



**Discussion  
Paper**

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## **Securing an Armenian-Azerbaijani agreement: the roles of international and local security providers**



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Peace monument in the central Azerbaijani city of Mingachevir. © Farman Nabiyeu

## Introduction

Mutual insecurity is a primary driver of the Nagorny Karabakh (NK) conflict and a dominant factor in contemporary Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Three episodes of communal violence and war in 1905, 1918-20 and 1988-94 dominate modern Armenian-Azerbaijani history. The outcomes of the 1991-94 Karabakh war included the segregation of Armenian and Azerbaijani populations, forced displacement of more than a million people, and the establishment of a self-regulating ceasefire line – without any peacekeeping forces and/or permanent military observers – far beyond the territory originally under dispute.

Low-intensity conflict has recently increased along the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in addition to regular skirmishes along the 260-kilometre Line of Contact (LoC), adversely affecting the lives of local populations. Meanwhile high levels of military spending, the diversification

of LoC and border incidents and their spread to new areas, in addition to rhetoric validating the use of force, are embedding insecurity and closing off public debate of peaceful alternatives.

The current peace proposal, known as the Madrid Principles, addresses the issue of insecurity through the envisaged deployment of an international peacekeeping operation, as part of a wider security package. This would be implemented alongside other key measures in the Madrid Principles, such as withdrawals from occupied territories, a right of return for all displaced communities, the establishment of a land corridor between NK and Armenia, as well as an interim status, guaranteeing security and self-governance, to the *de facto* authorities in NK. Beyond a fixed-term peacekeeper deployment, however, imagining future Armenian-Azerbaijani cohabitation and political arrangements involves a much wider-ranging set of challenges for the transformation of security.





*View of the meeting point between Armenia, Nakhchivan/Azerbaijan and Turkey, from the road to Goris (Armenia).  
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Despite the measures foreseen in the Madrid Principles, insecurity currently figures as a common argument as to why a peace agreement is unrealistic, unattainable or even dangerous. Consequently, even the advocacy of peace itself is securitised. It is therefore important to identify post-agreement security challenges now, and explore what kind of mechanisms and structures could meet them, even if post-agreement scenarios remain for now hypothetical. This is necessary to overcome the ironic perception that peace is more dangerous than the militarised and unstable status quo in the region today.

This discussion paper identifies several such security challenges, and considers possible

responses on the basis of international experience. It is based on discussions at a meeting of the Karabakh Contact Group (KCG), a platform for collaborative thinking on issues facing the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process. Facilitated by Conciliation Resources since 2010, the KCG was on this occasion hosted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace over two days in Washington in December 2014, and brought together Armenian and Azerbaijani civil society activists, policymakers and international experts on security and the Karabakh conflict. Subsequent KCG discussions on this topic that have fed into this publication were held separately in the region and engaged a wider circle of local expert opinion.

## 1. Securitising the status quo

Militarisation has been a key trend in the Karabakh conflict over recent years. Whether through rearmament on the basis of oil revenues (Azerbaijan) or through geopolitical and military alliance with the Russian Federation (Armenia and the Armenians of NK), military competition is increasingly prominent, exacerbated by currently high degrees of fluidity and uncertainty in the

surrounding international context. The military fragmentation and confused lines of command of the 1991-94 Karabakh war have become more professionalised armies with substantial budgets. In some areas local commanders have reportedly also been given increased decision-making authority, raising concerns about the potential for local escalation. In a worrying sign

of escalation, higher-ranking combatants have been counted among recent casualties, although conscripts continue to make up most of the 40,000 troops deployed along the LOC and the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border to the north (totalling nearly 570 kilometres), and a majority of the casualties.

Violence in the LOC area and along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan has increased and diversified. Although the reporting of casualties is inevitably unreliable and politicised, as many as 72 combatants were reported killed in 2014, the highest number since the 1994 ceasefire and effectively a doubling of casualty rates in recent years. In November 2014 an Armenian helicopter was shot down near the LOC, the first time that aviation has been downed since the ceasefire. Military exercises are regularly held in the vicinity, adding to tensions and an atmosphere of escalation. The sole body mandated to monitor the LOC as a confidence building measure (whose field visits are agreed in advance by all parties) is the Personal Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk, and five field assistants.

In the framework of the 1994 ceasefire agreement, the conflict parties have agreed in principle to the deployment of a multinational OSCE peacekeeping

operation. A High Level Planning Group (HLPG) was mandated in 1995 to plan and provide technical recommendations to the Chairperson-in-Office for such a deployment (see box below). Without a comprehensive agreement, however, a peacekeeping operation remains hypothetical, and the post-framework agreement security package unclear. Ambiguity as to how an agreement would provide for basic human security fundamentally undermines both imagining and advocating for a peaceful settlement.

