directly involved lack perspective, leadership and commitment to peaceful conflict resolution, instead refurbishing their military arsenals for use at some later date.¹ As time marches on the possibility of conflict becomes more likely, and the ICG noted that 2012 will be the key year, when Azerbaijan's oil production and related revenues are expected to peak.

The ICG observed that there is the danger that the well-motivated, trained and equipped NK army might take action before 2012, before Azerbaijan has accumulated an overwhelming superiority of fire power in artillery and aircraft. Moreover, any of the regular armed skirmishes has the potential to escalate into a more serious ceasefire violation, in turn leading to a major conflagration.

Not only are conditions becoming more conducive to a further outbreak of conflict over NK, but a number of external factors also promote uncertainty in the region, such as fears of Iranian nuclear proliferation, Moscow's withdrawal from the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE), the recent Kosovan declaration of independence, and the failure of the NATO Bucharest summit in the face of Russian opposition to support the speedy accession of Ukraine and Georgia to membership of the alliance. *"The 'frozen conflicts' concept is becoming more and more of an anachronism."*²

Box 1 – ICG's Recommendations to the Governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan³

1. Withdrawal of Armenian and NK forces from all occupied territories adjacent to NK, with special modalities for Kelbajar and Lachin.
2. Return of displaced persons.
3. NK's final status to be determined eventually by a vote, with an interim status to be agreed until then, and all transport and trade routes reopened.

The ICG also urged the wider international community, not just the Minsk Group of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (MG OSCE) which is facilitating the negotiation process, to impress on Baku and Yerevan the need for

greater progress in seeking agreement. Such exhortations have been made regularly since 1991, to little avail.

Rhetoric and the Path to War

The armed clash of 4/5 March 2008 was one of the worst to have taken place in recent times. Since the establishment of the Russian-brokered ceasefire in 1994 individual soldiers and civilians on both sides have continued to be picked off by sniper fire. There is an increasing turbulence along the front line, and by the end of 2007 the number of shooting incidents and armed clashes was almost three times the previous annual figures; about 30 men had been killed during 2007.⁴

Box 2 – Armed Clash on 4/5 March 2008

At 0500 on 4 March 2008 Azerbaijani armed forces and military forces of NK clashed. By the evening both Yerevan and Baku mass media reported the discontinuation of the clash, which had continued for several hours. According to the Armenian side in the course of the skirmish eight Azerbaijani servicemen were killed, two from the NK army were wounded. Azerbaijani sources stated that five servicemen became casualties, four wounded and one killed, together with two local civilians from Geranboyskiy rayon. The Armenian MOD's press secretary, Seyrana Shakhshvaryana, stated that "*Azerbaijani forces captured one of the strong points belonging to NK forces. Later the Karabakh side by its actions forced the Azerbaijan military to return to their former position. The Azeri side suffered casualties.*" It is no secret that officers and soldiers from Armenia participated in the armed clash.⁵

Lieutenant Colonel El'dar Saburoglu, head of the Azerbaijani MOD's press service confirmed that ceasefire violations occurred mainly in the Agdamskiy, Fizulinskiy and Terterskiy rayony.⁶

The Azerbaijani military maintained that the ceasefire violation by the Armenians was the consequence of internal tension following the Armenian presidential elections on 19 February 2008.⁷ Opposition parties claimed that the results of the elections had been falsified. The situation was further exacerbated by subsequent protests in Yerevan, and the imposition of a 20 day state of emergency marked by violent repressive action by the authorities on 1 March 2008.⁸

Increasingly, for some time from Azerbaijani representatives one has heard the following logic and argument: if war is wrong, how is it that ethnic Armenians have taken and continue to retain Azerbaijani territory⁹ through war and yet Azerbaijan is denied the right to recover its own territory by forceful means, even as a last resort? Even President Ilkham Aliyev's patience is not inexhaustible. Following the failure of talks between both presidents in June 2007 he announced:

*I have repeatedly stated that our patience is not unlimited. The negotiating process must have its own limits including time. And in the event that we become convinced 100% that negotiations are not leading anywhere, we have the full right under international legal norms, to restore integrity by any means up to war, and we will not hide this fact. We must be prepared for this, and we will be ready.*¹⁰

The Azerbaijani minister of defence Safar Abiyev told journalists that “*armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is extremely likely*”.¹¹

