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2017**The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Russia - US flashpoint***By Prof. Brenda Shaffer*

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson described the state of current US-Russian relations as at its “lowest point since the Cold War.” This situation has potentially dangerous implications for the US, Russia and Europe, as well as a variety of regional conflicts around the globe. Among the top of this list is the Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus. In the past three years, the frequency, intensity and technological level of flare ups in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan have intensified. Adding to the propensity for danger is the fact that several regional conflicts are now linked together—Syria, Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh and the policy toward Iran—with actions in one conflict affecting developments in another.

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The chances of renewed and sustained violent confrontation will continue to be high and the likelihood of resolving the conflict low. Despite the significant obstacles, Europe has a strong interest in investing policy effort in resolving or at least managing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Re-ignition of violence could affect Europe’s energy security, add to Europe’s tensions with Ankara and Moscow, and distract Europe from its already overflowing security

agenda, as well as have a spillover effect on other US-Europe-Russia disputes. The South Caucasus borders Europe, adjacent to EU members in the Black Sea region, as well as NATO. In addition, the main protagonists in the conflict—Armenia and Azerbaijan—are both members of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Both countries are members of the EU Partnership Program. Armenia signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU in 2017 and Brussels is currently negotiating a new Partnership Agreement with Azerbaijan.

Background to the conflict

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict emerged in the twilight years of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Under the USSR, the Nagorno-Karabakh region was part of Azerbaijan, but during the Soviet period, the region had an ethnic Armenian majority population. In 1987, ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh petitioned Moscow to transfer the territory to Yerevan's control. In the glasnost period, the dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region became a major issue promoted by the emerging national movements in Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet Armenia.

With the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the conflict between the sides developed into a full-blown war. The war created close to a million refugees and internally displaced persons (870,000 Azerbaijanis) and left more than 30,000 dead.

Toward the end of Soviet control, violent exchanges emerged between the two communities in the two Soviet republics. With the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the conflict between the sides developed into a full-blown war. The war created close to a million refugees and internally displaced persons (870,000 Azerbaijanis) and left more than 30,000 dead.

Moscow played an important role in intensifying the conflict during the final years of the USSR and after independence of the new states, through Russia moving its military support and arms shipments from side-to-side, during various junctures of the war. In the war, Armenia gained control not only of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, but seven additional regions of Azerbaijani territory. Altogether, over 16 percent of Azerbaijan's territory is occupied today by Armenia. A ceasefire was achieved between Armenia and Azerbaijan in May 1994. However, during the past two decades frequent violent confrontations have occurred along the line of contact between the sides. In these attacks, there have been casualties to both soldiers and the nearby civilian population.

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Since 1994, the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has been tasked by the international community to lead negotiations to end to the conflict. The Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group are Russia, the USA and France. The Minsk Group frequently convenes meetings of the Presidents and Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, despite more than two and a half decades of activity, the Minsk Group has not yielded any concrete results. Russia is the most influential actor on the developments in the conflict. Its predominance was shown in April 2016, when after the latest round of fighting a renewed ceasefire was signed between the Chief of Staffs of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Moscow, without any additional foreign presence. Russian troops are also physically present in the arena, deployed in a Russian base at Gyumri in Armenia and operating Armenia's air defense system, which is fully integrated within its own. Moscow also is the main arms supplier to both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

While the majority of the population of Armenia is Christian and of Azerbaijan Shiite Muslim, religion is not a factor in the emergence of the conflict. If anything, religious leaders in the two states play a role in promoting peace and communication between the peoples. Moreover, in the formation of the alliances around the conflict, religion is not a factor. For instance, Armenia's main allies in the conflict are Iran and Russia.

The ethnic differences between Armenians and Azerbaijanis also do not explain the conflict.

While ethnic and state disjunctures prevailed throughout the former Soviet Union, ethnic based conflict in specific, materialized in only six places after its breakup. Four out of six of the post-Soviet conflicts emerged in the Caucasus. This was not by chance, but due to the strategic significance of the region, clearly appreciated by Moscow, and by the US in the early 1990s. The Caucasus not only is located at the meeting place of Europe and Asia, but control of the Caucasus region essentially entails hold of the greater Caspian region, which is landlocked.

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The conflict not only killed tens of thousands and left over a million homeless, but placed significant constraints on the newly independent states—Armenia and Azerbaijan. In order to preserve its territorial gains, Yerevan agreed to the continued presence of Russian military forces and the integration with Russia of some of its military operations. The conflict also served as the main obstacle to reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia.

Initially after independence, Armenia and Turkey agreed to establish diplomatic relations and leave historical issues between them outside the bilateral diplomatic realm. However, as Turkish citizens saw in the media hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani refugees fleeing the conflict zone, domestic politics became a major obstacle for a Turkish Prime Minister to establish relations with Armenia.

Linkage to other conflicts

The recent escalation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict creates an additional potential flashpoint between Russia and the US and adds complication to the already overcrowded interaction between them and regional powers (Iran, Turkey, Israel) in Syria and the greater Mediterranean region. Moscow operates a multi-location security and foreign policy strategy toward the US and the West: where goals in one region are often achieved through actions in another. For instance, the deployment of Russian troops to Syria was partially aimed at creating leverage to cement its position in Ukraine and other parts of the post-Soviet space. Russia has a proven ability to catalyze conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and may use it to pursue goals in other arenas. For instance, Moscow could use renewed violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan to distract Turkey from influencing developments in Syria. In addition, since Iran and Turkey both border the South Caucasus and Iran has troops deployed there, and Russian and US troops are deployed in Syria, events in Nagorno-Karabakh can serve as a tripwire for conflict between some of these forces in Syria and vice-versa.

