

The EU cannot remain a passive observer of the Karabakh conflict

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When Federica Mogherini visited the South Caucasus in March, she was quoted as saying that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was a top priority for the EU. Facts, however, do not seem to match the words of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. As violent clashes in the conflict zone unfolded over the past week, the EU was a passive observer, with few visible signs of engagement apart from a cursory phone call urging Armenia and Azerbaijan to show restraint. The escalation has shown how quickly and dangerously the situation can develop, and the unassailable nature of the Line of Contact (LoC). If the diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict show no progress, a repetition is very probable. Furthermore, it is likely the next incident will be more devastating in human and material costs than this recent one, and may not be contained so quickly. The EU needs to be part of the renewed diplomatic effort.

Large-scale clashes in the Karabakh conflict zone started on 2 April, along the entire length of the LoC between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. The incidents started while the Armenian President, Serzh Sargsyan, and the Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, were out of the region, returning from the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington. During the visit, both presidents had met separately with US Vice President Joe Biden, and discussed the peace process and the United States' role in it. The US, along with Russia and France, co-chairs the Minsk Group, a number of countries working to resolve the conflict within the framework of the OSCE. The group was established in 1992, and since the 1994 cease-fire that ended large-scale hostilities between the sides, the co-chairs have assumed most of the group's responsibilities. There has been little or no progress in the negotiating process over the years, despite a number of false hopes.

Because there is no independent source of monitoring the conflict on the ground, it is not clear how the breakdown of the ceasefire began, with each side pointing the finger of blame at the other, or how many casualties there are. Figures for the dead and wounded range from several dozens to hundreds on both sides. Early on, Azerbaijan announced it had taken back a number of strategic areas around the villages of Talysh and Seysulan, the first exchange of land since the 1994 ceasefire. Armenia subsequently beefed up its counter-offensive and claimed it had regained most of the land. While the exchange of small slivers of land or the rubble of abandoned hamlets may seem to have questionable strategic value, it does have a significant psychological impact. In Azerbaijan it is seen as proof of their military superiority, that Armenian defence forces will now be more vulnerable to Azerbaijani offensives from higher ground, and that it represents the beginning of the process of liberating its occupied territories. In Armenia it is seen as a reversal of the victories in the early 1990s. How the events of recent days are going to impact things in the future is not yet clear.

While Moscow reportedly moderated the ceasefire between the two sides, the crisis has also seen a nuanced but important shift in the way international diplomacy has engaged in efforts to resolve the conflict. The primary role was still left to the OSCE Minsk Group co-chair countries. The accepted wisdom within the international community is to stick with this mechanism for the moment. However, two important things happened. First, the full Minsk Group was involved early on in discussions, and issued a joint statement for the first time in years. This new role for the full Minsk Group should be welcomed. The second development was the active role that the German OSCE chairmanship played, independently and by convening the OSCE Permanent Council. These small steps have set a precedent. While the format appears to remain, these actions demonstrate that much has changed.

The last few days have proven that the danger of a small incident quickly spiralling into a major crisis is very real indeed. It has also shown the need to revitalise the peace process. In its statement, the full Minsk Group called on both sides to engage in discussions on a comprehensive peace agreement.

In the present scenario, the EU cannot continue avoiding becoming directly involved in the process of resolving the conflict. The EU, working through the High Representative, the EEAS, the EUSR and the Commission, needs to develop a joined up approach, and stop punching below its weight. It is in its interest to do so because of the risk that these violent outbursts will escalate into a larger conflict involving third parties, and because the region is now interlinked with the EU in multiple ways, including trade and economy, energy, security and migration-related issues. Tangibly, it should as a first resort consider the following:

- Demand to be formally represented within the wider Minsk Group. It should do this using an existing procedure within the OSCE: the EU being formally represented through the EU member state holding the rotating EU presidency. It should insist on this even if Russia and its surrogates object.
- The Karabakh conflict should be considered an essential part of the EU's political dialogue with Armenia and Azerbaijan, as the EU embarks on negotiations for new contractual agreements with the two. So far it has been considered expedient to try to bypass the issue and instead focus on more tangible areas of co-operation. These short cuts do not work.
- At the military level, the EU should strengthen its capacity to observe the military situation by appointing military liaison officers, with the diplomatic rank of military attaches, in the delegations in Baku and Yerevan. These delegations could provide the political leadership of the Union with updated and accurate information on the military situation, and open channels of communication with the military on both sides.
- The EU must not squander its soft power capacity to influence the process. Its engagement with civil society through instruments such as EPNK (The European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh) needs to be strengthened, and other modalities explored.
- Member state positions on Karabakh need to be better synchronised. Overall, a common position already exists, but it comes with a certain amount of ambiguity. A number of member states have important bilateral interests with Armenia and Azerbaijan, largely commercial and economic with Azerbaijan, and largely cultural and religious with Armenia. Large Armenian communities in some member states, and considerable lobbying efforts on the part of both countries, further colour perception. The EU Special Representative (EUSR) should work closely with independent organisations such as think tanks and research institutes that have experience in the region, in order to ensure that the facts underpinning the conflict are well understood across member states.
- Coordination and consultation with other regional stake holders, including Russia (despite the current difficulties between in EU-Russia relations), Turkey and Iran – Mogherini is due to visit Tehran in mid-April, with regional security featuring on the agenda – (along with the US) should also take place.

The EU should undergo a period of proper consultation, listening to both sides, member states, the European Parliament and civil society. It should then adopt a clearer and articulated position on the Karabakh conflict and its settlement, outlining in some detail the extent to which the Union is ready to go, politically, militarily, financially and otherwise, to push for and support a comprehensive peace process.

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