In attempting to build scenarios for a post-agreement security package, KCG discussions highlighted movement from “hard” to “soft” security regimes. In a fixed-term initial phase international deployment would be envisaged in support of a harder security regime capable of meeting post-settlement challenges, such as the return of displaced communities. After a transition from, and withdrawal of, international actors, local agencies would assume responsibility for long-term “soft security”. Security scenarios ultimately need therefore to allow for movement from a concept hard enough to prevent recurrences of tragedies such as Srebrenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995, towards a softer concept of “borderless normality” associated with uninhibited movement, mingled populations and local policing.

## The High Level Planning Group

The OSCE High-Level Planning Group (HLPG) was established in 1994 with an open-ended mandate, issued on 23 March 1995 and supplemented by OSCE Chairperson-in-Office (CiO) directives. It was mandated to make recommendations to the CiO on a multinational OSCE peacekeeping force for the “area affected by the conflict dealt with by the OSCE Minsk Conference.” Within the OSCE, those recommendations are therefore limited to the NK conflict and no other OSCE areas. With its capacity originally planned at 31 officers, it is currently composed of five seconded military officers who normally stay for a period of three to four years. The structure is headed by an appointee of the CiO (at the moment a Swiss national), and located in Vienna (although not in the same premises as the OSCE headquarters).

The HLPG reports directly to the CiO, and in cooperation with the Minsk Group co-Chairs and the Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office participates in monitoring exercises. Following its mandate (“... to make recommendations on, inter alia, the size and characteristics of the force, command and control, logistics, allocation of units and resources, rules of engagement and arrangements with contributing States”), the HLPG has developed four planning options, updated on an annual basis, which are only known in detail to the Parties. Planning is conducted in consultation with the involved parties, who rely on a veto right as well.

While the OSCE has gathered great experience in unarmed monitoring missions, a post-agreement deployment would be its first mission involving soldiers. It would demand the agreement of all 57 participating states and a UN mandate. The timeline for an actual deployment would depend on a number of factors, in particular the willingness of OSCE states to contribute troops and consensus within the organisation. The HLPG synchronises its work with the Minsk Process and constantly keeps track of the developments on the ground, understanding itself as a purely technical organ.

## 2. Understanding the security calculus

Without knowledge of the contents of a comprehensive agreement, it is difficult to specify parameters for a security package to support it. Indeed, Armenian and Azerbaijani authorities reject any such exercise as premature and based on unfounded assumptions. Yet, this approach effectively postpones the planning for a post-agreement security architecture, and closes off public discussion on what the key security challenges to a framework agreement would be, and how they can be addressed. Moreover, the overarching framework of the Madrid Principles allows a certain number of assumptions to be made about other elements in the overall package.

Armenian and Azerbaijani positions accord different meaning and prioritisation to security. Armenian thinking on security prioritises the prevention of future repetitions of historical episodes of violence against Armenian communities. This drives a popular demand for self-reliance in hard security, reflected, for example, in the prominence of the “Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army” in NK. International involvement is seen as a dilution and surrendering of this self-reliance, especially in NK itself; in the words of one KCG participant, “it would be more efficient and cheaper to keep the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as a provider of security, than to transform it into a consumer of security.” For Armenia, military competition with Azerbaijan has motivated a deepening alliance with Russia, which contains a strong military component. This establishes a deterrence dynamic,

which is seen as preferable to the ceding of security provision to outsiders, and is reflected in another KCG participant’s view that “the best guarantee for regional stability is the preservation of balance.”

Azerbaijani perceptions of security are currently dominated by fears of entrenching an unfavourable status quo, in which Azerbaijani territory is seen to be under foreign occupation. Keeping the LOC area insecure is a way to challenge the normalisation of occupation and “frozen” conflict, a strategy currently supported by Azerbaijan’s substantial military purchasing power. Azerbaijan rejects military confidence-building and security-building measures in the LOC area and sees deepened international involvement in security arrangements as potentially weakening Azerbaijan’s leverage and influence to counter the stagnation of an unacceptable situation. Furthermore, there is no residual population of Azeris living in NK today, and hence no incentive to support interaction or transformation of the local security situation in NK itself. In the event of a comprehensive agreement, however, the mandated return of displaced communities would transform both Azerbaijani and Armenian outlooks on security. The viability of returnee communities in territory controlled by the other side would require international guarantees. In order to be sustainable, it would also require a transformed security relationship between Armenian and Azerbaijani authorities, as well as those in NK (whether enjoying interim or final status).

