THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE OSCE MINSK GROUP AND RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE NAGORNY KARABAKH SETTLEMENT IN LIGHT OF THE 2016 ESCALATION

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Abstract. The Soviet Union fall led to the dissolution of power and outbreak of the violent conflicts across the declining superpower’s periphery. Among these conflicts, the Nagorno-Karabakh war was the most long, large-scale and intensive. This war contributed to the destabilization of the situation in the entire Caucasus region and beyond. To break the conflict, Moscow as a capital of declining, yet influential power in the region had to spend a lot of resources. The armed phase of the conflict was stopped only thanks to the support of other post-Soviet states and the international community, the main representative of which was the OSCE Minsk Group, including three major powers – Russia, the United States and France. With these common efforts, the conflict was frozen, but not resolved. During long-lasting history of Karabakh settlement process major powers have demonstrated quite constructive work yet they didn’t manage to achieve sustainable movement to peace. Recent developments have demonstrated increasingly growing clashes on the contact line that eventually turned into a real war in April 2016. This most serious outbreak of violence was stopped mostly thanks to mediation efforts of Russia that has taken a leading role in negotiation process while other Minsk group co-chairs were not as active. This challenges the effectiveness and sustainability of Minsk process as the main international framework for Karabakh conflict resolution. Yet on the declarative level all key negotiation participants including Russia tend to demonstrate its adherence to the importance of the OSCE Minsk group, in reality it often is not able
to be a sufficient security provider especially in serious escalations. Thus, the situation around Karabakh is swinging between war and peace.

**Initial phase of the Karabakh conflict settlement: need for international support and Minsk group institutionalization**

The modern period of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has started almost 30 years ago when the violent clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan this time yet Soviet republics. Karabakh was the first conflict that started over the Soviet periphery in 1988 and decline of Moscow’s power was one of the main reasons of national disorders here as well as in other in many Soviet republics. Some of the conflicts led to real wars among them the Karabakh case was the most brutal. It led to the largest number of casualties (at least 25,000 people) and refugees (according to various estimates, up to 1 million people) and 20% of Azerbaijan territories was occupied by Karabakh/Armenian troops. The positions of the parties to the conflict proved to be the most irreconcilable in comparison with other similar settlement processes. While the internal dynamic was always complex and intractable in Karabakh conflict, the external level was important to create the positive conditions for its settlement.

At the beginning of the modern phase of the conflict Moscow as the most influential security player regarding the Karabakh conflict has made many efforts to stop the conflict. However, at the background of the power decline its influence towards (former) Soviet republics has been decreasing alone it was really difficult to make conflicting parties stop the violence. Moscow needed the help of international community and it was found in the face of developing CSCE as a new promising and rapidly reforming security institution with the instruments of conflict resolution. Since the spring of 1992 the group of interested states including Russia and other big powers, such as France, Italy and the US launched a permanent negotiation format that was later named as the Minsk group thus making negotiation process internationalized. Together with the CSCE efforts Russia was managed to reach the ceasefire by 1994. At that moment the conflict was frozen, but not resolved. This time both sides of the conflict became too tired to continue the war and external powers agreed to be a stable guarantors of peace process primarily within three major powers – Russia, the United States and France. They created the institute of the Minsk group co-chairs that has remained a main international mediator looking for Karabakh conflict resolution. Nevertheless the negotiations has been protracted for many years against the background of unstable internal dynamic and Karabakh has remained the main protracted conflicts until nowadays.
The conflict remained in a relatively stable condition until the end of 2000s. This period can be mainly characterized as long-lasting negotiation process during which the conflicting sides are clarified and specified details of the resolution and external powers in the framework of the OSCE Minsk group maintained the negotiation process. Negotiations developed in many ways since there were good relations and balance between Minsk group co-chairs. Although at the initial steps of the Minsk process the rivalry of mediators took place later it has become milder and Russia, the US and France as mediators in 2000s demonstrated high level of constructive work and creativity as they constantly had new suggestions for the leaders of conflicting states.