The declaration and recognition of Kosovan independence have certainly aggravated the antagonism between Azerbaijan and Armenia. R Mirkadyrov encapsulated the view from Baku in an article on 29 February 2008 when he wrote:

The latest events around the one-sided, moreover unsanctioned variant of recognition of Kosovan independence by the United Nations Security Council compels one to consider more seriously the possibility of forceful normalisation of ethnic-territorial conflicts in the post-soviet space. And here is why. The problem is contained in the fact that any peaceful normalisation of similar conflicts with the involvement of peacemakers, especially when staged, must be based on the trust of the conflicting sides in the international intermediaries, on the confidence of their neutrality independently of the flag under which they carry out this mission. But the form of presentation, recognising and especially guaranteeing the independence of Kosovo completely explodes the trust of countries coming to terms with the problem of separatism, both as international intermediaries and peacemaking missions.

*A second matter – conflicts in the post-soviet space. All the statements about the fact that Kosovo is a unique circumstance and can not become a precedent for conflicts in the post-soviet space, are simply unconvincing.*¹²

Russia also fears the declaration of independence by Kosovo and its subsequent recognition by many Western countries has opened a veritable Pandora’s Box, fuelling separatist tendencies across Europe. The invasions of Russian lands from both east and west across featureless terrain over centuries has encouraged Russians to stress international rules on the sanctity of state boundaries. The more recent experience of unbridled separatism, in some cases with more than a touch of religious fundamentalism after the collapse of Communist power, has reinforced this reliance.

Leaving aside the aspirations of Transdnistria, Abkhazia, South Osetia and even those of the Chechen separatist, there is no doubt that the issue of Kosovan independence has already had a markedly negative impact on the process of normalising the situation of Nagornyy Karabakh. The question of Kosovo’s status and growing Azerbaijani frustration with the MG OSCE co-chairmen were undoubtedly the catalysts which led to Baku putting forward a resolution to the UN General Assembly “*On the situation on the occupied territories of Azerbaijan*” which was adopted on 14 March 2008, with 39 votes in favour, seven against and 100 abstentions.¹³

The process raised a “*storm of emotion in Baku... The deputy foreign minister of Azerbaijan Ariz Azimov expressed bewilderment that the countries of Russia, France and USA, the co-chairmen of the MG OSCE whose task was to resolve the Karabakh conflict had voted against the Azerbaijani resolution.*”¹⁴ Even Iran had sent an official letter “*loudly announcing its support for the resolution*”.¹⁵ Clearly, Baku and the Azerbaijani people have lost confidence in the MG OSCE. However, co-chairmen can only advise and assist; not enough is being done by the opposing sides themselves to reach a settlement.

The outgoing Armenian president, Robert Kocharyan at a press conference on 17 March did not exclude the possibility of Armenia recognising the independence of Nagornyy Karabakh “*If Baku continues its present policy, in response Yerevan will*

recognise NKR and terminate negotiations with this republic, in particular in the military sphere".¹⁶ Kocharyan believed that "the activities of Azerbaijan in international structures" were undoubtedly linked to the problem of Kosovo: Baku was attempting to demonstrate that Kosovo could not become a precedent for NK, but in Kocharyan's opinion "NK had a greater right to independence than Kosovo".¹⁷ The Armenian president added that NK had a state structure and moreover it had the capacity to independently defend its own borders. "During the period of the state of emergency Kocharyan made a series of important foreign policy statements (in particular on the thesis that in the event of Azerbaijan leaving the format of the Minsk Group, Yerevan is ready to recognise Nagorny Karabakh)."¹⁸

Both the previous Armenian president, Robert Kocharyan, and the new one, Serzh Sarkasyan, originate from NK. As far as most Armenians are concerned, NK is a part of Armenia, though they put a permanent solution far down the list of priorities for their government, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1 – Opinion Poll Survey of Armenian Citizens¹⁹

Question	Percentage
1. Overriding task of government	
a. Creation of jobs	32%
b. Increase in working wage and pensions	22%
c. Improvement in social – economic situation	20%
d. Democracy and normalisation of the Karabakh conflict	3%
2. Future of Nagorno Karabakh	
a. Consider NK as an oblast' of Armenia	49%
b. Consider NK as autonomous oblast' of Armenia	28%
c. Consider NK as an independent state	23%
d. Consider NK as part of Azerbaijan	0%
e. Consider NK status must be solved by peaceful means	79%
f. NK status should be solved by force if necessary	18%

