

## REGIONAL CONFLICTS

**GLOBALIZATION OF  
REGIONAL CONFLICTS:  
A FUTURE WAR  
FOR THE UPPER KARABAKH**

Dr Lasha TCHANTOURIDZE

*Senior Instructor,  
Master of Diplomacy Program,  
Norwich University  
(Northfield, Vermont, USA)*

*Introduction*

Globalization in international relations is perhaps best understood in terms of increased interdependence in the international system. This interdependence manifests itself in both economic and military affairs. Since World War II, the United States has been the leading force behind “globalizing” processes: as economic interdependence leads toward more open markets, and military interdependence makes global affairs more peaceful, it has been in the vital interest of Washington to rid the world of isolationist and militarily autarkic powers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This, of course, includes America’s fights against Nazism and various forms of socialism/communism, as well as its more gentle push to get rid of the “friendly” empires of Britain, France, etc.

With increased interdependence regional conflicts also have become politically globalized. No regional conflict today remains isolated to a particular region despite the fact that very few of them directly affect power hierarchy in the international system. Regional conflicts in part acquire their global significance due to a spread of the phenomenon loosely understood as “soft power.”<sup>2</sup> Since the dominant powers in today’s world are either liberal democracies (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, etc.) or trying to play the democratic game (Russia, China, India, etc.),

<sup>2</sup> “Soft power” is best analyzed and explained in J. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, New York, 2005.

the concepts associated with democratic ideals have become the major currency in soft power transactions. Therefore, regional actors have to pay attention to public opinion and cultural sensitivities prevalent in dominant global powers even though these powers may not be directly affected by regional conflicts. Soft power of public opinion and ideals of international justice and freedom may well push and/or allow hard power to step in to quell or mediate by force a protracted conflict, and this could have disastrous consequences for one or both parties involved in a regional dispute.

The rise of soft power has made such concept as “victory” and “resolution of conflict” more political rather than military phenomena. As the Bush administration found out in 2003, a proclamation of military victory may amount to little if it is not politically endorsed or acknowledged by the others who may have stakes in such an outcome. Substantial dissention in regional or global public opinion may well result in a protracted and rather costly conflict, especially if a proclaimed military victory does not look that decisive.

The “frozen” conflict of the Upper Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not and cannot be isolated from globalizing trends. In fact, one could argue that the very fact this and other similar conflicts are frozen reflects the preferences of dominant global powers in the international

system. Violent regional wars go against the notions of global “security,” and “stability,” especially the latter, since it implies, to a large degree, preservation of a status quo. In this sense, national interests of those directly involved in the frozen conflicts may well contradict priorities and interests of those powers who prioritize “stability” in order to better promote interdependence in trade, and predictability in military affairs. Almost everywhere “frozen conflict” does imply closed borders and military stand-off, but even such circumstances would be preferable to damaging upheavals that accompany attempts to regain or conquer lost territories by force.

For better or for worse, the Karabakh conflict is part of the international system, although its eventual direct outcome may only influence power game at a regional level—in the Caucasus and/or Caspian Basin. However, if the parties to this conflict were to resort to military force to solve the Karabakh issue, regional (Turkey, Iran), and global (U.S., Russia) powers will not stay away as the fact of upsetting the status quo itself will affect their interests in some. On the other hand, the regional and global powers are interdependent through positive trade and alliance links or negative military stand-offs, and they will be tempted to gain the upper hand in some of the issues of their mutual interest through an expanded participation in a power game in the Caucasus.

## The International System, Its Complexity, and Interdependence

The international system is a complex system, with its structure and units. The structure displays variation as the interacting units engage each other with distinct patterns as great powers rise and fall, and world order experiences change. Globalization would be one of the many variations of international structure, which currently dominates world affairs, and as such it largely depends on the factor of growing interdependence among the main units of the system.

Kenneth Waltz has outlined the main characteristics of the international system, identifying the units as the nation-states, and distribution of power among them as system’s structure.<sup>3</sup> According to him, the units interact and thus form structure; and the units and structure comprise the system. The

<sup>3</sup> See: K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1979.

latter, however, also influences unit behavior. In other words, the units and the system mutually recreate each other with structure being intermediary; however, obviously they both cannot be the primary source of the other at the same time.

Waltz's explanation of international politics is, perhaps, one of the most advanced and distinct to the date; however, his point on how the system and the units influence each other represents a vicious circle as the system is explained/created by the units, while the system explains/creates unit behavior. In the international system, the idea of unit behavior is not exclusively ascribed to the legally recognized states alone, otherwise called "sovereign nation-states," but includes behavior of various "governments," government-like entities or "poles of power"—they deemed to be affecting structure of the system as well.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, "government" is frequently identified with "the state" as it is assumed that governments and those who speak for them uniformly and universally represent their respective states, and as such are identical with them.

