



## **“GREAT POWERS” AND “BIG BROTHERS”: WHY CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH REMAINS ELUSIVE**

**Daniel Little  
(RIEAS Senior Advisor)**

Copyright: [www.rieas.gr](http://www.rieas.gr)

As we approach mid-2012, Azerbaijan’s purchase of \$1.6 billion in military hardware from Israel appears more rooted in speculation about thwarting Iran’s nuclear aspirations than the decision process that went into buying them. Anytime a government spends a quarter of its annual revenue on weapons, there is more at stake than a singular, emerging security issue in an otherwise tough neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> Despite the best efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group and the Madrid Principles, little has changed for Nagorno-Karabakh since the 1994 ceasefire.<sup>2</sup> With accusations of ceasefire violations going back and forth between the Armenian and Azeri parties<sup>3</sup> more can be done by the international community given this recent escalation of tensions. By more, I mean the right kind of assistance. To the parties involved Nagorno-Karabakh is many things but what it is not is ‘frozen.’<sup>4</sup> Rather than accept the status quo of stalemate, this requires a re-examination of the traditional barriers to resolution as well as examining the normative structure of Conflict Resolution as it relates to Nagorno-Karabakh.

The first barrier that stands out about the two is their historical treatment by the international community. Despite their respective aspirations, each have been fused together by the outside world in such a way that clouds objectivity much less respect for either. Historically both tried to emerge from the subjugation and fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1920<sup>5</sup> only to lose these gains a few years later. Key to this change was the defeat of the Basmachi Rebels by the same Bolsheviks that declared the establishment of the USSR in 1922. It is through the latter’s forced migration, assimilation and the creation of enclaves in the Former Soviet Union that ethnic Armenian aspirations arose within the very center of Azerbaijan.<sup>6</sup>

As a result perceptions differ depending on the political lens that one chooses to view the region. For both, being wedged between Turkey, Russia and Iran corrals Armenia and Azerbaijan into traditional roles of having to balance the influence of its neighbors rather than seizing the initiative on their own to

resolve the conflict. For Turkey, both groups are viewed as extensions of Pan-Turkic or 'Echoes of Empire' influence. For Russia, involvement remains geopolitically motivated with military superiority underscoring a diplomatic tone that treats both as 'shadow republics.' For Iran, the ethno-religious overlap gives rise to claims of kinsmanship with both but unfortunately not between each other.

Recently things changed. The Azeri purchase of Israeli military hardware is just as much dissatisfaction with 'Great Power' management in mediating disputes as much as any implied threat to the south of its border. For internationalists in general, only the 'appropriate' domestic and international institutions can achieve the desired ends of global welfare and peace.<sup>7</sup> Scholars steeped in Conflict Resolution beg to differ. For them 'Great Power' machinations is not always the resolution of the problem but sometimes part of the problem itself. It is what gave rise to the First World War in the first place and the incomplete promises of Versailles thereafter. They would argue that in the end it is up to both parties to speak independently of 'Great Powers' or even 'Bigger Brothers.'

The second barrier is the parties themselves clinging to such 'Big Brother' agendas, especially when talks break down between national leadership. With the Azeri purchase of Israeli weaponry, we can discard Iranian brokerage outright. Turkey has to mitigate the swirling agendas revolving between Syria, Iran, the EU and NATO. This leaves Russia. If looked at through the 'Russian lens' then the notion of Armenians 'sitting it out' or taking a 'Squatters' Rights' military approach assumes that Moscow will support Yerevan based on the Gumri Military Base agreement. This extension of the basing lease extends to 2044 and includes the receipt of modernized military hardware.<sup>8</sup> The reason this is a faulty assumption is because the projection of Russian military power equally prizes the radar station at Garbala, Azerbaijan.<sup>9</sup> In order to be viable, Russia needs both. This is the reason the regional process is ill-suited as compared to bi-lateral and localized frameworks. If such self-interest promotion by 'Big Brothers' takes precedence over peace, resolution will always take the back seat that it does now. If the focus is achieving peace, Conflict Resolution is just as much dialogue at the local levels<sup>10</sup> as it is national, regional or even international. As it stands now, none of the 'Big Brothers' possess the fortitude to weigh in on territorial integrity issues either way.

Taking this argument a step further, if we graduate Russia up to their colleagues at the 'Great Powers' level we are still no better off. At an international scale we have the Armenian lobbies of Britain, France and the U.S.<sup>11</sup> squaring off against the Energy lobbies friendly to Azerbaijan.<sup>12</sup> Turkey is caught in the middle between disputing a historical narrative over Armenia and its critical role in receiving Azeri natural gas supplies in the Nabucco Pipeline.<sup>13</sup> Likewise the Russian oligarchs abroad will receive the brunt of scrutiny for a speculative market already reeling from events unfolding in Iran. Coupled with disruption of supply from Azerbaijan and possibly elsewhere, any scapegoat to such an economic catastrophe will do.

