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Georgian Institute of Politics

## EXPERT COMMENT

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### How likely is a war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2017?

In April 2016, the long-standing ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke down. Fighting broke out and up to 200 people were killed, many of them civilians. A consensus of observers called it the worst fighting since the 1994 ceasefire. Russia brokered a new ceasefire after four days of war, however, negotiations for a lasting settlement have stalemated since August 2016.

Renewed fighting broke out between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces at the Line of Contact on February 24-25, 2017. Five Azerbaijani soldiers were confirmed killed. A major resumption of hostilities such as what occurred in April 2016 would have implications for the entire region, including Georgia.

At the request of the Georgian Institute of Politics, a selection of experts from the United Kingdom, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran commented on the likelihood of renewed conflict and its implications for security in the South Caucasus.

**THOMAS DE WAAL**, *Senior Fellow at Carnegie Europe, Brussels.*

There are no peacekeepers on the Line of Contact around Nagorno-Karabakh that has separated Armenian and Azerbaijan forces since 1994--and just six international monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). So, the fact that the ceasefire has mainly held since then is entirely due to the goodwill and calculations of the parties to the conflict. In particular, that means Azerbaijan--the losing side in the conflict of the 1990s--which is the actor most interested in reversing the status quo and reconquering the territory it lost back then.

There are still good reasons not to go back to war. New fighting could cost not just thousands of lives, but threaten the source of Azerbaijan's prosperity--its oil and gas infrastructure. Defeat or even lack of outright victory could also cause public backlash in both countries, which could overthrow the ruling regimes in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

However, military pressure is the only leverage that Azerbaijan has over Armenia and, as we saw last April, conflict also has its temptations. Baku successfully used last year's "four-day war" to rally public opinion around the flag and distract the population from socio-economic issues. The danger this year is that the Azerbaijani government could try again to use this instrument in a limited

way, but receive a much heavier Armenian response. We could thus end up with a serious conflict by accident. Unfortunately, all the ingredients are in place for such a miscalculation to occur this spring.

A new conflict fought with new heavy weapons would be catastrophic. Many innocent lives would be lost. It would also set back the region back by a decade, without resolving the underlying issues of the Karabakh dispute. For Georgia, there would be two serious immediate effects—the shutdown of oil and gas pipelines from Azerbaijan; and the boiling-over of tensions between Georgia’s two biggest ethnic minority groups: Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

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**DR. FUAD ALIYEV**, *Adjunct Professor at Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, Baku.*

There is a high probability for activation of hostilities and military offensives from both sides--of the same level or even more escalated than that of April 2016.

For both the governments of both countries, the Karabakh issue is vital and widely used for domestic political objectives. Moreover, unlike for Armenia, for Azerbaijan--which suffered a military defeat and had its territories occupied in the 1990s--the status quo is not acceptable. Thus, Azerbaijan will use any opportunity to put this unresolved matter on the regional policy agenda. Given Azerbaijan’s current technical military superiority, its government will be interested in short-term, localized military actions that result in at least minor territorial advances, with the objective of persuading Armenia to be more responsive to calls for real peace negotiations and initiatives.

Georgia is not interested in any ongoing military conflicts or destabilization in its neighborhood. Besides a possible humanitarian crisis on its borders, the conflict may threaten tourists and investors. Georgia enjoys active cooperation with both countries as well as sizeable Azeri and Armenian communities on its territories, so it won’t be able to take a side. Given close economic ties with Azerbaijan and its own problems with separatism and foreign occupation, Georgia seems to have more in common with that country than with Armenia. On the positive side, Georgia can increase its regional significance by playing an active role as mediator.

The conflict implies an active role by Russia, which could win from any escalation as a mediator and strengthen its influence in both countries, especially Armenia. The escalation can also be used to “punish” Armenia’s government if it fails to satisfy Russia’s agenda items.

Overall, security will be threatened. But if an Azerbaijani military assault is successful, it may actually change the “frozen conflict” status quo, activating peace initiatives and the OSCE Minsk group and helping bring a long-term resolution to the conflict.