Logic and evidence could suggest otherwise, especially in the times when more and more international issues and actors arise. There must be a distinction made between the state and government (and government-like entities). Such organizations as Hamas or Hizbollah, self-proclaimed entities like Upper Karabakh or Abkhazia, insurgent groups like those in Colombia, Afghanistan or Pakistan clearly are not nation-states, but their behavior in the system significantly affects other actors. In terms of their basic functions, such groups, whether they are terrorist organizations or multinational corporations, perform similar functions to governments—all of them have at least some degree of legitimacy, could exercise power, and conduct policies according to their preferences.

In short, the international system is better described as a unity of "governments" and structures, i.e. a set of organized power centers and distribution of power among them. The international system affects behavior of nation-states, most of which have their central governments as their seats of power, but some may have more than one centers of organized power. "Nation-states" clearly differ from "governments" as they possess recognized and defined international boundaries that contain human societies within them. Indeed, these nation-states represent the main preoccupation for all the "governments"—most of them want to preserve their own, others want to acquire them, still others want to destroy or dismember those headed by rival governments.<sup>5</sup> More often than not states do not act with one voice—that of their governments—and this is more pronounced in non-Western and developing regions of the world where some many national governments are openly challenged by alternative, separatist, rebel "governments" that often times work against interests of the state they are formally part of.<sup>6</sup>

Behavior of the main units of the system, governments, in the international system, thus, produces feedback loops. Often times, centers of organized power or governments act in order to change and/or affect others; however, some effects of their own actions are fed back to them in such a way that their own behavior or make-up could be altered. For instance, Afghanistan's Taliban government's decision to give sanctuary to al-Qa'eda within the geographic space they controlled, and allow them to operate autonomously, eventually resulted into a powerful feedback loop, which saw them deposed from power by the end of 2001.<sup>7</sup> Government leaders and policy-makers frequently consider feed-

<sup>4</sup> F. Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> See: W. Etmayer, *Alte Staaten—neue Welt: Stabilität und Wandel in den internationalen Beziehungen*, Trauner Verlag, Linz, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Such "nation-states" as the Democratic Republic of Congo or Somalia could serve as the best examples of these. In some, international organizations could have almost as much power as locally elected governments; this could be the case, for instance, in Bosnia and Kosovo (that is, if one recognizes Kosovo as an independent state).

<sup>7</sup> At that time, Afghanistan had three main centers of power or "governments": the Taliban regime, al-Qa'eda, and the Northern Alliance cornered by the former two into a northeastern part of the country.

back loops of their own international actions as most realistic people would avoid doing things that may harm themselves and their own groups in the states they are part of.

Feedback loops do not always work the same way, and very seldom they produce the same results. That is, actions by some governments may produce strong feedback against their states, and similar actions by others may not.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that the international system is a non-linear, non-deterministic one. Linear systems always produce effects that are directly proportional to their causes. This may look like a trivial statement, but some social theories, such as Marxism and fascism, assume linear nature of the international system, as well as various conspiracy theories. The international system is anarchic not only because of the absence of the overall system-wide authority, but also because of behavior of its units that defies deterministic logic. Future behavior in such a system could be predicted with a certain degree of accuracy; however, much like long-term weather predictions could be made with a certain degree of precision.

The international system as a complex system was created in mid 17th century Europe by warring princes affiliated with different denominations of the Christian church, but since its structure has evolved and has displayed numerous variations.<sup>9</sup> Governments in charge of nation-states have remained dominant units of the system, but structure of the system or distribution of power has exhibited change and adaptation. The Cold War witnessed structural bipolarity at the global level, preceded by less predictable multipolar arrangements in the international structure. The end of the Cold War and the disappearance of a global rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States once again gave rise to a multipolar world power structure.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of new multipolarity has coincided with the increased significance of energy resources in international politics, as all wealthy and growing economies are highly oil and natural gas dependant while the world crude oil supplies continue to get diminished.

The international system is an open system as it needs close interaction with and support by other systems, most importantly by natural environment. To sustain or increase states' wealth and power, societies need to extract the necessary resources from the natural environment, and subsequently dump byproducts and refuse of the economic production cycle into the same environmental system. This close and necessary interaction of the international system with natural environment furthers depletion of resources, damage to the environment, and fosters competition for diminishing natural resources among governments. The existing structural arrangements in the international system currently manifest in globalizing trends assume the possibility of and encourage unlimited economic growth, while the natural energy reserves cannot possibly provide unlimited supplies. The contest for limited and diminishing resources coupled with unlimited growth goals also attracts global attention to such seemingly remote and seemingly insignificant conflicts as the Upper Karabakh.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, in 1995, Croatia was successful at retaking by force its breakaway provinces without much damaging feedback against the Croatian state, while similar attempts by the government of Georgia in 2008 triggered de facto dismemberment of the Georgian state.