The third barrier is the lack of bi-lateral and localized empowerment. What will ultimately solve Nagorno-Karabakh is both parties developing problem-solving strategies, a sense of reciprocity and the ability to save face when working out an agreement on behalf of their citizens.<sup>14</sup> At a minimum, the normative shift in Human Rights Law from the 1990s suggests that a re-affirmation of property rights be not only reciprocal but also codified into each of their respective Parliamentary statutes.<sup>15</sup> Despite where people in Nagorno-Karabakh pay taxes or whose plates adorn their automobiles, reconciliation is the final arbiter of an enduring peace – not the political boundary. In order to acknowledge and exorcise the past, both parties must develop mechanisms such as trials, truth commissions, reparations, public rituals or a combination of the four.<sup>16</sup>

As it stands right now, we have Azerbaijan as the first of the two to break out of the political straightjacket that was tailored for it for most of the last century. While any restraint by the Azeris is to be commended at every turn, the rapprochement of talks by the international community needs to resurrect if we want to keep Nagorno-Karabakh from heating up again. What would go a long way towards success this time is for the 'Great Powers' and 'Big Brothers' to place the burden of resolution on the two countries instead of the traditional distortion of interests. Whether your focus is commerce, human rights, ethnicity or peace, none are mutually exclusive if either of the two are forced towards unpredictability in order to stand up for themselves.

#### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Frenkel, S. (2012). "Israel's new ties to Azerbaijan worry neighboring Iran." The Miami Herald [online], 26 Apr 2012, [Accessed 1 May 2012] <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/04/26/2768826/israels-new-ties-to-azerbaijan.html>

<sup>2</sup> Svensson, I. (2009). "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Lessons from the mediation efforts." IFP Mediation Cluster: Crisis Management Initiative [online], March 2009, [Accessed 4 May 2012] [http://www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/pdf/Nagorno\\_Karabakh\\_conflict\\_mediation\\_efforts.pdf](http://www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/pdf/Nagorno_Karabakh_conflict_mediation_efforts.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Caucasian Knot. (2012). "Parties to Nagorno-Karabakh conflict accuse each other of massive violations of ceasefire." Caucasian Knot [online], 19 Mar 2012, [Accessed 4 May 2012] <http://abhazia.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/20458/>

<sup>4</sup> Barry, E. (2011). "Frozen Conflict Between Azerbaijan and Armenia Begins to Boil." New York Time: Asia Pacific [online], 31 May 2011, [Accessed 4 May 2012] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/01/world/asia/01azerbaijan.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>5</sup> MacMillan, M. (2001). "Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World." Random House: New York.

<sup>6</sup> Hiro, D. (2011). "Inside Central Asia." Overlook: New York.

<sup>7</sup> Hobson, J. (2000). "The State and International Relations." Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

<sup>8</sup> Rasizade, A. (2011). "Azerbaijan's Prospects in Nagorno-Karabakh." Mediterranean Quarterly 2011, Vol. 22: No. 3, 72-94.

<sup>9</sup> Oskonbaeva, Z. (2012). "Do Not Pay Your Rent With a Blank Check: An Overview of External Russian Military Bases." Research Institute for European and American Studies [online], 24 Mar 2012 [Accessed 5 May 2012] <http://www.rieas.gr/images/russiabases.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Mehdiyev, E. (2012). "Dialogue between Azerbaijanis and Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh could become tool of settlement." Trend [online], 4 May 2012, [Accessed 4 May 2012] <http://en.trend.az/news/karabakh/2022324.html>

<sup>11</sup> Laciner, S. (2001). "Armenian Diaspora in Britain." *Armenian Studies Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 3, September-October-November 2001, pp. 233-257. [Available online], [Accessed 5 May 2012] <http://www.turkishweekly.net/article/5/armenian-diaspora-in-britain.html>

Viscusi, G. and Peker, E. (2011). "French Assembly Approves Armenian Genocide Law as Turkey Lobbies." *Bloomberg Businessweek* [online], 22 Dec 2011, [Accessed 5 May 2012] <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2011-12-23/french-assembly-approves-armenian-genocide-law-as-turkey-lobbies.html>

King, D. and Pomper, M. (2004). "The U.S. Congress and the Contingent Influence of Diaspora Lobbies: Lessons from U.S. Policy Toward Armenia and Azerbaijan." *Journal of Armenian Studies*, Vol. 8, No 1, Summer 2004 [online], [Accessed 5 May 2012] <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/dking/Section907v2.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Rasizade.

<sup>13</sup> Gulf Oil & Gas E-Marketplace.com (n.d.) "Nabucco Pipeline: Project Focus." [online], [Accessed 5 May 2012] <http://www.gulfoilandgas.com/webpro1/projects/3dreport.asp?id=102885>

<sup>14</sup> Kriesberg, L. (2007). "Constructive Conflicts: Third Edition – From Escalation to Resolution." Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: Lanham, MD.

<sup>15</sup> Caplan, R. (2005). "International Governance of War-Torn Countries: Rule and Reconstruction." Oxford University Press, Oxford.

<sup>16</sup> Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T., and Miall, H. (2005). "Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflicts: Second Edition." Polity Press: Cambridge, UK.