## 3. Armenian, Azerbaijani and international perspectives on peacekeeping

Although the deployment of peacekeepers has been hypothetically accepted by the parties and the OSCE, there is no consensus on scenarios. For the conflict parties, it is hard to imagine the introduction of a major new actor on the ground in a context that has seen no change in more than 20 years. For the international community, the political and financial capital required for a peacekeeping deployment, and lessons learned in other post-war contexts, drives a cautious approach.

Locally and internationally the reservations and contradictions surrounding mandate, longevity, location, armament and above all composition of any such operation are considerable, as detailed below.

### A. Mandate

KCG discussions highlighted the contrast between “traditional” and newer schools of peacekeeping. The former envisages “inter-positioning” of peacekeepers between hostile parties, and consequently a harder enforcement mandate. The latter imply a more holistic approach to peacekeeping involving not only traditional security actors such as the military and police, but also a wide range of other state and non-state actors, such as the judiciary, customs and immigration, ministries of defence and internal affairs, civil oversight mechanisms and civil society organisations.

For Azerbaijan a key concern is to reassert sovereignty and not to see the restoration of





*The Mrav mountain range (known in Azeri as Murovdag) and surrounding landscape in the north of Nagorny Karabakh © Conciliation Resources*

sovereignty over previously occupied territories restricted by a peacekeeping operation. This can drive concerns to see a more limited mandate for any such deployment. There may, however, be more openness to discuss a more extended mandate for a peacekeeping operation when this issue is placed in the context of overseeing the return of displaced communities. Yet the return of displaced communities need not be seen solely as a security risk, or as a “necessary evil” to legitimate a peace agreement. Armenian-Azerbaijani cohabitation can also be re-imagined as generating cross-community stakes in security, and hence as a kind of security guarantee. This approach requires a much longer-term capacity building process reaching into the period beyond international involvement.

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Armenian positions are cautious and sceptical about engaging in a discussion of an international peacekeeping mandate. Any such mandate is perceived in largely zero-sum terms vis-à-vis the role of Armenian security providers. As one KCG participant noted, “We don’t know whose

security will be being provided for, from whom and by whom...” Furthermore, Armenian arguments seek the clarification of the status of NK prior to discussion of peacekeeping mandates. If NK’s secession is ratified, as Armenians wish, then the need for peacekeeping diminishes and becomes symbolic. Finally, Armenian thinking predicated the deployment of peacekeepers on a transformation in political conditions. Belligerent rhetoric and a siege mentality would, in this view, make any peacekeeping deployment premature and even dangerous, as illustrated in various conflicts across the world where peacekeepers have been unable to fulfil their mandate and prevent recurring violence.

## **B. Longevity**

Parties’ preferences regarding the longevity of peacekeeping are moderated by the high likelihood of limited timeframes for international engagement. KCG discussions highlighted the lack of international appetite for extended peacekeeping operations today. According to one KCG participant, “The world is tired of long-term peacekeeping operations; if a settlement demands a long-term peacekeeping deployment, then it’s not seen as a settlement.” International engagements are more likely to seek fixed timeframes and clear exit strategies. If deployment appears to maintain a dysfunctional situation by separating people in the absence of real agreement, it will be unlikely

to gain support. These limitations emphasise the integral role of domestic security providers, and consequently, the importance of political change and public commitment to peace at both elite and societal levels.

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### C. Location

The location of peacekeeping deployment is contingent on the modalities of displaced community return and territorial withdrawals. KCG discussions highlighted variation in the likely local needs of different regions. This could point to multiple peacekeeping zones, with different profiles of deployment, mandate and responsibility. The return of Azerbaijanis to NK is the area that most clearly implies a need for traditional “inter-positioning”, at least in early phases; a local and specific security architecture could cover Shusha (known to Armenians as Shushi), or formerly Armenian-populated territories to the north of the LOC, for example, as shared locations. A different set of modalities would apply in Agdam or Fizuli, where Azerbaijani police forces would be policing Azerbaijani returnee communities. Particular difficulties are likely to attach to arrangements in Lachin and Kelbajar as strategic territories situated between Armenia and the former NK autonomous region.

In today’s environment, a zonal approach proposing variable mandates clashes with contemporary rhetoric attaching uniform sovereign claims to territory. Yet in the event of a comprehensive agreement, security challenges are likely to vary by locality. This also offers opportunities for agreements through locally-relevant trade-offs within an overall package.

