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## Russia advocates peacekeeping mission as tensions flare over Nagorno-Karabakh

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*Tensions along the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh and on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border have intensified from September 24, with skirmishes including the use of heavy artillery by both sides. Tensions have grown to a level where the danger of a large-scale confrontation should be seriously considered. Russia's specific interests aggravate the situation, while the conflicting sides remain reluctant to seek a compromise solution. In this situation, Armenia and Azerbaijan are under increasing pressure to accept a Russia-led peacekeeping mission to the region.*

### BACKGROUND

After relatively calm summer months, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan began to grow from early September. Armenian media reported intensive gunfire from Azerbaijan in the direction of several villages in Armenia's north-western Tavush region on September 1-2. The shooting coincided with Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's unexpected visit to Baku. According to Russian media reports, in addition to discussing several issues of mutual interest, Lavrov invited Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev to visit the Russia Arms Expo exhibition on September 9. Russia has been Azerbaijan's principal weapons supplier, and has over the last five years supplied Baku with arms worth close to US\$ 5 billion, including helicopters, armored military vehicles, tanks, self-propelled cannons, and multiple rocket launchers. Following the Russia Arms Expo, the Azerbaijani delegation expressed the intention to extend existing contracts with Russian suppliers. At the same time, Russia is also the principal weapons supplier for Armenia – a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Despite its discount on arms purchases as a CSTO member, however, Armenia is

unable to match Azerbaijan's financial capacity and the quantity of acquired weapons.

After Lavrov's visit to Baku, Russia's President Vladimir Putin unexpectedly summoned his Armenian counterpart Serzh Sargsyan to Moscow. Few details about the discussions held during Sargsyan's one-day visit on September 7 are available. Yet on the next day, during a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) intergovernmental meeting in Belarus and without any previous public discussion, Armenia's Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan suggested that EEU members should gradually curb the use of the U.S. dollar in intra-EEU trade and instead use national currencies. Thus, Armenia was the only EEU member supporting the idea expressed a few days earlier by Putin, about forming a currency union based on the Russian ruble. A week later, during a CSTO summit in Tajikistan, Sargsyan made a suggestion that was also probably discussed during his Moscow visit, offering to host a CSTO peacekeeping task force in Armenia.

Meanwhile, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan grew even more dramatically from September 24, when three civilian women were killed in the Tavush region.

The next day, both sides started using artillery, including 82 mm mortars on the Armenian side and 122 mm howitzers on the Azerbaijani side. Both sides blamed each other for the growing tensions.

#### IMPLICATIONS

For a few years, exchanges of sniper fire have occurred regularly along the line of contact and over the last year, the conflict has featured regular incursions by small subversive groups, followed by the continuous use of machine guns. Yet exchanges in recent weeks have featured the first use of heavy artillery systems since the cease-fire in 1994. The latest escalation has again confirmed that Nagorno-Karabakh is indeed no longer a “frozen” conflict.

Similarly to the massive exchanges of gunfire between July 30 and August 4, 2014, Armenia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs abstained from commenting on the situation. Meanwhile, during a visit to London on September 10, Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandyan restated Russia’s official line that its arms supplies to Azerbaijan were just a business deal. Also, pro-Russian media in Armenia insisted that Azerbaijan mainly used weapons supplied from Turkey, despite contrary information available also from Russian sources. In particular, Interfax reported that Azerbaijan mainly used Russian weapons in the confrontation and that of over a hundred shells fired by the Azerbaijani army on September 25-26, only 12 were fired from Turkish TR-107 rocket launchers.

Like in August 2014, Armenia’s Defense Ministry again took the initiative. According to its statements, there is currently no need for a peacekeeping operation. Besides, after the September 25-26 events, the ministry summoned several Armenian journalists for a closed briefing, and presented videos recorded from drones showing Azerbaijani army positions on the line of contact in Karabakh under intensive mortar fire. For the first time, the chief of staff of Armenia’s army criticized the CSTO for not making any statement on behalf of its allied member, but also underlined that military support would not be required.

It should be noted that neither side has shown any significant interest in the suggested Russian peacekeeping operation. Several experts in both Armenia and Azerbaijan consider the possibility of deploying Russian troops to the conflict as detrimental to their countries’ interests. Yet, the lack of trust towards Russia is so far the only point of agreement. Both countries are susceptible to Russian pressure and considering Moscow’s aggressive and increasingly unpredictable policy, the

question is largely who will give way first. While still reluctant to agree to a deployment of Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh, Yerevan has agreed to virtually all other demands from Moscow, often despite their obvious damage to Armenia’s economy, international cooperation, and demography. It is also clear that if Armenia agrees to host a CSTO peacekeeping task force, Russia’s military presence and political influence will grow further, as other CSTO members will hardly provide any troops on the ground.

Azerbaijan, in turn, may become more vulnerable to Russian pressure due to its deteriorating relations with the West. The decision of Azerbaijani authorities to close the OSCE office in Baku, the sentencing of several vocal critics of the regime to long prison terms followed by former U.S. Ambassador Richard D. Kauzlarich’s suggestion to introduce travel and financial sanctions against some Azerbaijani officials, the termination of the Council of Europe’s participation in the joint working group on human rights in Azerbaijan, and other recent incidents indicate the lowest level of trust in years.

Russia’s Syria campaign complicates the picture even more. Putin’s appearance at the UN General Assembly preceded by the deployment of Russian troops to Syria could aim to lift the international sanctions as Russia’s economy has already suffered considerably. However, as Putin could not persuade President Obama and other key leaders in this regard, he took the next step, engaging in a military operation met by strong disapproval in the West, Turkey, and the Gulf states. Putin’s disregard for the international order combined with a need to continue showing his strength to Russian citizens and especially to the wealthy elites who have already been showing some discontent with the current regime, and also a desperate need to lift Western sanctions or to influence the oil market in order to boost the price, further Russian military expansion cannot be excluded.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Russia’s role in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been ambiguous: it is simultaneously a mediator, the main arms supplier to the conflicting sides, and a power that considers the region its zone of “privileged interest.” So far, Russia has demonstrated a desire to control and manipulate the conflict rather than solving it. The deep mutual distrust between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the democratic deficit in both states contribute to the relative success of Moscow’s strategy.

As demonstrated by its aggression against Ukraine and the engagement in Syria, further assertive Russian be-

havior can be expected. Manipulating military confrontation in Nagorno-Karabakh as a pretext for deploying Russian “peacekeepers” could serve a double objective: increasing military and political influence over Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as obtaining an additional stronghold in Georgia’s rear, and at the same time gaining international goodwill by attempting to solve the conflict. Such a combination of controversial objectives may seem bizarre. Yet it is possible given Putin’s desire

for a global power leader status and the belief that Russia is confronting the U.S. in Ukraine and elsewhere, in parallel with attempts to get the sanctions lifted through ostensibly constructive behavior. However, the growing firepower along the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh shows that Russia’s manipulation of the conflict has reached a dangerous phase where a large-scale “war by accident” is becoming a definite possibility.

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