<sup>9</sup> R. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> Discussions of a "unipolar world" that occasionally have occurred since the early 1990s do not make sense, just like a notion of a piece of magnet with only one pole does not. Analytical concept of "poles of power" only makes sense if there are at least two of them in active or potential opposition to each other (for instance, see: C. von Clausewitz, *On War*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1976, Book I, Chapter 1, or any other authoritative edition of the volume).

<sup>11</sup> Data on world and regional oil and gas production and consumption is frequently published by professional journals, such as *World Oil* [<http://www.worldoil.com/>] and *Oil & Gas Journal* [<http://www.ogj.com/>], governments, such as the U.S. Energy Information Administration [<http://www.eia.doe.gov/>], and those who worry about diminishing supplies drum alarm (see: The Oil Drum, "World Oil Production Forecast—Update May 2009," available at [<http://www.theoil Drum.com/node/5395>]).

## Parochial Interests of International Actors

The Caucasus could be analyzed as an international subsystem. This designation is, of course, theoretical and requires a degree of abstraction in order to consider a collection of units (governments or organized centers of power) as a coherent whole somewhat abstracted from the larger international system.<sup>12</sup> Three sovereign governments, those of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, as well as three self-styled entities, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Upper Karabakh comprise this subsystem due to many centuries-old shared history and geography.<sup>13</sup> Since the end of the 18th century, the Caucasian subsystem has been an arena of competition among the three dominant neighboring states, Iran/Persia, Turkey/the Ottoman Empire, and Russia/U.S.S.R. Occasionally, throughout history great global powers have managed to find their way into the regional game, for instance, the British after World War I, and the Americans after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Few regional processes/phenomena give the Caucasus its global significance.

- First, crude oil reserves found in Azerbaijan designate the subsystem as significant in the context of global energy supplies.
- Second, the Caucasus holds strategically significant location between the Black and Caspian Seas providing the only alternative land-bridge from Europe to Central Asia and back bypassing Russia and Iran. Oil and natural gas fields of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan add to this strategic and economic significance of the subsystem.
- Third, the frozen/protracted conflicts around Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Upper Karabakh globalize regional processes by getting a variety of international players involved.

Those engaged in the region are not limited to world governments, but include international organizations (the U.N., EU, NATO, CIS, OSCE, etc.), a plethora of non-governmental organizations, and international corporations (mostly attracted by oil and gas business). Vast majority of the international actors involved in the Caucasus are more interested in the preservation of the status quo and “stability” than they are in “resolution” of the regional conflicts even though many of them have been sent to the Caucasus with some kind of “conflict resolution” mandate.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, the international actors in the Caucasus are connected to their respective capitals, most of which are found in the West, and these capitals do carry their own interests and priorities in international relations. Therefore, it should not be unnatural to allow that, to some degree, the internationals involved in the Caucasus are defended by their respective capitals and public opinion, and vice versa, organizations originating from the local societies respond to their respective interests and priorities. Since, no Western capital faces critical circumstances in the Caucasus threatening their own survival or well-being, they generally should be willing to play along with their nationals in the region, the parochial interests of whom should lay in the preservation of the status quo, especially if the existing and future jobs and trade issues are to be upset by a potential conflict. Naturally, one should

<sup>12</sup> For more on the Caucasus as a region comprised of three nation-states, see: L. Tchantouridze, “The States of the Caucasus and their Neighbours,” in: *Coming Together or Falling Apart? Regionalism in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. by S.N. MacFarlane, QCIR, Kingston, 1997; De Ya. Breault, P. Jolicœur, J. Lévesque, *La Russie et son ex-empire: reconfiguration géopolitique de l’ancien espace soviétique*, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> In addition, one could specifically consider economic links as contributing factor of regional formation (see: V. Papava, *Central Caucaso-Asia (Essay on Geopolitical Economy)*, Siakhle, Tbilisi, 2009, in Georgian; E. Ismailov, “New Regionalism in the Caucasus: A Conceptual Approach,” *The Caucasus & Globalization: Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*, Vol. 1 (1), 2006).