### D. Armament

The question of peacekeeper armament is conditioned by the parties’ varying prioritisation of security, captured in this way by one KCG participant: “Azerbaijanis see a very small group of unarmed peace monitors; Armenians see the other end of the spectrum: one for one, fully armed peacekeeping forces.”

There is a wide spectrum of different types of peacekeeping mission, ranging from unarmed and civilian, to unarmed but not entirely civilian, to a more “traditional” armed and “inter-positioning”

mission. Doubts were expressed within the KCG regarding the viability of a purely civilian mission (which would effectively be an extension of the unarmed civilian monitoring mission active today) in an immediate post-settlement Karabakh context. Yet at the same time international preoccupation with defined and limited engagement naturally focuses attention on conflict parties’ capabilities and commitments to assuming responsibility on the ground. In the words of one KCG participant: “The robustness of an agreement has to come in political authority, not in peacekeeping numbers or armaments.”

### E. Composition

The composition of a future peacekeeping operation by national origin is the aspect currently attracting the most controversy. Highly variable degrees of trust in specific “great powers”, particularly Russia, negative perceptions of past experience of Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeeping operations elsewhere in the South Caucasus, and contrasting geopolitical vectors in the foreign policies of the conflict parties make agreement on peacekeeper selection elusive. Current fluidity in the wider Caucasus and Black Sea regions makes discussion of this issue especially difficult.

KCG discussions highlighted contrasting approaches to this issue. In the past there was reported to be a “gentleman’s agreement” amongst the mediators that peacekeepers would include “no Minsk Group co-Chair countries and no neighbours.” In the light of questionable capacity and commitment from countries neither involved nor close to the Caucasus, this approach was contrasted with a “regional stakeholder” approach. This would seek to establish stakes in security provision amongst those regional actors with interests and capacity, without giving any single one of them a dominant majority. Realistically as of this writing, Russian would be likely to be the lingua franca of any such force; Iran’s involvement in peacekeeping was also noted as a possible broadening of relevant stakeholders.

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The composition of peacekeepers could also vary by area of deployment, in order to accommodate geopolitical sensitivities; if some nationalities are more welcome in some areas than others, they could be deployed there. Nevertheless, there are

strong fears of “geopoliticised” peacekeeping ultimately compromising national sovereignty. Concerns regarding disproportionate representation in peacekeeping or dominance by any one country

could be met by clear, prior definitions of roles and geographic remit. There was a certain consensus in the KCG that it was better to involve potential “spoilers” than to exclude them.

## 4. The security commitment dilemma

The differences in emphasis and approach outlined above reveal a dilemma in strategising for Armenian-Azerbaijani security. The less the conflict parties offer in terms of commitment to de-securitising their relations, the less likely it is that broad-based international engagement will be forthcoming. Without this engagement, it is more likely that eventually peacekeeping will fall to regional actors more likely to have cross-cutting geopolitical agendas, which the parties do not want. This eventuality was captured by one KCG participant: “Either Armenians and Azerbaijanis do this together, with each other, by themselves, for themselves, or someone is going to do it for them.”

Yet the less that the international community offers in terms of specified commitments to securing an Armenian-Azerbaijani agreement, the less

incentive the conflict parties have to contemplate the necessary risks in moving to agreement. This reality was expressed in the comment: “Without a stable base for implementing a framework agreement, discussing peacekeeping takes us down a dangerous road where we’ll discuss fictional threats and opportunities and miss the real ones.” More explicit international commitments to a post-agreement security architecture could contribute to mitigating this dilemma.

*“Either Armenians and Azerbaijanis do this together, with each other, by themselves, for themselves, or someone is going to do it for them.”*

## 5. Local policing

The likely limitations to any international peacekeeping deployment make it necessary to imagine the transition from international to local security provision and hence the future roles of local security providers. Unfortunately, the parties have never agreed upon the importance or validity of a local policing approach, so only the military aspect of post-agreement security has been thought about. This is bound to be a hypothetical discussion at the moment but without it, it is impossible to imagine post-settlement scenarios beyond segregation. Furthermore, as one KCG participant observed: “Without transforming governance, none of the military aspects would have the functionality or ratification to work... Unless this is an imposed peace.”

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As noted above, thinking on post-conflict security has evolved in recent years from a traditional concept of “inter-positioning” PKF to a more holistic approach premised on the reform of security sectors to become responsive to, and legitimate in, societies. This approach requires long-term, even generational, change in the way that key institutions such as the police, judiciary and civil oversight operate. Yet there is a relatively short window from agreement to implementation in which to develop capacity for a robust repertoire of local policing practices adequate to the context. In the KCG discussions it was observed that, “you don’t always have a lot of time before your peacekeeping force starts to look like an occupying one.”

