

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: Ceasing fire is not a ceasefire

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On 2 April, fighting erupted at the 'line of contact' between Azerbaijan and the self-declared Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which has been the subject of a prolonged stand-off between Azerbaijan and Armenia. [Richard Giragosian](#) writes that despite an agreement on 5 April to halt the conflict, sporadic clashes have continued. He argues that it will now be extremely difficult to deescalate the situation and that the latest violence could further strengthen Russia's influence in the region.



In the most serious escalation of fighting in over two decades, the formerly “frozen” conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh has quickly erupted into open warfare, presenting Russia with a fresh opportunity to further consolidate its power and influence in the region.

Early on 2 April, Azerbaijani forces launched a coordinated offensive targeting three different fronts along the Nagorno-Karabakh “line of contact” separating Karabakh from Azerbaijan. As the fighting rapidly escalated, the fragile but largely observed ceasefire that was in effect for some twenty-one years was the first notable casualty. By the time the fighting subsided on the fourth day of combat, well over 100 were dead or wounded on all sides.

But even with a subsequent 5 April agreement reached in Moscow to halt the fighting, a series of sporadic exchanges of fire reaffirmed the volatility and the vulnerability of the situation. In fact, even with the cease in firing, there is still no clear return to the prior ceasefire.

Daunting diplomacy

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which can trace its roots as far back as before the collapse of the Soviet Union, has long stood out as one of the world’s more daunting diplomatic challenges. And the unresolved nature of the conflict has been regularly reaffirmed with a steady escalation in tension and exchanges of fire that have left several dead and wounded nearly each month in recent years.

On one side stands the ethnic Armenians of Karabakh, who seceded from Azerbaijan in the waning days of Gorbachev’s Soviet Union and subsequently declared themselves “independent”, strongly pursuing the principle of self-determination. But Azerbaijan, which lost a war in the early 1990s over Karabakh, rejects the principle of self-determination, accepting only the opposing principle of territorial integrity.

Against this backdrop, the future status of the self-declared independent Karabakh enclave has become the subject of a unique brand of tri-partite diplomacy, mediated and co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States. This rather odd and surprising diplomatic triad is known as the “Minsk Group”, which is an entity within the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), through which the mediators have long struggled to “square the circle” of diplomatic divergence. There has been little to show for their efforts beyond a series of peace talks that have been weakened by a pronounced lack of political will. This virtual deadlock in diplomacy has resulted in an outcome that is well short of a peace process and further lacking in terms of promise or progress.

Azerbaijan’s tipping point

As the loser in this conflict, Azerbaijan has become increasingly frustrated with the lack of any tangible results to date from the peace talks. This has fostered a new, more dangerous situation where Azerbaijani patience in diplomacy has reached a “[tipping point](#)”, with a preference for force of arms coming to prominence instead.

And no matter what the immediate cause or trigger, that tipping point was most evidently breached in Azerbaijan's launch of combat operations on 2 April. While the eruption of clashes over Nagorno-Karabakh was neither new nor surprising, given a broader trend of increasingly deadly fighting over the last several years, this particular round of fighting was different, for two main reasons.

First, the recent fighting was much more than a border skirmish. Rather, it was an intensive offensive campaign that opened as a well-coordinated assault. It exceeded all prior attacks in both scale and scope, marked by the most serious combat since a ceasefire was first reached in May 1994.



Map of the contested territories in Nagorno-Karabakh. Source: [Regional Studies Centre](#).

A second key difference was that, for the first time, the military campaign was based on a new Azerbaijani strategy aimed at seizing and securing control of territory. This new strategy was also bolstered by a serious improvement in Azerbaijan's military capabilities, with demonstrable gains in operational coordination and in the application of "combined arms" involving the use of heavier weapons, such as artillery, armored units, and combat helicopters.

But after only a few hours on the opening day of this campaign, the efficacy of the Azerbaijani combined arms operation quickly declined in the face of a counter-attack by Karabakh defenders that better utilised the topography and terrain. Militarily, Azerbaijan's reliance on a rapid "blitzkrieg" offensive operation was further impeded by the combination of well-fortified defensive positions and a daunting mountainous environment. By the third day of the fighting, the situation had stabilised, with both sides forced back to their original positions and nearly all lost territory regained. Overall, the final outcome of the four-day military campaign reflected the limits and the nature of warfare in Nagorno-Karabakh, mirroring the impediments of World War I-period trench warfare.

Reinforcing Russia's influence

Despite the inconclusive nature of the conflict, the affair now holds wider implications. By brokering a suspension in fighting, Moscow was able to demonstrate that only a [unilateral Russian-led diplomatic initiative](#) could successfully stabilise the situation on the ground. Although nominally implemented through the OSCE Minsk Group format, the Russian effort at "shuttle diplomacy" reaffirmed and reinforced the local perception that Russian involvement is essential, largely to the diplomatic detriment of the two other Minsk Group co-chairs, France and the United States.

And given the inherent fragility of the existing ceasefire agreement, the Karabakh conflict may become even more of

an instrument for Moscow to enhance its power and influence, perhaps with a renewed bid to [deploy Russian peacekeepers](#), which Russia has been tempted to consider in the past. Such Russian gains from this conflict are not new, and are reflected by Russia's position as the primary arms provider to both Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Moreover, as the West holds little leverage over Azerbaijan and in light of the lack of political will to return to the negotiations, Baku also views Moscow as the key to any change in what it [sees](#) as an unacceptable "status quo". And there is some merit in this view, as Russia is the only actor to benefit from the escalation and is well-positioned to exploit the conflict to further deepen its power and influence in the region.

No deterrence

The fighting also highlighted the absence of any real deterrence to prevent or at least pressure any side from launching military operations. Although there are no real strategic advantages for the Armenian and Karabakh sides from offensive operations, the lack of a deterrent to discourage Azerbaijan is exacerbated by the limited leverage the West has over the country, as well as Russia's position as Azerbaijan's main source of modern weapon systems.

Beyond Russia, however, the outbreak of warfare has also altered the calculus of Azerbaijani-Turkish relations. More specifically, over the past few months, Azerbaijan has weathered a precarious position of being forced to navigate the larger crisis between Turkey and Russia. Yet with the onset of combat operations, Baku was able to regain the initiative, retaking control of Ankara's regional agenda and garnering blanket Turkish support.

At its core, it seems unlikely that anyone except the parties to the conflict themselves can climb down and step back from the brink. A return to normal affairs and a real de-escalation seems unlikely, especially as the conflict is now defined by a "new normal", ensuring that it is virtually impossible to return to the earlier status quo. And such a bleak outlook is due in large part to the fact that despite its "mediation", [Moscow has made it clear](#) that it intends to continue to provide arms to combatants on all sides, adding further fuel to a now dangerously combustible situation.

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