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Additionally, the rising likelihood of confrontation between Israel and Iran with their forces now face to face in Syria, could spill over into a proxy conflict between them in the South Caucasus (Armenia is well coordinated in the security sphere with Iran and Azerbaijan with Israel). The military linkage between the South Caucasus and the Syrian conflict was already established with the firing of missiles from Russian vessels in the Caspian Sea into Syria.

The continuation of the poor state of relations between Russia and the United States significantly lowers the chance of resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Most likely Russia would block any future full resolution of the conflict, since its continued existence gives Moscow strong leverage over both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The exception would be a peace arrangement that gives Moscow full control over regional security, such as through deployment of troops in the disputed region. However, at times of closer US—Russia relations, Moscow has been amenable to

regional arrangements that lowered the chances of renewed war and to addressing some of the issues of contention between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, since Russia's neighboring states serve as a geopolitical battleground between Moscow and Washington, in periods of relative tranquility between the US and Russia, Moscow is more complacent with some of its neighbors' independent foreign policy activity, such as increased ties and cooperation with the EU.

Recent developments

Since 2014, military confrontation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has increased intensively on a variety of levels: frequency, number of casualties and the technological level of the arms involved in the dispute. In April 2016, an all-out multi-location short war took place between forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan (commonly called the "Four-Day War") causing the estimated deaths of more than two hundred soldiers, and resulting in Azerbaijan's first successful re-conquest of territory seized by Armenia.

At his parting press conference upon concluding his service as interim US Co-Chair of the Minsk Group, Ambassador Richard Hoagland (August 23, 2017) delivered a statement expressing US principles for resolving the conflict. In this statement, he reiterated the declarations made by his predecessor, Ambassador James Warlick about the components of any settlement: 1. Interim status to the Nagorno-Karabakh region that guarantees its security 2. Return of the

occupied territories around Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control 3. The opening of a corridor linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. 4. The right of return of the refugees and IDPs, to the former place of residence. 5. The deployment of peace-keepers to the region. The recent statement on its policy toward the conflict, could signify US interest in bolstering the negotiating process.

No foreign state, including Armenia, has recognized the region as a state and the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh do not claim that they are a separate nation from the Armenians of the Republic of Armenia. In parallel, Baku is no longer attempting to shape domestic public opinion in favor of compromise with Armenia.

On the regional front, some developments have taken place that further complicate resolution of the conflict. Trust between the sides is hurt by the fact that Armenia promotes the myth that it is not a side to the conflict and that the Nagorno-Karabakh region is a sovereign state separate from Armenia. This is even though the current President of Armenia and his predecessor were both leaders of the Nagorno-Karabakh region prior to becoming presidents of Armenia, Armenian troops are deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh and the other

occupied regions, and natives of Nagorno-Karabakh are conscripted into the Armenian army. Moreover, no foreign state, including Armenia, has recognized the region as a state and the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh do not claim that they are a separate nation from the Armenians of the Republic of Armenia. In parallel, Baku is no longer attempting to shape domestic public opinion in favor of compromise with Armenia. In the 1990s, Baku signed a ceasefire and Azerbaijan and Armenia agreed to three preliminary peace agreements and in tandem, the government in Azerbaijan worked on the public front to make compromise with Armenia domestically palatable, if the opportunity arose. However, Azerbaijan seems to have abandoned this policy, evidently losing confidence in the prospects for peace. Moreover, Azerbaijan's recent – albeit modest - military gains in the battlefield, may have raised public expectations that it can regain its occupied territories through military means.

Moving forward: European policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

The prospects of resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are quite limited and the chances of renewed fighting is quite strong. However, it is in Europe's (and the US) interest to try and resolve or at least manage the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As pointed out, renewal of the fighting and escalation of the conflict could reflect onto the neighboring Syrian conflict, potentially undermine Europe's efforts to diversify its natural gas sources, and

create an additional security problem in a region directly bordering Europe.

To advance conflict management, it is important to analyze the conflict in the accurate regional geopolitical context. Yerevan and Baku are two among many actors in the conflict. The position and interests of Russia have the greatest effect on the outcome of the developments in the conflict. European and US efforts at conflict resolution have focused on confidence building measures and people-to-people contacts between Armenia and Azerbaijan. These efforts could help aid the acceptance of a peace agreement, if it were achieved. However, the key to successful resolution or management of the conflict, remains identifying Russian interests that could be served by resolution of the conflict. This may involve tradeoffs in other regional arenas. This may be an uncomfortable reality. Additional actors - Turkey, Iran, the US, Europe and Armenian diaspora communities (especially in Russia and the US) play an important role in the developments as well.

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It is important to view this conflict in the perspective of overall relations between the US and Russia and Europe and Russia. In its strategy, Moscow binds many disputes with Europe and the West together and often aspires to achieve goals in one arena though actions in another. In order to correctly identify factors that could lead to conflict resolution in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and generally to manage successfully relations with Russia, it is important to analyze this conflict, like the Russians, in a multi-arena perspective.

Next, while developments in the conflict can directly influence Europe, the EU has no formal representation in the official negotiations format. In the Minsk Group, France is a Co-Chair, despite not having any special interest or presence in the South Caucasus, especially relative to other European states. For instance, France does not plan to be a major consumer of energy resources from the Caspian set to reach Europe in 2020. The EU may consider asking France to replace its place in the Minsk Group with one for the EU and get a seat at the table.

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