This highlights the importance of consultative mechanisms providing for three-way communication between international deployments, local security providers and local communities. It also highlights the importance of securing commitment to addressing these issues as part of a framework agreement in as comprehensive a way as possible. While practice in other contexts differs, and in some instances issues that were not



specified at the negotiating table need to be fleshed out by commissions, committees or other bodies already at the implementation stage, there are risks in leaving much of the detail to a later stage when expectations of implementation are already high. It can be both possible and useful to undertake technical talks on specific issues in advance of a framework agreement, and discussions held at this stage to identify appropriate mechanisms could assist at various stages of implementation. This is in line with the Minsk Group co-Chairs' mandate that includes the promotion of "direct talks, as appropriate, and substantial talks, among the parties to the conflict." Armenians have strong reservations about starting such talks before an overall package, including the status of NK, has been agreed upon. However, such talks would not be limited specifically to security-oriented remits, and the work that could be done in advance to flesh out detail could make an agreement more robust when it comes to the implementation stage – hence helping to secure it. Such discussions may be limited to mainly governmental personnel but would have greater legitimacy if they also involved non-governmental participants and a degree of public consultation.

The issue of security sector reform in unrecognised entities is both sensitive and controversial, yet it is critical to making sustainable political arrangements and ensuring the return of displaced persons in the future. Discussion at the KCG of experience in other contexts highlighted that it can be possible to create conditions for a higher margin of tolerance for non-governmental organisations to engage with *de facto* authorities on security and justice issues. While it is hard to envisage progress being made on this vis-à-vis NK, institutional and security sector reform in NK remain central aspects to any post-settlement local policing perspective on security.

Work along the international *de jure* boundary between Armenia and Azerbaijan offers more possibilities at present than the highly politically-sensitive environment of the LOC, although it is still a challenging environment. A project initiated in 2014 by local partners supported by the UK-based NGO Saferworld has initiated a civilian monitoring scheme documenting ceasefire violations affecting civilians and their property. Work on this local level has successfully mobilised the natural pragmatism of local contexts and avoided the more political interests at play at the national level.

This publication is based on a meeting of the Karabakh Contact Group (KCG), an initiative established by Conciliation Resources in 2010 aimed at generating policy-relevant thinking about the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Held over two days in Washington in late 2014, this meeting brought together Armenian and Azerbaijani civil society activists, policy-makers and international experts on security and the Karabakh conflict. Subsequent KCG discussions on this topic that have fed into this publication were held separately in the region and engaged a wider circle of local expert opinion.

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## Possible entry points for future dialogue

### A. Specifying international commitment to security

A paper setting out what is required and anticipated in terms of international commitments to post-agreement security could clear some of the ambiguities and fears surrounding this all-important aspect to the peace process. Research could be undertaken by an international NGO or think tank drawing on best practice in the OSCE area, soliciting the views of key international actors and setting out a range of scenarios. This would help make clear to local actors the extent of support they may count on to minimise security risks in a post-agreement scenario, and help them to overcome the security commitment dilemma.

### B. Local security sector reform

International involvement in post-agreement security provision must be seen in terms of partnership and an eventual handover to local security providers. Long-term “micro-security” capabilities adequate for policing and providing security in challenging contexts of Armenian-Azerbaijani cohabitation require an overhaul of Armenian and Azerbaijani security sectors today. If the future security of returnees, and the populations among whom they would live in the Karabakh area, is to be provided for, this process must include *de facto* agencies in NK.

### C. Community perspectives on security

Institutions that have the capabilities, the values and the oversight to understand and provide security in a post-conflict situation need to gain legitimacy through citizen participation. Opportunities are extremely limited in today’s securitised context, but more work can be done in the *de jure* Armenian-Azerbaijani border area. This may be very local in its context (for example, cooperation on lost livestock, irrigation, documentation of ceasefire violations). Lessons learned can be taken up to the level of national policy.

### D. Planning for bridging the gap between agreement and implementation

There is a critical time-period between the signing of a framework agreement and the full negotiation of a comprehensive peace agreement when on-the-ground security provision will face special challenges. This underscores the need for comprehensiveness in agreements. Today’s extremely narrow negotiating format works against comprehensiveness, and could be extended to include meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani Ministers of Defence. Working groups, including a strong civil society and expert component, could also assist in the advance work of identifying the full range of issues to be addressed in a future, comprehensive agreement.

Cover photo: Soviet roof decoration (“Mir/Peace”) in a main street of Nagorny Karabakh’s capital. © Conciliation Resources

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