
After A Long Pause The US Administration Has Finally Started Re-Engaging With The South Caucasus Region

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ArmInfo - 14/7/2010

Interview with Dennis Sammut, Executive Director of the London Information Network on Conflicts and State-building (LINKS)

What do you think about the latest developments in the Karabakh settlement process, namely, the trilateral presidential meeting in St Petersburg and the incident on the contact line? Why, in your opinion, did Baku undertake this provocation?

The general opinion is that the meeting in St Petersburg did not contribute much to the process of resolving the Karabakh conflict.

Before each meeting of the Presidents expectations of a breakthrough increase, and then when there is no breakthrough we have disappointment. I think that this format of meetings involving the two Presidents and the President of Russia has exhausted itself.

Unfortunately the meeting in St Petersburg was also overshadowed by a serious incident on the line of control in which Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers died. I do not necessarily connect the incident with the results of the St Petersburg meeting. It is a consequence of a deeper problem. There is an increasing sense of frustration about the failure of the peace negotiations and this will inevitably reflect itself on the front line. This is what makes the Karabakh situation so dangerous and why all efforts need to be exerted to solve it. Those who think that the status quo is preferable are wrong since there is no status quo in fact. Things will either get better or worse but it is very unlikely they will remain the same.

There are still serious differences between the conflicting parties.

So, can we say that new war is inevitable?

A war in Karabakh would be such a disaster for the whole region, that it should be unthinkable! However we cannot exclude the possibility and that is why everybody needs to remain focused.

There is no time to loose and nobody should be playing for time. I agree that there are still serious differences between the sides but there is also a lot of common ground. We need to build on this common ground.

What exactly do you mean by common ground?

During the negotiations that have taken place over the last years the two sides have identified many points on which they could agree. It is time to emphasize those areas where there is agreement and not simply refer to those areas where there is disagreement.

Returning to the incident near the village of Chaylu, it looks obvious for everybody that this provocation was organized by Azerbaijan, who has, in fact, admitted this. Why didn't the world community condemn those guilty?

The cease fire regime agreed on by the sides in 1994 is not controlled by

international observers. The world community should be based on reports by the sides and regular monitoring inspections by a few OSCE observers. So, it is very hard to establish facts.

You have said that the format of meetings involving the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia has exhausted itself. Do you think that it is time for new formats and mechanisms?

The mechanism of the OSCE Minsk Group is not perfect. But at the moment it is the only format on which everybody agrees, and until an alternative mechanism is agreed it must remain the one that everybody should work with. Within that format the Russians have tried different approaches. So maybe similarly other different approaches can be tried as well. It will depend on the readiness of the sides to accept to co-operate.

What do you think about the statement made by the heads of the OSCE MG co-chair states during the last G8 summit? Can it help the sides come closer or was it just one more empty declaration?

The statement reflects the opinion of the international community about the need to engage more intensively to help resolve the conflict. It says nothing new, but the fact that the three Presidents are now focusing on the issue reflects the seriousness of the situation.

The people of the region should not expect that a solution to the Karabakh conflict comes from outsiders. However the international community has a responsibility to work with Armenia and Azerbaijan for a solution, and this issue must be given priority. So a joint statement by the Presidents of France, Russia and the US is welcome.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited the region recently?

What messages, do you think, did she leave for Armenia and Azerbaijan concerning the Karabakh issue?

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I welcome very much the forthcoming visit of Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to the region in July. After a long pause the US administration has finally started re-engaging with the region and this is a positive development. However in the same way that Russia on its own could not achieve a breakthrough in the negotiations on Karabakh neither will the United States. Russia and the United States need to work together, and with the European Union, on the Karabakh issue, and generally on bringing about long term peace and stability in the Caucasus region. We can expect that Hilary Clinton will be frank and firm when talking with the political leadership in Baku and Yerevan. However she comes to the region as a friend so her advice should be heeded.