<sup>14</sup> See: O. Ramsbotham, T. Woodhouse, H. Miall, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2009.

expect much outcry and criticism to be directed against the side to a military conflict, which would be the most likely benefactor of war, and a real or perceived disturber of “stability.” Georgia’s case provides a good example—the European Union sponsored commission essentially blamed Tbilisi for August 2008 war, although the country was invaded by a more powerful neighbor, Russia, and parts of its territory were seized as a consequence.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, it would be unreasonable to expect Baku to be supported by any significant international actor if it were to try regaining the Upper Karabakh and other lost territories by force. Unless the actors are connected with hard core interests with a potential success by Azerbaijan, even brotherly nations, such as Turkey, are likely to look the other way. Ironically, globalization of a regional conflict also makes it an international business, and as international business benefits more from the preservation of status quos, interests of international actors do not coincide with those of regional players directly involved in the conflict.

## A Future War for the Upper Karabakh

The war for the Upper Karabakh fought between Armenia and Azerbaijan resulted into a self-styled “independent” Upper Karabakh entity with the capital in Stepanakert (Khankendi). Although de facto the Stepanakert region is not distinguishable from Armenia proper, as it has no distinct foreign and defense policy of its own, it still potentially impacts the international sub-system of the Caucasus through its mere presence, and its potential to become a de facto independent entity from Armenia. If future events were to lead to the direction of separation of foreign and defense priorities between Erevan and Stepanakert, Baku will likely benefit from it. On the other hand, if Stepanakert were to remain strictly under Erevan, it could potentially be used by the latter to manipulate its future relations with Azerbaijan and/or other neighbors, which most likely would trigger more hard-line policies from Baku.

Complexities of a tripartite relationship around the Karabakh would be more apparent if military activities to resolve the frozen conflict were to be renewed. In the case of war, the leadership in Stepanakert would be more hard-line than that in Erevan, as they would be the chief recipients of the enemy’s missiles and bombs. They are also more likely to lose if Baku prevails, more than the leadership in Erevan—a protracted war with Azerbaijan would see well-being of their families and supporters erased, not to mention human casualties. Accordingly, the leadership in Stepanakert would be more committed to military defense of their region at all costs than the leadership in Baku would be committed to its recovery as their fortunes will not be threatened as dramatically if Azerbaijan’s offensive fails. The ordinary Armenian inhabitants of the Upper Karabakh would also be more passionate in their opposition to Azerbaijan, and more dedicated to defend their self-styled republic than ordinary Armenians in Armenia proper or Azeris would be willing to sacrifice themselves in the effort to bring the break-away region back. In a future war, Stepanakert’s self-defense forces most likely will be outgunned and dwarfed by Azerbaijan’s armed forces, except that they will most likely receive major help in both manpower and arms from Armenia proper, and other supporters, such as Russia and Iran. Stepanakert and Erevan are more on the same page and rather inseparable when it comes to military forces (unlike their leaderships and population), as without Erevan’s help

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<sup>15</sup> Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia [<http://www.ceiig.ch/Report.html>]. The title of this commission itself is biased as it does not imply an interstate war between Georgia and Russia, but “conflict in Georgia.”

the self-styled republic's armed forces are not likely to survive the Azeri assault, and the defenses of Armenia proper will become exposed and vulnerable, if the self-styled republic were to collapse dramatically.<sup>16</sup>

No doubt, a renewed war for the Upper Karabakh will find reaction in public opinion and political leaderships around the world. As the Armenians in the self-styled republic will be essentially fighting for their survival, chances are very good that public opinion will sway in their favor, especially if the war drags on, as public opinion generally favors the underdog and sympathizes with those under attack. The political leaderships in both Erevan and Stepanakert will also better manage public relations campaign through separate or joint appeals for help, assistance, peace, ceasefire, etc. than the government in Baku. Stepanakert and Erevan will be better positioned to get support from their traditional allies, Moscow and Tehran, than Baku will get from its only true ally, Ankara. Such support of the Armenian forces would be even more forthcoming and substantial were the Azeri forces to achieve success at initial stages of their campaign.

When it comes to global great powers, especially the United States, they will not likely get involved in the conflict, unless it goes out of control and spreads beyond the issue of the Upper Karabakh, which is a highly unlikely scenario. However, public opinion in the United States will most likely support the Armenian side. Not only the Armenians have a well-established and better organized ethnic lobby in the United States only second to the Jewish lobby, they are also more likely to generate opinions favorable to their cause through their numerous Armenian studies university-based centers, programs, scholars, think tanks, publications, and Armenian-oriented NGOs.

