
Kosovo And Karabakh : How Azerbaijan Sees The Connection

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Azerbaijan's decision to withdraw its peacekeepers from Kosovo is playing into a larger debate about the future of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process.

Azerbaijani troops have participated in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's peacekeeping operation since 1999. But with only 33 Azerbaijani soldiers serving in Kosovo - attached to a larger Turkish battalion - the decision to withdraw in early March, at first glance, does not seem critically undermine the 16,000-strong NATO contingent's peacekeeping capabilities.

The move, however, does have larger geopolitical implications. In Kosovo's February 18 declaration of independence, post-Soviet countries like Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova see a reflection of their own problems with separatism. In Baku's case, Kosovo serves as a potentially troubling precedent for the resolution of its 20-year conflict with Armenia over Karabakh. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Karabakh Armenians control the territory and wish to gain independence. Baku, meanwhile, has offered the region broad autonomy under continued Azerbaijani jurisdiction. Given the circumstances, any action that recognizes, or even acknowledges Kosovo's independence, has the potential to undermine Baku's stance on Karabakh.

That realization motivated the Azerbaijani parliament to overwhelmingly approve on March 4 a presidential proposal to recall its Kosovo platoon. President Ilham Aliyev earlier complained that recognition of Kosovo's independence had "a negative impact on the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process," adding that the "the factor of force is a decisive one." The Azerbaijani president reiterated that Azerbaijan continues to mull a military option for Karabakh.

"Azerbaijan is increasing its military budget and building up its army," the official AzerTag news agency quoted Aliyev as saying on March 5.

Controversy still surrounds the vote's context. Some analysts say that in opting to pull out the troops, Azerbaijan has effectively sided with Russia, a country which many Azerbaijanis believe backed ethnic Armenian separatists in the 1988-1994 fighting over Karabakh.

Russia, a strong ally of Serbia, which claims Kosovo as its own territory, has led opposition to the ethnic Albanian region's independence.

"We should remember that Azerbaijani territories have been occupied with the help of Russian weapons and troops," Rasim Musabekov, an independent political analyst often critical of the government, commented in late February.

Musabekov added that the government is wrong to see a connection between Karabakh and Kosovo. "[T]here is a big difference between the Kosovo and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts. The international community sees Kosovo on the world's political map, but it does not see Nagorno-Karabakh there."

A recent United Nations resolution, however, suggests otherwise. On March 14,

in a contentious vote, the UN called for recognition of Azerbaijan's right to territorial integrity and for the immediate withdrawal of Armenian forces "from all the occupied territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan." Aside from Georgia and Moldova, thirty-seven countries supported the measure, including four with growing investor interests in the South Caucasus: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain.

Seven UN members opposed the resolution, including, aside from Armenia, three members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Minsk Group overseeing negotiations with Armenia about Karabakh - France, Russia and the United States.

In a recent interview with The Armenian Reporter, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew Bryza termed the resolution "one-sided," adding that it "did not reflect the fair and balanced nature of the [peace] proposal on the table."

Opposition by Minsk Group members to the resolution has fired longstanding questions within Azerbaijan about the value of the OSCE-brokered peace process. Kosovo has merely added to these qualms.

[For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

The Prague Process for resolving the Karabakh conflict includes an international peacekeeping force being placed on the disputed territory prior to Armenia withdrawing its troops from the area bordering Karabakh, notes analyst Ilgar Mammadov.

"We already saw what role the peacekeepers played in Kosovo. They have been placed in Kosovo with the formal consent of Belgrade, and by countries recognizing Serbia's territorial integrity," he observed. "Nevertheless, the peacekeepers brought in with Belgrade's consent became the boundary that Serbia failed to get past when Albanians declared their independence."

Mammadov believes a similar scenario could occur in Karabakh, if Azerbaijan agrees to the deployment of international peacekeepers.

"Since we did not need peacekeepers to maintain the cease-fire in the past 14 years, then why do we need them for the period of implementation of a peace agreement?"

By withdrawing from Kosovo, Baku makes that question clear, analysts and government officials believe.

At the same time, though, officials are quick to stress that the pull-out does not mean a change in Azerbaijan's relationship with NATO, or its participation in international peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Azerbaijan recently doubled its number of peacekeepers in Afghanistan and we are considering other recommendations. It shows Azerbaijan's commitment to international stability and peace," Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov told journalists on February 28. The country currently has 45 peacekeepers stationed in Afghanistan under NATO command.