It is hardly surprising that the verbal response from Yerevan was robust when it could be said that Baku's approach is aggressive and based upon its burgeoning economic and hence military power, and its international influence. An approach built more on the establishment of future trust and reconciliation is more likely to achieve worthwhile results, but realistically this is unlikely to happen. Presidential elections in Azerbaijan are scheduled for autumn 2008. Despite the considerable misgivings harboured by minority ethnic groups such as the Talysh, Lezgins and Meskhetian Turks over the government's lack of attention towards their aspirations, Azerbaijani society as a whole is openly united in the belief that NK and Azerbaijani territory occupied by ethnic Armenians should be returned to Azerbaijan.²⁰

The international community agrees with Azerbaijan. There have been four United Nations Security Council resolutions calling on Armenia to end its occupation of parts of Azerbaijan, namely 822 (1993), 853 (1993), 874 (1993) and 884 (1993). The resolutions have all referred to NK as Azerbaijani territory.

Azerbaijan's Growing Economic Power

Whilst Azerbaijan does not have the status of a major regional power, it no longer falls easily into the grouping of minor states in the Caucasus-Caspian region as I

suggested in a paper written almost 10 years ago.²¹ Nevertheless, it should also be remembered that Baku still finds it prudent to follow a policy of swinging 'to and fro' between Washington and Moscow: it also has to tread warily with Tehran.²²

As well as being blessed with significant offshore hydrocarbon deposits, Azerbaijan is ideally placed to act as an energy pipeline hub not only for the transfer of its own oil and gas to western markets but also to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan,²³ offering a route which bypasses Russia through the transit states of Georgia and Turkey via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the more recent South Caucasus gas pipeline Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum. If the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline comes to fruition it will also further enhance Azerbaijan's status as both a producer and transit hub. Furthermore, Azerbaijan has the potential to act as a major entrepot for other kinds of trade, with its capital and major port of Baku as the main eastern outlet of the trunk Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia, and with a future alternative route for passengers and freight to/from Europe via the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku railway: Baku is providing a substantial portion of the funding for building this railway.²⁴

Azerbaijan is also an influential and active participant in several regional organisations. Besides GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova), Azerbaijan belongs to the Black Sea Economic Cooperation organization as well as the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank, whose membership mirrors that of the BSEC. Armenia, by contrast, is a member only of BSEC.

In view of its difficult relationships with Turkey and Azerbaijan, small landlocked Armenia still needs reassurance and security through a "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance" with Russia.²⁵ This and cooperation with Iran in the energy sphere tends to place Yerevan outside the burgeoning economic opportunities coming to the South Caucasus. As a result Armenia has come to be regarded as part of a Russo-Iranian-Armenian triangle wanting to prevent Azerbaijan's revitalisation, limiting the presence of the West in the Caspian and reducing the involvement and authority of Turkey.

Note should be taken of a recent meeting in Antalya of the deputy parliamentary speakers of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey when a protocol was signed to establish an inter-parliamentary assembly of Turkic-speaking states. "The question from Moscow is whether this new assembly will remain primarily a discussion group with little political authority, or whether it might develop into a potential political counterweight to Russia's attempt to retain influence and power in the post-Soviet space."²⁶ Nevertheless, it will undoubtedly add further cement to relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey and enhance the position of Baku as a transit hub between East and West.

Artur Rasizade the prime minister stated that "according to the rate of economic development the republic occupies a leading position amongst other world countries and in the conditions of economic globalisation the image of Azerbaijan had risen". Certainly over the last four years the real growth of the GDP increased 2.3 times, the oil GDP 1.5 times, a nominal expression of GDP per head of population 3.4 times. Income of the population has grown 2.5 times, the average wage 2.8 times, revenue to the state budget 4.9 times. In 2007 the overall volume of GDP was 25.2 mlrd manats which exceeded the 2006 figures by 25%. The increase of the supplementary value in the non oil well sector at 11.3% has allowed the reduction of dependence on the oil sector.²⁷

A disturbing factor has been the growth of military budgets of both Azerbaijan and Armenia, and in particular the fact that "Azerbaijan's military expenditure exceeds

the whole of the Armenian budget".²⁸ As a result of Azerbaijan's vast revenues from oil:

