

The Key West Conference on Nagorno-Karabakh: Preparing Peace In the South Caucasus?

By Dr. Robert M. Cutler

In early April the United States is hosting a nearly week-long meeting in Key West, Florida bringing together President Robert Kocharian of Armenia and President Heydar Aliiev of Azerbaijan. This meeting is part of a continuing attempt to settle the conflict between the two countries over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. This region is an enclave in Azerbaijan settled by Armenians since the early nineteenth century, and from which the resident Azerbaijanis were chased during a war in the late 1980s.

In late 1999 a peace settlement seemed imminent. But the progress toward peace unraveled after an Armenian journalist, with guns and accomplices, entered the building housing the Armenian legislature and assassinated most of the government's top leadership. This tragedy effectively decapitated the political elite of Armenia and made any further movement on a Karabakh settlement with Azerbaijan impossible for months, as political forces within Armenia jockeyed for position in the resulting political vacuum.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which over the past decade has successfully mediated settlements in other ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet area, has for some time been engaged in the attempt to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict—generally agreed to be the thorniest of all the ethnic conflicts in the transitional states of the former Soviet area. To settle the Karabakh dispute, the OSCE works through the so-called “Minsk Group,” a diplomatic mechanism cochaired by the U.S., France, and Russia expressly established to address the Karabakh problem.

The OSCE has over the past few years come up with three different proposals, which were kept

confidential until several weeks ago when, for reasons still uncertain, they were published in the Armenian and then Azerbaijani press. These versions are generally taken to be accurate representations of the various proposals, with some minor inaccuracies resulting primarily from translation problems or, occasionally, variations due to errors of omission for presumably political purposes. Some anticipate that the OSCE will now come up with yet a fourth series of proposals.

Presidents Kocharian and Aliiev have been meeting regularly within the “Minsk Group” framework, but the content of their talks has been kept secret. The last meeting took place in early March in Paris and was mediated personally by French President Jacques Chirac. The Key West meeting will be the first since then and the first since the publication of the previously confidential OSCE proposals in the South Caucasus press.

Key West as a venue was suggested by the U.S. cochair of the Minsk Group, Carey Cavanaugh, a Florida native who has years of experience in post-Soviet affairs and conflict mediation. The ambience of the meeting will be humble, workmanlike, and quiet but intense. Reports indicate that the conference will be opened by Secretary of State Colin Powell, and that more than one hundred advisers and experts from all sides will attend.

Karabakh is not the only conflict situation in the South Caucasus, yet it is the one without the solution of which nothing will change regarding the others. Indeed, Karabakh is the linchpin to peace and development in the South Caucasus. The secessionist regions in Georgia, Abkhazia, and Tsinkhvali (South Ossetia), will look at the degree of autonomy

achieved by Karabakh as the outer limit of their own aspirations for self-rule.

In the second half of February, a high-level delegation from the European Union for the first time visited the region, marking a turning point in EU policy by finally discarding the discredited piecemeal approach to peacemaking that has thus far only resulted in stagnation. Although nothing substantial or specific resulted from the visit, it marks a commitment by the EU to play a more active role in the region, and the organization is undertaking measures preparatory to implementing a reinforced policy later this year.

Separately from the EU diplomacy, a conference was held in mid-February in Istanbul to discuss the proposal for a Caucasus Stability Pact (CSP) made last year by the Centre for European Policy Studies, an independent but influential Brussels think tank. This

ambitious proposal (some have said too ambitious) advocated nothing less than the eventual creation of a South Caucasus Community among the three states in the region, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—somewhat (perhaps too much) based on the model of the EU itself.

In the past, the U.S. has resisted the idea of a CSP for region out of concern that, if the conflict were not settled first, then the creation of a structure apart from the Minsk Group could encourage “forum-shopping” where parties to the conflict not satisfied with what is on offer through the OSCE could seek to go somewhere else to get a better deal, thus vitiating all attempts at settlement. However, at the mid-February Istanbul conference, it became clear that the CSP is not intended to be a megaregional, multiconflict negotiation process.

As a result, a convergence between the U.S. and European approaches seemed to be in the offing. The Europeans began to talk about a “process” instead of a “pact” (which was a confusing misnomer anyway, since the CSP proposal has nothing in common with the Balkan Stability Pact), and the U.S. seemed to welcome the possibility of a contribution to peacemaking by actors outside the Minsk Group. The OSCE mediation of the Karabakh conflict and a broader CSP-based regional process now appear as complementary stages of conflict resolution and peace-building, and both are worthy of support, inasmuch as the latter provides incentives for the former.

Robert M. Cutler

<rmc@alum.mit.edu>

<http://www.robertcutler.org>,

Research Fellow, Institute of European and Russian Studies, Carleton University, Canada.

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