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Nagorno Karabakh as a Diversionary Conflict

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and the diversionary incentives of ruling and opposition leaders. It focuses on the case of Armenia. The Nagorno Karabakh conflict has remained unresolved since 1994 and has been shaped by governments of Armenia, depending on the internal situation in the country. The conflict is situated in the two theoretical frameworks of the security dilemma and diversionary conflicts. The paper covers the political situation of Armenia since the last presidential elections in 2008, draws upon several episodes of political instability in the country and shows the link between the political instability and the escalation of belligerent rhetoric regarding the conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The heavy fighting along the Line of Contact in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict zone in early April 2016 once again reminded of the unresolved conflict in the South Caucasus. In my paper I draw upon the theoretical explanations of the causes of wars. Mainly, I elaborate on the

security dilemma and describe why it cannot sufficiently explain the protraction of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. I introduce the theory of diversionary conflicts, together with the role of elites in instigation of conflicts. The underlying diversionary incentives are examined in the context of Armenia, covering the period from 2008 till nowadays. In my paper I present three protests that have happened in Armenia and link them with the escalation of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

My paper starts with a brief historical background of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Then it draws upon realist assumptions, along with the security dilemma and theory of diversionary conflict. After providing the theoretical framework, I analyze the internal and foreign policies implemented by the current government of Armenia. My paper demonstrates how the government intensifies the rhetoric over the Nagorno Karabakh conflict so as to distract the public attention from internal troubles to an external enemy.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NAGORNO KARABKH CONFLICT

Nagorno Karabakh turned into a disputed territory in 1918 when the three South Caucasus states, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, declared their independence. At that time there were various military actions taking place in the region and over Nagorno Karabakh as well.

In 1920 the Red Army entered South Caucasus and proclaimed Nagorno Karabakh a disputed territory. Subsequently, in 1921 the Bolsheviks handed it to the Soviet Azerbaijan. The conflict erupted again in 1988, prior to the fall of the Soviet Union. Nagorno Karabakh declared itself as an independent state, based on the right of self-determination. This fact was not welcomed by the Azerbaijani side. The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan lasted from 1992 till 1994 when the Bishkek Ceasefire agreement was signed by Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan¹.

More than 20 years after, the conflict still remains unresolved. Despite the main OSCE Minsk Group negotiation format which has tabled the Madrid Principles together with six precise steps for solving the conflict, the Nagorno Karabakh dispute remains protracted. The authorities of Armenia and Azerbaijan have not yet achieved a final agreement. The fighting in early April

¹ Сурен Золян, *Нагорный Карабах: проблема и конфликт* (Ереван, 2001).
Translation: Suren Zolyan, *Nagorno Karabakh: Problem and Conflict* (Yerevan, 2001).

2016 is yet another proof that the elites of the two states are reluctant in finding a swift solution to the conflict. The fragile truce that was announced on April 5 was not in a written form, did not solve any problem as such, nor stopped the sporadic escalations. The Nagorno Karabakh conflict has thus transformed into a tool used by governments for solving their internal issues.

CONFLICTS THROUGH THE LENSES OF THE SECURITY DILEMMA AND DIVERSIONARY PARADIGM

Conflicts have been examined in the light of strategic and economic gains, geopolitical games and miscalculations. Various theoretical frameworks have explained state behavior and the logic of ethnic groups. One of the concepts of conflicts and wars is the security dilemma. Jervis explains the security dilemma as various actions undertaken by a state to increase its security, which decrease the security of other states².

The security dilemma is a realist assumption that was classified by Levy on the systemic level as a part of international order. States act in an anarchical world to advance their security. States may join military alliances, accumulate military power for the sake of self survival and security. However, even if such actions are only motivated for self-defense, it can still be perceived as a threat by the other side³.

Conflicts may be caused by perceptions and misperceptions or offense-defense divide. The realist assumption of anarchic world, together with the security dilemma, was also applied on the micro-ethnic level. Posen sees the collapse of empires as an anarchical situation for ethnic groups. He argues that once the sovereign disappears, ethnic groups act like states under no higher body. When the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia disappeared in the era of post Cold War, the ethnic groups started addressing the problem of security. On state level, the actors react by strengthening their own positions to remain independent and secure. The same logic applies to the newly independent groups: the ethnic groups, first of all, determine whether the neighbouring group is a threat. Ethnic groups form offensive or defensive military power based on the ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic collectivities that emerge from collapsed empires. Then each ethnic group starts assessing the military capabilities of the other side. In case of holding an

² Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics* 30 (2) (1978), 167-214.

³ Jack Levy, 'The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace', *Annual Review of Political Science* 1(1998), 139-165.

advantage in technology and geography, and offense being superior to defense, a conflict may erupt⁴.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to ethnic group divide and to a new arrangement where Armenians and Azerbaijanis assessed their past. The security dilemma became an obvious issue for the two ethnic groups, each of whom adhered to two contradicting principles of international law, namely the right to self-determination and territorial integrity. Due to the lack of mutual understanding and of culture of compromise, the two ethnic groups built the offense-defense divide that resulted in an outbreak of a war. The war of early 1990s between Armenians and Azerbaijanis was a security dilemma.