*The overall 2007 defence budget was 907 million manats (just over one billion US dollars). Military expenditure has increased by 27.9% in comparison to last year and now accounts for 16% of the entire state budget. 796 million manats will go to the defence ministry and 110 million manats to the recently formed defence industry ministry.*²⁹

President Aliyev stated on television in July 2007 that the defence budget was eight times greater than four years ago, due to the fact that "We live in a state of war and our territories are occupied. The war is not over yet. Only a ceasefire is being observed."³⁰ David Petrosyan noted then that:

*Growth in military spending in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia now exceeds GDP growth by 20 to 40 times... For every million inhabitants of the South Caucasus, there are 75 tanks and 85 artillery pieces. This is a much larger proportion than in the three big neighbours of the region, Iran, Russia and Turkey. If you factor in the number of weapons in the three unrecognised separatist territories in the region, Abkhazia, South Osetia and Nagornyy Karabakh, the figures rise by around a third.*³¹

Petrosyan mentioned Armenian concerns about the dangers that could follow from Moscow's suspension of the CFE treaty: "However, up until now, relative stability has been guaranteed largely due to a military balance, whose cornerstone has been the CFE treaty. If the CFE treaty begins to unravel that could lead to destabilisation... with the threat of unresolved conflicts flaring up again."³²

No doubt there are grounds for concern: "This move is positive for Azerbaijan: since we intend to build up our military capabilities. Now it's important for our authorities not to make any concessions to those forces that will try to make us adhere to CFE limits."³³ As yet, however, Azerbaijan has not announced its intention to withdraw from the Treaty. Armenia and Russia have both denied that Russian equipment withdrawn from Georgia would move from its new base in Gyumri, Armenia, to NK.

Azerbaijan's Vulnerabilities

Azerbaijan does have inherent weaknesses and instabilities which have the potential to retard its future development. It goes without saying that the occupation of Azerbaijani territory remains a source of distraction and instability for Baku, but there is a whole host of other destabilising factors in Azerbaijani society which have a predisposition to dull the patina of dramatic rises in the state's revenues and finances. These include: widespread corruption; abuse of human rights; lack of press freedom; maladministration of justice and police brutality; and the low level of attention to ethnic minorities already noted.

A new report by the ICG³⁴ noted a growing trend by the authorities in Azerbaijan to control all aspects of religious life, with harsh treatment being meted out to Islamic communities who no longer accept the spiritual authority of the official clergy. This in turn risked radicalising peaceful groups:

*The authorities seem to play up the Islamic terrorist threat to gain the West's sympathy and tolerance for its undemocratic proclivities.*³⁵ *Harassment of independent believers, even if not on a mass scale, runs the danger of pushing*

*otherwise peaceful groups towards radicalisation, if not yet overt violence. This is becoming visible among some in Azerbaijan's Salafi community.*³⁶

The Chairman of the party "Ana Vetən", deputy Fazail Agamali rejected these views; he said that the authorities and people have a tolerant attitude towards the activities of the Muslim community: *"In Azerbaijan the authorities do not proscribe the activities of religious communities and do not pressurise representatives of religious communities. The fact that it is the usual lie and does not reflect the real Azerbaijan speaks negatively about the organisation."*³⁷ At the same time, there were sects whose activities were forbidden: *"These sects call for the rejection of military service and encourage Armenian aggression"*.³⁸ Moreover, a theologian, leader of the "Dzhuma mechet" Hadzhi İl'har İbrahim told *Zerkalo* that he believed the ICG had not the moral right to make any sort of comments relating to the situation in Azerbaijan.³⁹

There is also an element of authoritarianism, indifference or indeed callousness in the manner in which the authorities discharge their responsibilities towards the 600,000 ethnic Azeris displaced from Karabakh in the fighting more than a decade ago.

Box 3 – Situation of Azeris from Nagornyy Karabakh⁴⁰

Since 2001 the Azerbaijani authorities have begun to relocate large numbers of displaced people from emergency relief centres to newly constructed settlements around the country. This process has been marred by a lack of consultation with those being relocated, and by the construction of settlements in remote, infertile and unsuitable locations. Displaced people relocated to such settlements face isolation, poverty and continued dependence on the state. Those living in urban areas have more opportunities to find work in the urban economy but remain particularly vulnerable to housing shortages. The right of displaced people to freedom of movement is restricted by an internal residence permit system, which requires a fixed address in order to receive aid and social services, despite the *de jure* abolition of this system in the Azerbaijani Constitution. Residence permits for more prosperous urban centres are difficult to obtain without payment of bribes.