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**DR. VAHRAM TER-MATEVOSYAN**, *Assistant Professor at the American University of Armenia, Yerevan.*

Since 2008, the nature of the conflicts in the Caucasus has changed. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was no exception. Since then, the question that became dominant among policymakers and practitioners alike was not whether the conflict would resume, but when and how it would do so. Therefore,

the likelihood of a breakout of major hostilities always remains high, and this feature has become a characteristic part of the conflict.

Since 2008, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has transformed into a low-intensity conflict, which entails phases of escalation, intensive violations of cease-fire, and periods of short-term truce. As a result, it has deepened the sense of insecurity contributed to the militarization of the involved societies. Ruling elites in both Armenia and Azerbaijan raised the stakes with talk about the “unavoidability” of the war solution, whereas the government of Nagorno-Karabakh amended its constitution to incline the region toward war-time logics and requirements.

The Caucasus region is small and interconnected. Therefore, any major socio-political and military developments occurring in one country undoubtedly affects the other two. This is why Georgia was concerned by the 2016 April escalation, as Armenia was during the 2008 August War. Georgia has all the reasons to fear that a major outbreak in the Karabakh conflict will negatively affect its own stability and security. It would also have negative implications for regional projects, as military operations would most likely target major pipeline and communication infrastructure. As a volatile region, the South Caucasus needs lasting peace for stable development.

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**DENNIS SAMMUT**, *Director of LINKS (Dialogue-Analysis-Research), London.*

2017 may turn out to be a defining year for the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Both sides now have the military capabilities to launch significant military operations, and both see some advantages in doing so, despite high risks. However, the peace option still remains

on the agenda. In fact, there is as much chance of a breakthrough in negotiations as there is of renewed fighting. The least likely scenario is a continuation of the current status quo. That option has now exhausted itself, and both sides know it.

The biggest risk in case of renewed hostilities is the possibility that it will spread very quickly beyond the current conflict zone. We have already seen occasional skirmishes on the Armenia-Azerbaijan international border, and both sides now have the capability to strike each other’s capitals and economic infrastructure. Such a development would have huge implications for the region and likely draw in external powers. Fortunately, that remains a distant possibility, despite escalating rhetoric. More likely is a repetition of what happened in April 2016, probably on a larger scale. That would be bad enough.

There is an urgent need to renew efforts for peaceful solution of the conflict. Peace in Karabakh will open tremendous opportunities for regional development, including for Georgia. So far, Georgia has managed to maintain good relations with both sides. Of course, if war breaks out it will be more difficult for Georgia to do so, but equally, more essential that it does. Georgia needs to be more proactive on the Karabakh issue, including by helping build confidence between the sides.

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**HAMED KAZEMZADEH**, *Senior Scholar at the Center for East European Studies, Warsaw, Poland.*

The recent conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh occurring February demonstrated once again to analysts, actors, and regional and transregional powers that sustainable peace and stability in the Caucasus are still fragile. In 2017, we will most likely see minor

conflicts between both sides of the Line of Contact. However, it should be noted that both sides of conflict have incentive to maintain a degree of stability in the region.

Azerbaijan is in the process of economic development and accordingly needs peace and security within its own borders. On the other hand, the separatist government in Nagorno-Karabakh also needs stability on its borders to end the conflict through international negotiations. Any armed conflict will be costly for all sides and all will be losers. Additionally, according to nationalist discourses and state propaganda, either needs only a small military movement

on the Line of Contact to show their people they continue to strive for national victory.

Realistically, any military conflict will have direct impacts on the security and foreign policies of the entire region, including Georgia. Georgia is essentially located between Armenia and Azerbaijan and provides both countries with a geographical link to Europe. Both countries, for the sale or supply of energy, are dependent on Georgia. Therefore, any changes to the region's security environment will be costly and threaten Georgia's foreign investment and tourism markets, too.

## GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

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