The OSCE: Neutral and impartial in the Karabakh conflict?

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In September 1991 President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and Russia's Boris Yeltsin intervened in the Karabakh conflict in order to bring peace, but they did not succeed. The Iranian government followed suit in early 1992 and met the same fate. President Nazarbayev made a single-handed attempt in August 1992 and terminated his effort in frustration. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and Russia, in competition with the CSCE, intervened as third-party mediators, but fared no better than the other mediators. The Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is currently co-chairing the intervention and it is proving to be equally stunted. Actually, the CSCE/OSCE peace efforts have been in progress since February 1992.

In January 1992 the European Parliament, France, Iran, Russia and the United States called on the contentious parties to arrive at a peaceful settlement of the conflict. The OSCE Chairman-in-Office (CIO), Jiri Dienstbier, dispatched a 12-member Rapporteur Mission to the Caucasus to evaluate the Karabakh conflict in February 1992. The Mission concluded that the conflicting parties 'attach great importance to their participation in the OSCE process, confirm their willingness to contribute to security and cooperation in Europe, and welcome OSCE involvement in resolution of their differences'. The report provided data and refrained from making accusatory comments aimed at any one party. The report set the tone for an impartial approach to OSCE intervention. In March 1992 the OSCE Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) recommended that the OSCE 'convene as soon as possible a conference on Nagorno-Karabakh under the auspices of the CSCE, to provide an ongoing forum for negotiations towards a peaceful settlement of the crisis in accordance with the principles, commitments and provisions of the CSCE'.

Because it would be cumbersome for 52 member states to mediate in the conflict, the OSCE established a small group composed of Armenia, Azerbaijan, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Belarus, Turkey, and the United States, called the Minsk Group. According to John J. Maresca, the former US Ambassador to the OSCE and former special US negotiator for Nagorno-Karabakh, in 1992 there was fairly high-level Western interest in the

1. At the Budapest Summit in December 1994 the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was changed to the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). For the purposes of simplicity, and with the exception of quotations as appropriate, OSCE will be used for the remainder of this article.
Karabakh conflict, and it was 'this high-level American intervention' that insisted on the creation of the Minsk Group process. Their main mission was to mediate in this conflict in order to bring the warring parties to the table for face-to-face negotiations in order to 'negotiate an agreed political status for Nagorno-Karabakh'.

It is the political status of Karabakh around which the apparent intractability of the conflict revolves, to wit: the Armenians want separation from Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani government refuses to grant this separation. The issue highlights the controversy involving the right of a people to seek its own destiny (self-determination) versus the sanctity of international borders. The Armenians consider the Karabakh conflict to be a continuation of a people's determination to rid themselves of colonial bondage. Conversely, Azerbaijan considers the Karabakh Armenians to be armed rebels acting on the behest of Armenia to acquire additional territory.

The Minsk Group and the contending parties correctly concluded that the political status question could derail the 'peace process'. Consequently, it was agreed by all parties that the political status should be 'left until the convening of the formal Minsk Conference', and instead the Minsk Group should initially concentrate on helping the parties achieve an official cease-fire. It was also agreed that the official Minsk Conference would be convened in Minsk, Belarus. The Karabakh intervention marked the first time in its history that the OSCE committed itself to resolving a conflict as a mediator in a peace conference.

During the Budapest Summit of December 1994, the OSCE members 'strongly endorsed the mediation efforts' of the Minsk Group. The participating member states endorsed speedy negotiations to come to terms with a formal cease-fire which would 'permit the convening of the Minsk Conference'. As an organization, the OSCE did not advocate any position that supported either of the conflicting parties. At the 5th meeting of the Ministerial Council in Budapest on 8 December 1995, Decision No. 3 upheld the Minsk process as the sole forum for the settlement of the Karabakh conflict. Equally important, Decision No. 3 reaffirmed the goal of convening the Minsk Conference to peacefully come to grips with the political status of Karabakh.

OSCE documents substantiate the fact that all parties agreed that the status of Karabakh would be determined at a formal Minsk Conference orchestrated by