

BIGGER WAR POSSIBLE

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 **Editorial**, 17 July 2016

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The Vienna meeting, attended by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov of Russia, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault of France, shepherded Armenia and Azerbaijan to agree to halt cease-fire violations although it is Azerbaijan which has violated the ceasefire countless times since 1994. The St. Petersburg meeting saw an agreement to increase the number of observers on the conflict line and to arrange high-level monthly meetings between the two warring states. But before the ink was dry on the agreements, Azerbaijan got into a diplomatic trouble when President Ilham Aliyev and his chief foreign policy aide (Novruz Mammadov) made a mockery of what Baku had agreed to at the international meetings.

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Mammadov wrongly claimed on Azeri TV that the St. Petersburg meeting had resulted in an agreement favorable to Azerbaijan. He elaborated that the agreement would lead to the "gradual liberation of the seven districts around Karabagh" and that Karabagh's future will be determined following the removal of Armenian rule over the buffer zone. Russia took strong exception to Mammadov's analysis and through foreign office representative Maria Zakharova accused Mammadov of "loose interpretation" of the agreement. In a highly undiplomatic language Zakharova went on to say that Mammadov's interpretation was "very dishonest ... unscrupulous... frivolous... perverse."

But the big bomb was still to come. After agreeing in St. Petersburg to increase the number of observers on the conflict line, Aliyev went back on his word when he returned to Baku. Back at home he said he was against increasing the number of monitors because that would solidify the status quo which he regards as illegitimate. Aliyev's U-turn can be interpreted as an indication the Azeri president is against increasing the number of monitors because such a development could curtail Azerbaijan's constant violations of the ceasefire.

Constant violation of the ceasefire is another way of saying a war of attrition. With little resources and smaller army/population, Armenia can't afford a prolonged war of attrition. Thus a continuation of the pre-war Azeri strategy of non-stop ceasefire violations could force Yerevan to try to stanch the blood-letting by attacking Azerbaijan. Conversely, after raising, for two decades, his public's expectations of conquering Karabagh, Aliyev may be forced to make another—and a more ambitious—attack than that of April.

Returning to the OSCE series of meetings, while the phased ceding of Karabagh's buffer zone to Azerbaijan seems to be OSCE's first goal, the three co-chair countries are vague about the future of Karabagh. Over the years there have been various proposals as to the fate of Karabagh. In the recent negotiations Armenia has chosen to be circumspect about what Yerevan would consider a just solution. People who don't trust President Serge Sargsyan have good reason to worry about his cryptic intentions. Although as interior minister he was one of the people who dumped President Levon Ter-Petrosyan (1997) supposedly for agreeing to implement the Kazan document for phased Armenian withdrawal, he later admitted that he had supported that very document. A few weeks ago Jirayr Sefilyan, hero of the Karabagh War and head of the Founding Parliament political group, was jailed when he accused the Sargsyan regime of conspiring to give away Karabagh. Desperate for his release, members of his group took over a police station in Yerevan on July 17 and repeated Sefilyan's accusation. Will Sargsyan, with Putin's backing, agree to Azeri demands and hand over Karabagh? Or does he now agree with most Armenians in Armenia and in the Diaspora that giving Karabagh to Baku would be the beginning of the end for Armenia?

Sargsyan is cognizant of Armenian public mood following the barbarity of the Azeri forces during the April war. He knows his citizens are more ready for military solution than at any time in the past 25 years. Likewise the Azeri public.

Armenia has begun to receive some of the high-tech weapons it purchased from Russia with the \$200 million Russian loan. These include multiple launch rocket systems, anti-aircraft missile systems, signal monitoring systems, flame throwers and armored cars. Azerbaijan has similar weapons.

Impatient due to the slow pace of "progress" at the negotiating table, erratic Aliyev may decide to hit Karabagh/Armenia for any number of reasons: War of attrition is slow in producing results; the Azeri public—long promised victory—might force Aliyev's hand to opt for a military solution; considering the meager gains of the April war, Aliyev might decide he has to raise the ante and go for broke by launching a full-scale war; he may also decide to hit Armenia before all \$200 million worth of weapons have been delivered. The recent Russian/Armenian agreement which put Armenia inside the Russian air-defense umbrella would have no impact on Baku's decision to go to war. When Armenia rushes to Karabagh's defense in an Azeri attack, Russia would not be obliged to protect Armenia because the protection clicks only when Armenia is the defender. When Yerevan goes to Karabakh's rescue, it becomes the aggressor.

It has been 100 days since Azerbaijan's blitzkrieg. What has Armenia done—other than purchase the above Russian systems—to better counter Azeri aggression? Sargsyan made cosmetic changes when he dismissed some senior military officers. However, the army is essentially the same one which had a difficult time pushing back the Azeris in April. When Samvel Babayan, Karabagh's former top military commander (1993 to 1999), visited Karabagh soon after the mini-war, he criticized the Armenian military leadership and urged for urgent "modernization" of the two Armenian armies. The Armenian "foot soldiers" seem to be ready for a looming war, but what about the mid-level and senior officers? Is ex-General Babayan correct in his assessment of the two Armenian armies? Has Armenia merely tweaked its war strategy or made substantial improvements since April? The milquetoast Armenian response to continued Azeri ceasefire violations doesn't inspire confidence in the muscle and strategy of the Armenian defense forces. Perhaps Hrant Bagratian, former prime minister of Armenia and now MP, and retired Major. Gen. Arcady Ter Tadevosyan were admitting the Armenian forces are weaker than that of the Azeris when the pair said that Armenia could deploy nuclear bombs if threatened by Armageddon.

