

[Home](#) > [Russia/CIS](#) > [Azerbaijan](#)

Armenian-Azerbaijani war for Karabakh might resume

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The Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers meet in Paris on June 18. French, Russian and US mediators from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group are widely expected to exert pressure on both sides to de-escalate tensions. Generally viewed as a 'frozen' conflict, Nagorno-Karabakh has been quite 'hot', with a steady cycle of clashes leaving dead on both sides. Against the backdrop of an already fragile balance of power and an escalating 'arms race', recent Azerbaijani attacks threaten to trigger a new outbreak of hostilities or outright war.

What next

Azerbaijan is following a new military strategy based on a build-up of procurement and preparations for attaining operational readiness by 2014, threatening to go to war by the 20th anniversary of the ceasefire if there is no progress in the Karabakh peace process.

Analysis

Since April, tensions have risen in the northern Tavush border region. Consistent and often escalating violations of the ceasefire led to three Armenian soldiers being killed in the area last month. An Azerbaijani sniper fatally wounded an Armenian villager in late May; a local kindergarten and passing vehicles have also been targeted.

Three-day cycle of clashes

The latest incidents were sparked by an Azerbaijani probe of Armenian defensive positions in the Tavush area on June 4:

- The Azerbaijani probe was initially successful and crossed the border, only being repulsed in a counter-attack that resulted in the death of three Armenian soldiers and the wounding of several others. Unlike earlier clashes along the 'line of contact' separating Armenian forces in Karabakh from Azerbaijani troops, this operation targeted Armenia's fortified defensive positions along the western-most section of the 1,000-kilometre Armenian-Azerbaijani border.
- The situation escalated the next day, as five Azerbaijani soldiers were killed early on June 5, during an apparent counter-offensive by an Armenian unit firing on Azerbaijani positions along the western Gazakh district on the Azerbaijani side of the border.

Impact

- The Karabakh conflict has driven an arms race that will continue to be a major impediment to regional development.
- The risk of 'war by accident' stems from threat misperception and strategic miscalculation, exacerbated by the steady upsurge in tension.
- War would threaten the region's role as an energy producer/exporter, with the possible intervention of regional powers Russia and Turkey.

The latest cycle of clashes is unusual for the tenacity and professionalism of the attacks on Armenian positions

- A third operation was launched in response, as the Azerbaijanis shifted to a surgical strike against Armenian positions along the line of contact south-east of Karabakh. That attack, early on June 6, resulted in one Armenian soldier killed and three others wounded before the incursion was repulsed. Unlike more routine past probes of Armenian defences, this attack sought to take and hold territory.

Following the clashes, Armenian Defence Minister Seyran Ohanyan visited the region, to reassure the local population and inspect border defences. After visiting the wounded in hospital, he hinted at a new Armenian policy of "overwhelming response" to any future Azerbaijani incursion.

Sending message of frustration

Underlying this fresh outbreak of hostilities is Azerbaijan's frustration with lack of progress in the Karabakh peace process, seeing little if any concrete dividends from some 20 years of international diplomatic mediation.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has increased the tempo of his threats to resort to a military resolution. This rhetoric has increased significantly recently, owing in part to Azerbaijan's sense of betrayal by Turkey over the 'normalisation' diplomacy between Ankara and Yerevan (see ARMENIA/TURKEY: Negotiating normalisation may restart - May 30, 2012):

- Bolstered by a steady build-up in weapons and spending, the Azerbaijani General Staff recently warned it would take just ten days to liberate the occupied territories and reach the Iranian-Armenian border.
- For his part, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan has warned that the Azerbaijani military would suffer a "final and devastating" defeat in the event of renewed war.

Despite such rhetoric, the Azerbaijani armed forces remain unready for a new war (see AZERBAIJAN: Conscription will keep army inefficient - March 8, 2012), while the Armenian side poses no offensive threat and simply seeks to secure its earlier gains. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan seems unwilling to climb down from its threats, underestimating the potentially destabilising impact of domestic disappointment with unfulfilled promises and expectations of military victory.

New sense of diplomatic urgency

Azerbaijan's attacks coincided with a regional tour by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and seriously disrupted its agenda. Reflecting recognition of the new scale of risk, there is now a new sense of diplomatic urgency. Yet under the current OSCE mediation format, such urgency will be difficult to sustain, and nearly impossible to succeed:

- The Azerbaijanis seem unlikely to submit, given mediators' lack of leverage. Even before the Paris meeting, Foreign Minister Elmar Mamedyarov warned that maintaining the status quo was unacceptable.
- Russia, as the one Minsk Group co-chair with the diplomatic initiative, has little real incentive to push for a breakthrough. Russian interests are better served by either the status quo or an expansion of tension.

Looking to 2014



The spate of attacks is part of a new Azerbaijani military strategy of seeking to raise its state of combat readiness by 2014. The deadline coincides with the 20th anniversary of the Karabakh ceasefire, ratified in July 1994:

Azerbaijani military sets 2014 as deadline for heightened capability

- Politically and diplomatically, 2014 sets a deadline for the mediators to demonstrate real progress. Otherwise, as Azerbaijani strategists are now planning, there must be a resumption of military operations to regain control over Karabakh and the recovery of Armenian-held areas of Azerbaijan proper.
- Azerbaijan's oil reserves will have started to decline by 2014, although there will still be substantial gas reserves. The respected Baku-based Centre for Economic and Social Development research group forecasts oil revenues peaking in 2011; both the Azerbaijani government and BP expect total oil production to peak by 2012, according to the US Energy Information Administration.

Russia has not been passive. In a display of force to deter Baku and reassure Yerevan, Moscow has stepped up its patrols of Armenian airspace. Russian fighters based in Armenia have conducted about 300 training flights since the beginning of the year, increasing flying hours by more than 20% from last year.

Procurement trends

One of the more visible indicators of Azerbaijan's build-up is its procurement of modern offensive arms. Even more than the pace of defence spending, which remains mired in Azerbaijan's entrenched system of state corruption, the delivery of weapons is a significant trigger to the broader trend of militarisation.

Up-to-date weapons increase Azerbaijani army's capability

For the past several years, Turkey has been supplanted as the major source. Sporadic and small deliveries come from the Czech Republic, Germany and Poland; major suppliers include Pakistan, South Africa, Turkey and (the most active and dynamic partner) Israel.

In April 2012, Israeli defence officials confirmed a deal to sell Azerbaijan some 1.6 billion dollars' worth of arms, including Searcher unmanned aerial vehicles, Gabriel anti-ship missiles, ten Heron TP reconnaissance aircraft and Barak-8 air defence weapons systems fitted with 75 missiles. A second, follow-up deal was announced last month, when Azerbaijan signed another 300 million dollar contract with Israeli Aerospace Industries for several dozen drones.

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