Military Deficiencies

In general terms the characteristics of a nation are reflected in the strengths and weaknesses of its armed forces. Azerbaijan is no exception to this.

The armed forces do not have a high state of battle readiness and are ill-prepared for wide scale combat operations, although firepower capabilities have grown significantly since the purchase from Ukraine of 12 x 300 mm salvo rocket systems 9A52 "Smerch" with a range of 70 km.⁴¹ Several analysts maintain that the appearance of this weapon system will alter the military balance in the South Caucasus.⁴² Details of the armed forces of Azerbaijan, Armenia and NK can be found in the Appendix.

An interview with a representative of the Azerbaijani MOD press service, Lieutenant Colonel El'dar Sabir, reflected his optimism about the implementation of reforms in the Azerbaijani armed forces, though in the main, the article only covered the various activities required for NATO membership, namely Partnership for Peace, the Individual Partnership Action Plan and the Planning and Review Process: *"In 2007*

alone around 1,500 of our servicemen participated in measures within the framework of bilateral agreements with foreign states".⁴³

An interview with Il'drym Mamedov, a retired colonel and military expert, by the same author, published in the same paper on the same day painted a very different picture.⁴⁴ It was concerned with the very real problems being encountered by both NATO and Azerbaijan in the military reforms which Azerbaijan is required to implement to reach NATO standards. It pulled no punches and was a somewhat gloomy forecast. The main points were as follows: the majority of senior military figures do not have democratic views, and will not change them in a short period of time. A few of them have moral and psychological difficulties in coming to terms with modern standards and putting them into practice. Perhaps one of the most important points which high-ranking military bureaucrats need to address is the implementation of the required structural-establishment reforms. As everyone is aware, in NATO countries the defence minister is a civilian, but in Azerbaijan the military have no wish to let go the reins of power and control.

A major indicator also mentioned is that in NATO armed forces personnel nominations, such as matters of promotion, appointments and postings, are carried out on a competitive basis. However, in Azerbaijan nominations for promotion and appointments are made on the basis of the personal preferences of the senior person involved, with no tests or formal attestation, which of course becomes yet another opportunity for corrupt practices. In different spheres, as in the training and in the effective implementation of military cadres double standards exist. Taking account of all the nuances it is possible to say that very few military cadres meet the standards of NATO.⁴⁵ Box 4 below provides some specific points from the interview.

Box 4 – Question of Azerbaijani Army meeting NATO Standards⁴⁶

Q1. Instruction at the Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev Higher Military Academy is carried out according to NATO standards. Since 2001 officers are graduating according to NATO standards. Has the system of military education become effective from the point of view of solving cadre problems in the army?

A1. No kind of effectiveness is visible. Despite talk in latter years announcing reforms in military education reflecting NATO standards, experts relate to these expressions with suspicion. It is not possible to state effectiveness if the reforms have not taken place. A number of moral and psychological problems remain unattended, such as: rights of a person (human rights), requirement by servicemen to observe the rights of others, and creation of equal rights for career development. Young officers do not serve with enthusiasm in army field formations. Today in the Azerbaijani armed forces the situation with cadres having NATO education is not so satisfactory. Large problems exist in this sphere. Little attention is devoted to solving questions such as officers' social problems, essential increases in pay, the guarantee of living accommodation. In the army it is like a kind of bribery, but no one fights the reasons which engender it. In the matter of cooperation with NATO, one of the main questions is concerned with officers in army branches and command-control procedures. Unfortunately no perceptible movement is visible in this direction. The level of training of arms branches, their knowledge and capability in the Azerbaijani armed forces continues to remain the main problem. The leadership of the armed forces in the course of 13 years remains unchanged.

Q2. Annually with the aim of acquiring skills relating to NATO standards, hundreds of Azerbaijani officers are sent to military training establishments belonging to countries of the alliance. Combined seminars and courses take place. Do they offer any form of influence on the solution of cadre problems?

A2. No one sees the benefit, because the majority of those had occupied high ranking military posts under soviet standards which are far-distant from NATO standards. Young officers receiving a military education in Turkey, the USA and Germany need to serve under the leadership of these instructors. For this reason they have practically no way of influencing development of the Azerbaijani army. A portion of the young, responding to NATO standards, do their best to cope with the situation in the army, the other part discharge themselves. Cadre reform is needed from top to bottom, since if the high ranking officers do not respond to modern requirements, they are turning into an obstacle on the road of reform... In fact they are a real brake, which interferes with the steady integration of Azerbaijan into NATO.