**Geopolitical shifts in the Caucasus region and revisionism in the Karabakh settlement since 2008**

By the end of 2000s, the geopolitical situation in the region became more complex at least for two reasons. First, the 2008 Georgian crisis occurred that created the new security balance in the region after the “Five days war” and further recognition of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states by Russia. Second with the growing oil and gas prices Azerbaijan’s economy demonstrated a quick rise that transformed into growing military power while Armenia’s economic stagnation led Baku’s military budget has exceeded whole GDP of the latter in 2010. Azerbaijan wanted to change the situation it was dissatisfied for many years and becoming increasingly revisionist power while Armenia tried to maintain its status quo that was beneficial for it holding the captured territory.

Since the beginning of 2010s, there was no real progress in negotiations and it has become increasingly more difficult for mediators to deter the conflict parties from escalation. The number of ceasefire violation reports has increased year by year, especially since 2014. One of the most serious aggravation was the events of August 2014, when the armed forces of Azerbaijan launched an offensive almost along the entire contact line with the use of large-caliber artillery and tanks, and during the shootings a combat helicopter of the Armenian armed forces was shot down.

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3 [Рыбин А. «Война остановлена, но не прекратилась» // Газета.ру. [Rybin A. “The war was ceased, but it was not stopped” // Gazeta.ru] 28.03.2016](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/03/27_a_8146349.shtml?updated)
Nevertheless, despite the growing number of armed excesses along the border, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group, continued to gather at the negotiating table. This time it was remarkable that even on the background of serious deterioration of the Russia-West relations because of Ukrainian crisis, the Minsk process co-chairs continued to work in a constructive way. One might say this time it has remained perhaps the only example of positive communication between Russia and the West on conflict resolution issue.

As a rule, the degree of tension in the conflict zone was decreasing after such meetings, but in December 2015 the situation changed. The Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations actually took place “under the weapon cannonade” of the conflict parties, when immediately after the summit in Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation became aggravated again⁴. Symbolically one can suggest it means it was important for conflicting sides to keep the negotiation under any circumstances in order to demonstrate its adherence to international commitments in the face of the OSCE Minsk group big powers. At the same time on the ground the OSCE was practically powerless to stop the growing number of the ceasefire violations as it was not able to impose a respective ceasefire-support mechanism⁵.

Further, in early 2016, the situation continued to deteriorate until in April 2016 it developed into large-scale military clashes involving the use of heavy weapons, including artillery, aircraft and tanks, not only along the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh itself, but throughout the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. While Baku and Yerevan repeatedly accused each other of unleashing a war, for four days, from 60 to 200 people were killed during the clashes⁶. Despite daily statements on a unilateral ceasefire, in practice, the parties did not intend to stop the hostilities, as there was absolutely no confidence in the opposite side of the conflict. In such a tense situation it was quite obvious that without external mediation assistance, it would not be possible to stop the escalation of the conflict.

Russia’s mediation activity in search of an “honest broker” role in the Karabakh settlement at the background of 2016 escalation

On the first day of April escalation Minsk group co-chairs made a common declaration condemning the use of force in the conflict zone, calling on the parties to stop shooting and to take all necessary measures to stabilize the situation in the region. Yet from the beginning of the crisis, of the main participants in the settlement process, Russia played the most important role in resolving the April crisis. The other co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, France and the United States, took a less active stance. Since the very beginning of the crisis, Russia has maintained constant contacts through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense with the conflict parties. It was mostly thanks to the mediation efforts of Russia (the agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan was reached in Moscow) that on the fourth day of the confrontation – by April 5 – a new truce agreement was reached, which stopped this crisis named the “Four-day war”. At the same time, in its unilateral efforts to resolve the conflict, Moscow stressed that it has not in any way attempted to undermine the role of the OSCE Minsk Group and continued to support the joint work of the other co-chairs (US and France). Thus, at this critical moment, Russia stressed the importance of maintaining unity with the West in the issues of the Karabakh settlement, even when the settlement process was more efficiently held in a unilateral format, and in other issues in the security sphere there were serious contradictions in Russia-West relations.