Afterwards, over time Nagorno Karabakh transformed into a diversionary conflict. In addition to the security dilemma, diversionary paradigm offers an additional perspective on the causes of the conflict. It explains how elites shape the conflict by distracting the public attention from internal hardship to an external enemy. Diversionary paradigm is compatible with the security-dilemma-centred explanations to the extent that State A, knowing that State B has diversionary dynamics operating in it, will feel even more threatened because of this (and potentially vice versa). Those feelings of threat will increase whenever there is a domestic crisis in State B.

Levy classified diversionary conflicts on societal level⁵. According to diversionary conflict theory, some conflicts are not caused by “external” strategic or economic divergences of interests between states but rather by internal calculations on the part of ruling elites keen to solidify their grip on power. The causal mechanisms by which conflict can translate into regime support are disputed. Scholars often hypothesize that conflicts can distract people from domestic ills, amplify nationalist sentiments through a “rally around the flag” effect, transfer blame for internal difficulties by scapegoating external actors, and create an impression of the government's competence in foreign policy⁶.

Armenia is a post-Soviet state that has not fully completed its transition to democracy. It faces various internal problems such as the lack of political will to implement efficient reforms,

⁴ Barry Posen, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', *Survival* 35 (1) (1993), 27-47.

⁵ Jack Levy, 'The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace', *Annual Review of Political Science* 1(1998), 139-165.

⁶ David Sobek, 'Rallying Around the Podesta: Testing Diversionary Theory across Time', *Journal of Peace Research* 44 (1) (2007), 29-45.

Amy Oakes, *Diversionary War: Domestic Unrest and International Conflict* (Stanford, 2012).

Jaroslav Tir and Michael Jasinski, 'Domestic-level Diversionary Theory of War: Targeting Ethnic Minorities', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52 (5) (2008), 641-64.

corruption, weak rule of law, and rigged elections. Weak political legitimacy, interaction among political parties and political instability stand behind the belligerent rhetoric of the elites. The Nagorno Karabakh conflict that was re-ignited with the collapse of the Soviet Union transformed into a diversionary conflict that benefits the ruling and opposition elites.

POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND INCREASED RHETORIC OVER NAGORNO KARABAKH

The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia identifies Azerbaijan as the main threat to the national security of Armenia⁷.

Since its independence in 1991, Armenia has announced its transition from socialism to democracy and market economy. However, it still has unresolved internal problems. Corruption, rigged elections and injustice have led the State into a permanent political instability in form of civil and political protests. From time to time, the elites resort to belligerent rhetoric or conflict escalation, depending on the internal political situation.

It is the second term of Serzh Sargsyan as President of Armenia, and the Republican Party as the ruling power in the parliament. Since the presidential elections of 2008, Serzh Sargsyan has lacked political legitimacy and has not succeeded in effective internal reforms. Due to the political weakness and prioritization of own interests, the current government opted to intensify the rhetoric over the conflict in order to mobilize people around nationalistic sentiments. Such policy also contributes to not being discredited by the opposition leaders.

Serzh Sargsyan came into power with weak legitimacy. Immediately after the elections of 2008, the President faced mass scale protests. March 1st is remembered as day of struggle for democracy where at least eight protestors and two police officers were killed and more than 130 people were injured. A 20-day state of emergency was announced.

The instability was immediately followed by conflict escalation. On March 4, 2008, it was reported that skirmishes took place. Statements by officials on both sides suggested the fighting was heavier than most of the skirmishes that sporadically break out along the ceasefire

⁷ National Security Council at the RA President Office, 'National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia (RA)', 26 January 2007, available at: http://www.mfa.am/u_files/file/doctrine/Doctrineeng.pdf (12 May 2016).

line. A spokesman for Nagorno-Karabakh's military forces stated that eight Azerbaijani soldiers were killed, whereas Azerbaijani officials declined to comment on casualties. Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Vardan Oskanyan, stated that Azerbaijani forces attacked the Armenian positions northeast of Nagorno-Karabakh, causing casualties among the Armenian servicemen. President elect Serzh Sargsyan later announced that Azerbaijani forces briefly seized positions held by Nagorno-Karabakh, however Armenians managed to regain control in a counteroffensive. The military actions and gaining control over new positions by Azerbaijan was denied by the Azerbaijani side⁸. The reports were full of blame against each other, and the ruling elites used the conflict and the escalation to divert the public attention to Azerbaijan, thus avoiding internal instability and mass protests.