If public opinion in the U.S. and other Western democracies sways in favor of the Armenian side, Baku may well forget about private assurances of help and promises of support routinely made in Washington and other Western capitals. In cases of war, public opinion is the king in Western democracies and very few politicians will risk voicing support for those whom public opinion does not approve.<sup>17</sup> Many may sympathize with the Azeri cause, but if a future military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan were to drag on, as it will inevitably do, Western opinion will be on the side of a more familiar party, moreover if it were to face some harsh measures through the conflict or in the aftermath.

It should also be noted that the conditions for a potential military solution of the Karabakh issue will be created by the overall international situation around the Caucasus. If Iran were to be weakened by U.N.-sponsored sanctions (or military reprisals by the U.S.), and/or Russian power undermined by its own domestic strife and/or poor economic, social or demographic conditions, the initial and decisive stages of war may witness larger and forceful involvement of Turkey. Either of these scenarios seeing Iran and Russia weakening dramatically is unlikely in the near future; however, quite possible in the long run: Tehran has not shown any signs of making concessions to the West, and structural weaknesses of the Russian Federation will one day yield their harmful effects on the country. If such circumstances were to arise, Erevan and Stepanakert will not be able to effectively counter a joint Azeri-Turkish onslaught, and that is probably why it is crucial for Erevan to find some kind of common language with Ankara sometime soon.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> When considering possibilities of a future war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the study of their respective strategic cultures would be an important factor in estimating potential outcomes (see: J.S. Lantis, D. Howlett, "Strategic Culture," in: *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, ed. by J. Baylis, J. Wirtz, C.S. Grey, E. Cohen, Oxford University Press, London, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Connections between public opinion and war have long been studied in the West. They deemed to be of significance even during less interconnected international structures (see: E. Luard, *Peace and Opinion*, Oxford University Press, London, 1962).

<sup>18</sup> The ongoing rapprochement between Ankara and Erevan has been rejected by some powerful voices in Armenia objecting to giving too many concessions to Turkey (see: "Oskanian Rejects Armenian-Turkey Protocols," *The Civilitas Foundation*, 22 September, 2009, available at [<http://www.civilitasfoundation.org/cf/discussions/227-oskanian-rejects-armenia-turkey-protocols.html>]).

In a new war to erupt around the Upper Karabakh, peacetime diplomatic orientation and activities of Baku, Stepanakert, and Erevan will likely continue only with a more urgent and energetic pace. Peacetime allows the participants of the “frozen conflicts” to adopt a wait and see approach, a luxury which cannot be imagined in wartime. If the Karabakh conflict were to reignite, there is no telling how rash and frantic policies by governments in Baku, Stepanakert or Erevan may influence their respective states (a state-like entity in Stepanakert’s case) and societies. Rash and unwise decisions made in the late 1980s and early 1990s by political leaders in Baku, Stepanakert, and Erevan eventually contributed to deaths of tens of thousands, displacement of more than a million people, and created two decades of abnormal economic conditions in both countries.

## Concluding Remarks— Complexity Remains

The case of the “frozen conflict” of the Upper Karabakh appears to be far from a simple diplomatic or military solution. The conflict has lasted too long, initially as an active military engagement, and then as a frozen one, to allow for a straightforward disentanglement of potentially explosive issues. Interests of international actors are powerfully entrenched in this region as well, and any attempt to forcefully change the status quo will trigger negative feedback loops, and public opinion outcries throughout the world. The Caucasus’ increased interdependence with the outside world plays into the hands of the Erevan/Stepanakert side, and Baku cannot possibly go against this dominant trend in world politics without incurring criticism and damages in the process.

The United States has consistently pushed for interdependence in trade (frequently and commonly dubbed as support for “free trade,” “open markets,” and opposition to protectionism, mercantilism, socialist or pro-Soviet minded governments), and for interdependence in security matters (support for global and regional military alliances, their enlargement, “coalitions of the willing,” etc.). An outbreak of hostilities in the Caucasus would be upsetting to such trends, especially at very delicate junctures in international affairs when the world is facing economic or financial crises or nuclear stand-offs with Iran and North Korea. Strategic significance of the Caucasus region, and the oil reserves that tie it with many threads to the larger international system create an inescapable conundrum for Azerbaijan, for which there is neither a quick answer nor an easy solution.

The satisfactory settlement of the Upper Karabakh issue will most likely be a lengthy and daunting process influenced by shifts in power balance both regionally and globally. Public opinion in Western states, and the ability of the parties involved to influence it, especially in societies of great powers, will also affect the conditions of a potential settlement scenario. There are no longer isolated conflicts or obscure and irrelevant wars in the world—at least for the time being, the world is deeply interconnected through both power relations and information noise.