

# Self-regulating ceasefire

## Oksana Antonenko

For more than a decade the ceasefire line, or line of contact (LOC), separating Azerbaijan and *de facto* Armenian-controlled Nagorny Karabakh, has been observed by all parties without external peacekeepers or a permanent monitoring force. This self-regulating aspect of the ceasefire line is unique to the Karabakh conflict. In other conflicts where no political settlement has been reached, such as Kashmir or Cyprus, a third-party force (in these cases the United Nations) observes and sometimes enforces the ceasefire. In the former Soviet Union, a joint peacekeeping force composed of Russian, Georgian and North Ossetian units observes the ceasefire in South Ossetia; in both Abkhazia and Transnistria Russian peacekeepers are deployed under a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) mandate.

Limited instances of ceasefire violations, low casualty levels (around 200 dead and wounded) and no instances of military escalation beyond the LOC testify to the unprecedented success of this self-regulating system. Some experts believe that the ceasefire has been observed due to an existing military balance between the sides, assuring neither of military victory should a new confrontation occur. However, the question remains to what extent this system is sustainable and effective in the long run without any progress towards the political settlement of the conflict.

The Russian mediated ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan was drafted as an initiative of the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Federal Congress and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, and came into effect at midnight on 11-12 May 1994. However, mediators and parties to the conflict were unable to agree on the deployment of a peacekeeping force, the main obstacle being its composition. The Azerbaijani side rejected any involvement of a Russian-led peacekeeping force, yet the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE later OSCE – Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) lacked a mechanism to create a multinational peacekeeping force, and in any case Western armies were preoccupied with Bosnia.

On 5-6 December 1994 the OSCE Summit in Budapest agreed in principle that a multinational peacekeeping

force should be sent to Nagorny Karabakh. According to the OSCE initiative, this force would consist of 3,000 soldiers with no country providing more than 30 per cent. Following the Budapest summit the OSCE established the High-Level Planning Group (HLPG) mandated to make recommendations regarding the deployment of an OSCE peacekeeping force. However, the HLPG document made the deployment of the peacekeeping force dependent on the successful implementation of the political settlement process. Without progress towards a political settlement no peacekeeping force could be deployed.

In the absence of a permanently deployed force, OSCE monitors carry out monitoring of the LOC through regular visits. These visits are announced in advance and involve visits separately to both sides of the LOC from Azerbaijan and from Armenia. In the past monitors also made symbolic crossings of the LOC after a corridor had been de-mined by both sides. However, these crossings have ceased after an incident involving a mine that exploded. This system includes neither the permanent presence of monitors nor any element of surprise. It also does not incorporate any confidence-building measures between the forces deployed on both sides of the LOC, between which no clear rules of engagement exist in the absence of a political settlement. As a result both the *de facto* authorities of Nagorny Karabakh and the government of Azerbaijan maintain high levels of military presence at the line as well as a well-developed infrastructure of trenches and other fortifications. A number of measures have been discussed, including possibilities for a direct 'hotline' of communication between commanders, cooperation on pest control with benefits for both sides, and the exchange of information regarding non-strategic minefields.

If a settlement is reached, the issue of deploying a peacekeeping force will again be raised in accordance with OSCE decisions. Under these circumstances peacekeeping forces will most likely be mandated not to observe the line of separation between the parties to the conflict, but to promote safe movement of people, observe some disarmament and confidence-building measures and possibly to oversee the process of refugee return. However, the old disagreements remain regarding the composition and rules of engagement of any future peacekeeping force. The Armenian side supports the deployment of a Russian-led force along the LOC, while the Azerbaijani side supports the deployment of a bigger international force throughout the entire conflict area, with a much broader mandate including support for refugee return. In the meantime, however, making OSCE inspections more intrusive and implementing minor confidence-building measures could help to make the system more effective.

**Oksana Antonenko is the Programme Director for Russia and Eurasia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London.**