Since then Armenia has continuously faced political instability in forms of protests demanding justice and implementation of efficient reforms. Another violent clash took place in January 2015, when people of Gyumri, the second largest city in Armenia, revolted against the inaction of the prosecutor's office with respect to the case of an Armenian family allegedly killed by a Russian soldier⁹. A seven-member family was killed in Gyumri by a Russian soldier serving at the Russian military base, which was located in Gyumri for the purpose of ensuring the security of the country. People were demanding that the Russian soldier was handed to the Armenian law enforcement agencies. Protests took place on January 13-15, spreading from Gyumri to the capital Yerevan. In both cities heavily armed riot police prevented demonstrators from approaching the Russian diplomatic missions, and several people were arrested. Peaceful actions continued over the next days.¹⁰

It was a rather serious moment for the Armenian Government which used the opportunity to remind about the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. On January 23, it was announced that clashes started on the Nagorno Karabakh contact line. Armenia and Azerbaijan gave conflicting death tolls and disputed who was to be blamed. Armenia's Defense Ministry accused the Azerbaijani side of killing two of its soldiers: "All responsibility for escalation of the situation and its consequences lies with the political and military leadership of Azerbaijan". On the contrary Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry, accused Armenian soldiers of trying to cross the border and said

⁸The Guardian, 'Armenian and Azerbaijani forces clashes', feed article, 4 March 2008, available at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20080308182915/http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/7357504> (12 May 2016).

⁹Bertelsmann Stiftung, 'BTI 2016 — Armenia Country Report', Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016.

¹⁰Commonspace.eu, 'Tension in Armenia as protesters demand Russian soldier be handed over', news, 16 January 2015, available at: <http://commonsplace.eu/eng/news/6/id3161> (12 May 2016).

12 of them had been killed and 20 wounded. Azerbaijani side announced that the Armenians were the first to open fire, and there were no Azeri casualties¹¹.

Yet another announcement regarding conflict escalation during political instability was done in summer of 2015. Armenia is in a quite difficult internal economic situation. The controlled economy and its oligopolistic structure do not allow the country to develop economically. According to the World Bank Group Report, between 2008 and 2009 poverty in Yerevan increased dramatically from 20.1 to 26.7 percent of the population and then slowly declined to 25.6 percent in 2013. In 2009 there was a record low GDP growth (-19.70)¹². Average unemployment was 17% in 2014 and 19% in March of 2015. Together with economic hardship in 2015, the Armenian Government announced about raising the prices for electricity by 16.7% — a rather high burden for the Armenian population. Such decision led to mass protests that started on June 19, 2015 and lasted for 19 days. The Government of Armenia once again used the Nagorno Karabakh conflict for diverting the public attention. On June 26, it was announced that one soldier died in clashes with troops from neighbouring Azerbaijan. The news of clashes was denied by the Azerbaijani side¹³.

Due to internal developments, strengthening of opposition, and lack of political will to solve internal problems, the ruling party focuses mostly on the rhetoric of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Through internal developments the parties transform their ideology into interplay with each other: first, for distracting the public attention and mobilizing over the nationalist sentiments and, second, for stopping the mass scale protests.

However, such rhetoric slows down the country's fragile path towards democracy and reinforces the difficult situation it has appeared in. Moreover, such type of rhetoric in reality neglects the interests of Nagorno Karabakh. On May 16, 2016, the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met with French Secretary of State for European Affairs Harlem Désir, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, and Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov. The sides announced that they will comply with the ceasefire

¹¹ Reuters, 'Armenian soldiers killed in border clash with Azerbaijan', news report, 23 January 2015, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-idUSKBN0KW1W620150123> (12 May 2016).

¹² World Bank Group, 'Country Program Snapshot' October 2015, available at: <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/pubdocs/publicdoc/2015/10/222551443449037781/Armenia-Snapshot.pdf> (12 May 2016).

¹³ Reuters, 'Armenia says soldier killed in border clash with Azerbaijan', news report, 27 June 2015, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-idUSL5N0ZD0A920150627> (12 May 2016).

of 1994¹⁴. However, this time the ceasefire was re-established without a written document and in the absence of the representative of Nagorno Karabakh.

CONCLUSION

Nagorno Karabakh conflict, which has historical roots, has transformed into a diversionary conflict. Different theoretical frameworks have been given to explain the causes of war. The security dilemma is one of the causes of wars. According to realist assumptions and the security dilemma, states and ethnic groups may go into a war once they start building their own security. Misperceptions, offense-defense divide will be the decisive elements for the outbreak of a war. In addition to the security dilemma, the diversionary conflicts theory explains the role of elites in conflict protraction and allows seeing the link between internal instability and conflict escalation.

Armenia is facing political instability; the authorities are slow in implementing sufficient and consistent reforms. The lack of political will to implement actual democratic reforms leads to protests and political unrest. One of the major protests with clashes happened in 2008, after the presidential elections. Protests also erupted in January and June of 2015. During each of these protests, the Armenian authorities have announced about conflict escalation and casualties on the border. These facts have been denied or misinterpreted by the Azerbaijani side. Conflict escalation and its reminder is one of the tools that the government of Armenia uses to shift the public attention from domestic turmoil and hold back mass scale protests.

The governments of the two conflicting sides have opted to a dangerous game aimed at preserving their power, avoiding the implementation of effective democratic reforms, and reinforcing the idea of external enemy.

¹⁴ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 'Joint Statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Secretary of State of the United States of America and State Secretary for Europe Affairs of France', press release, 16 May 2016, available at: <http://www.osce.org/mg/240316> (21 May 2016).