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Nagorno-Karabakh

War and Defeat

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Between the First Karabakh War and the Second Karabakh War there is a long period of 26 years, so many missed opportunities to resolve the conflict through negotiations. The failure should be found in the wrong beliefs, wrong ideas that led to wrong policies.

The Armenian public opinion is in shock. The gap between the world imagined before September 27, and the disastrous outcome of the war is too wide to be bridged. Many are searching for traitors, conspirators. The most evident target to the outpour of this pain is the political leadership and personally Nikol Pashinyan.

To shout “traitor” until the last breath of one’s lung is not helpful. The defeat is much deeper than that. The defeat is first of all military, as seen in the battlefield. The Armenian armed forces were evidently not ready to fight the kind of war imposed on them. The defeat was also diplomatic, the incredible isolation in which Armenia found itself. Most of all, it was strategic: many of the beliefs and presumptions – whether those openly discussed or mostly enjoying tacit consensus – revealed to be false.

The witch-hunt for “traitors” will not help the necessary exercise of self-criticism. By definition, the traitor is the other, the outsider, who falsely pretends to belong to “us”. The only result of seeking conspiracies is to impose censorship by silencing debate, any possibility to understand past failures, and prepare to face a new, much more complicated future.

The military defeat was the result of strategic failure: Armenia found itself not only opposing Azerbaijan’s armed forces, in itself superior in numbers and armament. But also, Azerbaijan succeeded in bringing in Turkish military participation, as well as Syrian mercenaries, while ensuring that Russia would not intervene.

The defeat is in the failure to see these possibilities, and do everything to stop it.

With such alignment of forces, and without an equal alignment on the side of Armenia, the military defeat was a matter of days.

Missed opportunities

Between the First Karabakh War and the Second Karabakh War there is a long period of 26 years, so many missed opportunities to resolve the conflict through negotiations. The failure should be found in the wrong beliefs, wrong ideas that led to wrong policies.

While the Karabakh conflict area enjoyed many years of relative stability, the world around was changing rapidly and dangerously. Look at the wars in Iraq and Syria, not far away from the Caucasus. The April 2016 “four days’ war” had made it clear that the 22-year-long status quo in Karabakh had ended, that the danger of war was real, and that the next war would cause much more casualties than the First Karabakh War.

Russian retreat ended with the 2008 war, to be replaced by assertive, expansionist policies. It was no secret that Moscow wanted to see its troops in Karabakh area as well. Turkey also changed dramatically: the failed coup of 2016 Turkish politics hardened, both internally but also through a series of external expeditions. While Moscow and Ankara

often opposed each other, nevertheless managed to make deals on behalf of their local junior partners.

The Karabakh conflict had started in 1988 as a struggle for self-determination for the Armenian population within what was the Autonomous Region of Mountainous Karabakh. The war that followed in 1991-1994 was imposed on Karabakh population. At several periods in the first war, Karabakh risked losing the war and being annihilated. This was the case when Azerbaijani forces under the banner of nationalist leader Abulfaz Elchibey occupied some 40% of Karabakh lands in the summer of 1992. It was bitter and costly resistance that turned the tide in 1993, and led to the occupation of Kelbajar and the other territories.

Breakpoint

For many years the negotiations were based on return of territories and in return the recognition of Karabakh Armenian self-determination. Somewhere down the road the narrative changed. It was never openly discussed, never completely assumed. But instead of seeking compromise, try to end a tense situation that cost Armenia – and Azerbaijan – hundreds of millions of dollars every year, instead of sending young men into trenches reminiscent of World War I, new slogans appeared: “we will not return any land”. This was meant to answer Azerbaijan’s refusal to accept Karabakh’s drive for self-determination. By rejecting to return occupied lands one put an end to any possible negotiations. By ending negotiations, it was already the first step towards a new war.

Instead of reading changes in regional geopolitics, instead of seeing the alarming red lights, the Pashinyan administration led the country into the direction of the fire, not away from it.

Symbolic land

But what were those lands that so many refused to return? It was abandoned and destroyed towns and villages of Azerbaijanis, forcibly displaced during the first war. There was no one living there. There were only trenches, where soldiers were sent to spend their young years. The land that many hard-liners refused to give back was not real land. It was symbolic land.

It is only ironic that a nation of Diaspora would be so obsessed by territory, in the age of globalization.

Land, empty land, symbolic land, became more important than people. This led to a series of political blunders. Just one example: according to recent interviews of Vladimir Putin, one of the demands of Baku before the war was the return of Azerbaijani civilians to Shushi/Shusha, what was rejected by Yerevan. Imagine this was accepted and ethnic Azeris return to live next to ethnic Armenians, and the Armenian administration of the city takes steps to integrate them, create bilingual schools, and run municipal affairs together. It would have been the first, healthy step towards exiting the logic of conflict and restarting to learn coexistence and sharing daily routine. Imagine all the lost opportunities to experiment structures – administrative, political, cultural – where members of the two communities participate side-by-side. This is not impossible: in the beginning of the 20th century there were even political parties with ethnic Armenian and Azeri members, as well as Kurds and Georgian, Russian and Persians.

It was the horrors of the early 20th century that put an end to such experimentation, coexistence, and pluralism. Isn't it time to go back and correct the wrongs of the past?

High cost

The war came at high cost for the Armenian side: thousands of young men died, defeat, and loss of territory. But also Armenia is more than ever under Russian protection. Azerbaijan won the war, but also at high price, and not only in the large number of the war victims. Azerbaijan has to pay the price for Turkish aid, and for Russian “neutrality” during 44 days of war. Now, in the west of Azerbaijan there are Russian troops, something that Baku tried to avoid since independence from the Soviet Union. Many in Azerbaijan are worried about this fact, the return of the Russian soldiers. Less discussed in Baku are the consequences of the growing Turkish influence, the possible deployment of Turkish military on Azerbaijani territory.

How many countries have simultaneously Russian and Turkish military stationed on their land? And what are the consequences?

The war ended with a winner and a loser. But on the long run both countries will discover that they are less sovereign now than before September 27, 2020.

Let us not create new “certainties”. The November 9 agreement is a cease-fire agreement and a political agreement. It is for 5 years. It has frozen – temporarily an active volcano. But do not take this situation as a final solution. Do not count on Russian presence “forever”. Remember, even the Soviet Union one day abandoned this region and left.

It was possible to avoid the Second Karabakh War. The defeat is in the 26 wasted years when a peaceful solution was not found. When one looks from a distance, not only Armenia is very small, but also Azerbaijan. If the two sides continue to reject to talk to each other and solve their problems, then states with imperial ambitions will accomplish that task for them.

[Is it finally time for Armenians and Azerbaijanis to talk to each other?](#)

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