The delay in the progress of Georgian and Ukrainian aspirations towards membership could impact negatively on the thought processes in Baku, where many people are against joining NATO, in particular those who regret the passing of the Soviet era. People in the South Caucasus republics are even beginning to have doubts about the West, recognising that fallibilities exist there as well: they wish to make their own decisions, to eschew automatic Alliance membership. Possibly the unsatisfactory situation in Iraq is accelerating this process. The civilian population in Azerbaijan in particular are deeply apprehensive about whether the USA will conduct an aerial bombing campaign against Iran.

The Azerbaijani MOD, commanders and officers down the chain of command should be displaying concern for the welfare of their men, but there appears to be considerable anecdotal evidence to the contrary. For some time now in the Azerbaijani army the emphasis has been on the acquisition of weaponry rather than on the social needs of soldiers.⁴⁷

Box 5 – Azerbaijani Army’s Limitations in Soldier Care⁴⁸

Yashar Jafari, head of the public organisation Officers in Reserve, noted that in most countries there was a 50-50 split between spending on weaponry and on salaries and social needs of soldiers, but that in Azerbaijan the proportion was 60-40 in favour of weapons.

Uzeir Jafarov, a lieutenant colonel in the army reserve, also voiced concerns that living conditions of soldiers were not improving. An Azerbaijani lieutenant earns 250-300 dollars a month, while a major takes home twice that amount. But ordinary soldiers and sergeants earn only between 5 and 15 dollars a month. Jafarov also said that the defence minister still owed retired military personnel around 100 million dollars.

Lack of soldier-care also appears with regard to veterans wounded in the 1991-1994 conflict:

*Gasimov is one 7,000 soldiers of the Azerbaijani regular army who were wounded in the Karabakh war and who say their government has neglected them. According to the Public Union of Karabakh Veterans, there are around 13,000 disabled veterans – the additional number is accounted for by the interior ministry and security service troops.*⁴⁹

There are also claims of abuse in the Azerbaijani army such as bullying, which is not altogether surprising:

*According to data collected by Doktrina, a centre for journalistic investigations, in previous years 60-70 percent of casualties in the army had direct military causes, such as shooting across the front line and mine explosions, but in the last year [2006-2007] 75 percent of casualties were caused by non-battlefield incidents. The centre says this shows a rise in the number of suicides and cases of bullying.*⁵⁰

On the question of corruption, the Doktrina centre noted that 30 Azerbaijani officers, including several colonels, had been arrested in the three months prior to March 2007. Moreover, two high-ranking officers in the MOD had complained about wrongdoing, which resulted in one of them being transferred to Nakhichevan with a reduction in rank and a pay cut of 50%. However, at the time “*experts said that the drive on corruption was linked to Azerbaijan’s efforts to implement its [NATO Partnership Action Plan] with the military prosecutor’s office and the national security minister now investigating the army more closely*”.⁵¹

Even by old standards, the Azeri military are not up to scratch. In Soviet times combat readiness was defined in the Voroshilov General Staff Academy as:

*The capability of troops to initiate combat action in the shortest time under all conditions in a given situation, and to accomplish combat missions successfully within the specified time. Combat readiness is determined by combat capabilities of troops: by an accurate understanding of the missions by commanders, staffs and political organs; by the completeness of organisational cadres; by the completeness of supplies, by the operability of weapons and equipment, by the timely preparation for the impending operation; and anticipation of the changes likely to happen in a situation. The level of combat readiness of troops in peacetime should be such as to ensure: the rapid transition of troops from peacetime to wartime status, the organised committal of troops into combat action, and their capability to accomplish the assigned combat missions.*⁵²

Clearly Azerbaijan’s armed forces at present are not in a state to carry out wide-ranging military operations. NATO’s efforts are devoted to bringing the Azerbaijani army under civilian democratic control and not necessarily to raise its combat capability to a level that it becomes a force which could threaten its neighbours: another reason why the older Soviet-educated officers are lukewarm about NATO’s reform programmes.