Immediately after the active phase of the conflict was stopped, Russia intensified the mediation efforts to consolidate its diplomatic success. Already on April 7-8, 2016, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev made an emergency visit to Yerevan and Baku to discuss the issue of the Karabakh settlement. In parallel, the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan took place in a

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7 Press Release by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group // OSCE. 2 April 2016. (http://www.osce.org/mg/231216)
9 Договоренность о прекращении огня в Карабахе была достигнута в Москве // РБК. [The agreement on a cease-fire in Karabakh was reached in Moscow // RBC] 5.04.2016. (https://www.rbc.ru/politics/06/04/2016/5704cb8f9a79470eb2af58fb)
10 В Армении рассказали о роли России в достижении перемирия в Карабахе // Лента.ru. [In Armenia it was told about the role of Russia in achieving a truce in Karabakh // Lenta.ru] 5.04.2016. (https://lenta.ru/news/2016/04/05/agreement/)
trilateral format, the main theme of which was the settlement of the situation in Karabakh. Thus, Moscow tried to show that it is equally important for the interests of both sides of the conflict and it is ready to make significant efforts to prevent the crisis from turning into a “hot phase” that could destabilize the entire Caucasian region. In the Karabakh crisis, Russia sought to avoid the use of military force, insisting on a diplomatic process within the existing procedures and the Minsk Group, in which it plays an active mediating role.  

Already in May 2016 in Vienna, with the mediation efforts of Russia, the first meeting of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan after the April escalation was held with in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. It reaffirmed the commitment of all parties to the negotiations to observe the ceasefire in the form agreed in 1994-95, and a new agreement was reached to establish a mechanism for investigating armed incidents in the conflict zone and to organize information exchange on missing persons. To consolidate the success of the meeting in Vienna, a month later Russia managed to organize a trilateral meeting in St. Petersburg with the participation of Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian leaders, but without France and the US participation as the Minsk group co-chairs. Following the meeting, a joint statement was adopted, where it was noted that the heads of conflicting states managed to reach a mutual understanding based on which it is possible to achieve progress in the Karabakh settlement. Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Lavrov stated that the parties approached “closer to the prospect of success than it has been until now.” This was confirmed in practice: until the end of 2016, no serious incidents were recorded around Nagorno-Karabakh. All this makes it possible to conclude that...
Russia has succeeded in successfully fulfilling its role of an “honest broker” and settling the consequences of a dangerous April exacerbation\(^\text{17}\).

**Russia and the OSCE: changing balance in Minsk process and the “conflicting status-quo” in Karabakh settlement**

Assessing the role of Russia we see that the leading Moscow’s role in mediating Karabakh “Four days war” were threefold. First, it sought to keep the balance between conflicting parties, as both of them are important partners for Russia. Even being much closer in political-military term to Armenia (including Russian military base there and common CSTO membership), it was important to maintain good relations with Azerbaijan even during the crisis and demonstrating as possible neutral position to the both conflicting parties. Russia has sold sophisticated weapons for both conflicting parties yet Baku has bought several times more Russian weaponry than Erevan thus getting a serious advantage in military terms\(^\text{18}\). Second, Russia was also concerned about its own internal security in the North Caucasus that could be easily destabilize if the Karabakh crisis got out of control. Last, but not least, it was also important for Russia to demonstrate its adherence to the Minsk group efforts and maintaining relations with the US and France as great powers supporting the peace process. One might also suggest that Russia needs the international authority of Minsk group stressing inadmissibility of the use of force as one of the main Minsk process principles to avoid further military escalation and keeping balance of power and security in the Caucasus in general (that connected with the second point mentioned). Russia has been trying to balance not only between Armenia and Azerbaijan as conflicting parties, but also the US and France as big powers, influencing the regional security. At the same time as recent developments have showed while the latter OSCE Minsk group co-chairs have been reluctant to play active role in the settlement, this “stalling multilateralism” could lead in fact to the more unilateral Russian-dominated conflict resolution process, though all co-chairs in words declare unity and need to common action\(^\text{19}\).


\(^{19}\) Broers L. The Nagorny Karabakh Conflict: Defaulting to War. Pp. 30-32.
Thus, the absence of active cohesive settlement policy on the Minsk group level contributes the situation instability. Already in the course of 2017 armed clashes intensified again (one might mention at least five serious incidents among them), and they were combined with periodic returns to peace negotiations\(^{20}\) (e.g. the leaders of conflicting sides meeting in October 2017 in Vienna, which, nevertheless according to the co-chairs of the Minsk Group, were held in a “constructive atmosphere”\(^{21}\)). Yet on the ground at the contact line in Karabakh the situation has permanently remained tense until nowadays. Overall, the situation has has increasingly turned to the kind of “conflicting status-quo” in recent years reminding the “swing” between peace and war, which is both for Russia separately and Minsk group co-chairs together has become quite difficult to settle.