Both sides, Armenians with the NK army, and the Azerbaijani armed forces will have carried out various calculations within the general scope of a correlation of forces. Whilst a quantitative correlation will have produced some idea of the strengths of the two sides, reliance on quantitative comparisons alone could lead to large errors. Another Soviet-era manual gave a guide which is still very relevant today:

Combat capabilities depend on many factors: number of personnel, level of combat training, morale, availability and technical condition of combat equipment and weapons, professionalism and personal qualities of commanders, availability of ammunition and other material means, tactics of operations and enemy capabilities, conditions of terrain, time of year, weather and other matters. Platoon combat capabilities are reflected by the number of attacking tanks, infantry combat vehicles which it can repel with its own forces and means, having maintained its own combat effectiveness.⁵³

Judging by these standards the Azerbaijani army has some way to go before it can be considered capable of carrying out wide-scale combat operations.

It should not be forgotten that there are a number of mutual arrangements which form a network surrounding the possible war zone. Armenia has a Treaty of “Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance” with Russia dated 29 August 1997; moreover Armenia also has a number of arrangements and projects with Iran. Azerbaijan, whilst it would almost certainly have the backing of Turkey, also has a web of agreements with Iran, which also assists in giving Azerbaijan access to its Nakhichevan exclave. There is also an agreement between Azerbaijan and Iran that their territory cannot be used for an attack on the other party.

Armenians believe that, although fewer in number than their Azeri counterparts, Armenian and NK armed forces combined are superior in combat capability, especially in mobility, efficiency and the quality of officers with combat experience. The weakness of NK armed forces is the lack of army aviation – a restraining factor in the conduct of combat operations. There can be no doubt that Armenia would support NK militarily if serious fighting broke out once more. Whilst in the past Armenians defeated the Azerbaijani army, their assessment about their own military abilities and capabilities could be over-optimistic. The acquisition of the 300mm multiple launch rocket system 9K58 “Smerch” (Whirlwind) by Azerbaijan could be a battle winner, remembering that NK is a small area. 'Smerch' was designed as an area weapon and can saturate a target area of 67.2 hectares; with one 12 barrelled salvo from one vehicle 672 sq m from a range of between 20 km or 70 km.⁵⁴ However, the danger is that if salvos fell on Armenian territory proper that could widen the scope of the conflict. Other powers would then be more likely to actively take sides.

In these circumstances a war would be a catastrophe for the economic development of Azerbaijan and its people: a successful war over Nagornyy Karabakh is not a realistic option, despite the rhetoric.

Appendix**Armed Forces of Azerbaijan, Armenia and NK⁵⁵****1. Azerbaijan****General**

Among the former soviet republics Azerbaijan has the largest armed forces: 95,000 men, including 85,000 men in the ground forces. 8,000 men are in the air force and air defence, 2,000 men in the navy; 2,500 men in the National Guard part of the ground forces; Interior Ministry 12,000 men and border troops 5,000 men. 292 tanks,⁵⁶ 706 armoured vehicles,⁵⁷ 405 guns and mortars, 75 salvo-rocket launchers BM-21, 370 rocket launchers,⁵⁸ anti-tank missile launchers.⁵⁹

Ground Forces consist of five army corps: 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Army Corps concentrated against NK; part of 2nd Army Corps is deployed on the Azerbaijan-Iranian border; 4th (Bakinskiy) Army Corps covers the capital and the coast and 5th Army Corps is deployed in Nakhichevan. Forces by Role: MR – 23 bdes; Arty 1 bde, MRL 1 bde, AT 1 regt.

Air Force: airfields Kyudamir, Zeynalabdin (fitted out with NATO navigational system TAKAN), Dallyar, Gyandzha, Kala. 61 combat aircraft and helicopters, 46 aircraft and helicopters in auxiliary aviation.

Air Defence Troops: four air defence (AD) missile brigades, one AD missile regiment, two separate radio-technical battalions. AD missile complexes S-200, S-125, S-75 (32 missile launchers), “Krug”, “Osa”.

Azerbaijan Navy: squadron of surface ships (escort vessels, amphibious ships, group of trawlers, search and rescue vessels, training ships), naval infantry battalion, spetsnaz diversionary reconnaissance centre, coastal service units/subunits. Total 14 warships/launches, 22 auxiliary vessels. Not all craft are capable of carrying out their tasks due to defects and unavailability of experienced specialists.

Equipment: Purchases include long range missile/artillery systems from Ukraine 12 x “Smerch”⁶⁰ and 72 x 100mm anti-tank guns MT-12; from Bulgaria 36 x 130mm M-46; from Georgia 6 x Su-25 aircraft; 19 x T-72 tanks from Belarus. In 2007 carried out training flights with MiG-29 from Ukraine; USA modernised 7 military airfields; T-72 tanks from Ukraine/Slovakia, and 26 x 120mm “Nona” high angle howitzer/mortar.

Combat Effectiveness

The main partner of Azerbaijan is Turkey. Education of service personnel in the spirit of Pan-Turkism has paramount significance. The armed forces do not have a high state of battle readiness and are ill-prepared for wide scale combat operations. Firepower capabilities have grown significantly since the purchase from Ukraine of “Smerch”.

Terms of service – 17 months, but service in the ground forces can be extended.⁶¹

2. Armenia

General

Strength of Armenian armed forces is around 53,000 (or 56,000, of which 45,000 are in the ground forces)⁶² in five army corps. Air defence troops are around 3,900 men, air force up to 700. Armenian Army has eight tactical-operational missile launchers. 198 T-72 tanks; 338 infantry fighting vehicles; 360 guns and field artillery, mortars and salvo-rocket artillery; around 160 x 100mm AD guns modified for use against ground targets; 55 x AD missile launchers (S-75, S-125, “Krug”, “Osa”) and two battalions of S-300.

Ground Forces: The main strength of the Armenian Army is concentrated around the border with Azerbaijan. Several battalions are deployed directly in the Karabakh zone on occupied Azerbaijani territory. Units of 5th Army Corps are deployed close to Armenian-Turkish border. The main AD assets are deployed along the line of contact with the Azeri army. The borders with Georgia and Iran are not covered by destructive weapons. Armenia and Russia have the closest relationship in the South Caucasus. After the withdrawal of the two remaining Russian bases from Georgia, Armenia remains the only state with a Russian group of forces in the South Caucasus. (IISS gives a more detailed breakdown of Armenian ground forces.)⁶³

Air Force: 7 combat aircraft (6 x Su-25, 1 x MiG-25) 12 x combat helicopters (7 x Mi-24, 3 x Mi-24K, 2 x Mi-24P) 26 aircraft and helicopters of auxiliary air force (2 x L-39, 16-Mi-2, 8 Mi-8MT).

Air Defence: Troops belonging to the joint AD assets of Russia and Armenia work to a plan developed during Soviet times which provides joint control of the air space in the southern direction.

3. Nagorny Karabakh

Strength

The NK Army is well trained and equipped. Its strength lies between 18,000 and 20,000 officers and soldiers, with a mobilization reserve of 20,000-30,000 reservists. Army Defence of NK, like Armenia is well-trained and equipped. For every 1,000 people in the population of NK 65 are servicemen, the highest ratio in the South Caucasus. The armed forces of the unrecognized republic are considered as a form of institute which guarantees regular employment; many families depend on this money.

Ground Forces: up to 16,000 men deployed in eight defensive areas. Armament consists of (figures differ): 177 to 316 tanks, from 256 to 324 fighting vehicles, from 291 to 322 guns and mortars (including up to 26 BM-21 salvo-fire systems).

However, only 8,500 citizens from NK serve in the NK army; some 10,000 come from Armenia. Some 500,000 Armenians left NK and relocated to Armenia. Between the armed forces of Armenia and NK a high degree of integration exists. Yerevan supplies arms and other military necessities to Stepanakert. The support offered by officers from Armenia in training military personnel in the NK army is an open secret. Yet Yerevan maintains that in NK and in the occupied Azeri territories around NK there is not one Armenian military subunit.

Air force: up to 250 men, equipped with Su-25 x 2, Mi-24 x 4, and 5 other helicopters.

Combat Effectiveness

In the opinion of Armenian experts, whilst ceding numerical superiority to Azeri armed forces, Armenian and NK armed forces are superior in combat capability, especially in the spheres of mobility, efficiency and scale of manning by officers who possess experience of combat operations leading to 100% mobilization. Veterans from the Karabakh war operated with small subunits independently in mountainous terrain. The weakness of NK armed forces is the lack of army aviation – a restraining factor in the conduct of combat operations.

Endnotes

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Want to Know More ...?

See:

International Crisis Group, Europe Report No. 187, 14 November 2007
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