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It's the Process That Counts

By Cory Welt

"We are not in favor of process for the sake of process itself. We want results." So said Georgian Foreign Minister Gela Bezhuashvili on Thursday in addressing the lack of momentum for the peace process Georgia launched last year for resolving its conflict with the breakaway region of South Ossetia. For a peace process in its infancy, the foreign minister's expression of frustration was premature.

Frustration is, however, understandable in the case of the elaborate peace process next door over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. In anticipation of the highly touted meeting on Friday and Saturday of the Azeri and Armenian presidents in Rambouillet, France, observers insisted that after years of process it was high time for results. The new OSCE chairman, Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, said in January that a "window of opportunity" had opened for the Karabakh conflict to be resolved in 2006.

While cautioning against hopes for an immediate breakthrough, observers still suggested that the two presidents might sign a short document laying out basic principles for the next stage of negotiations. The meeting ended Saturday, however, with nothing signed, and international mediators said Armenian President Robert Kocharyan and Azeri President Ilham Aliyev had made little progress during their talks.

"Despite intense discussion, the positions of the two parties about some sensitive principles remain identical to what they have been over the past months," said a joint statement issued by French, American and Russian mediators.

Despite the dashed hopes, the apparent absence of progress at Rambouillet should not be taken to indicate that the Azerbaijani-Armenian peace process cannot succeed. It does, though, underline the fact that it is too soon to hope for a political settlement -- which, in the variant most often repeated during the last year, would include the withdrawal of Armenian troops from virtually all occupied Azerbaijani territory in exchange for Azerbaijan's consent to a future referendum on Nagorno-Karabakh's independence.

Azerbaijan is far from ready to sign an agreement that permits Nagorno-Karabakh, ever, to freely determine its political status. Alternatively, it is unimaginable that Armenia could be persuaded to agree to the return of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan as part of any formal agreement. Hopes that either of these "minimal" criteria for a political settlement can be finessed are misplaced. Fundamental transformations in Azerbaijani and Armenian perceptions of national identity and security have to occur before their leaderships will agree to one or another of these bases for a political settlement, no matter what other components of a deal there may be. Armenia and Azerbaijan are too far apart in their political ambitions to be able to produce such a compromise settlement.

But if final settlements to conflict are difficult to imagine, we can conceive of a compromise that is grounded in the process of settlement, rather than a permanent result. Armenia's return to Azerbaijan of territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh coupled with Azerbaijan's tacit acceptance of

Nagorno-Karabakh's unrecognized self-governance (and normalization of relations with Armenia) constitutes a realistic basis for compromise. By withdrawing from occupied Azerbaijani territories, Armenia will allow Azerbaijan to recover nearly two-thirds of the territory it has lost, achieve the return of almost all its internally displaced citizens, and gain continued de jure recognition of its territorial integrity. By normalizing relations with Armenia and tolerating a self-governing (if unrecognized) Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan will enable Karabakh Armenians to retain their security and political identity. Such a compromise will allow both sides to claim victory.

The problem, however, is that this compromise will also leave both sides with a fear that victory is fleeting. By withdrawing from Azerbaijani territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia will lose its bargaining chip and outer line of defense, even if it does retain a land corridor to the region. Armenia will thus only have bought Nagorno-Karabakh time until Azerbaijan, flush with oil revenues, again demands the return of the region, this time from a considerably strengthened position.

On the other side, by normalizing relations with Armenia and allowing Nagorno-Karabakh to develop freely, Azerbaijan will enable both of them to strengthen and consolidate their statehood, and set Nagorno-Karabakh on a trajectory toward independence or unification with Armenia that will be even harder to reverse.

This is where supporters of the peace process have to come in. To bring the sides ever closer to a compromise of "process without results," outside mediators must eradicate both Karabakhi Armenian fears of future vulnerability and Azeri fears of political defeat. Convincing Armenians that it will be impossible for Azerbaijan to use its liberated territories to threaten Nagorno-Karabakh while getting Azeris to agree that Nagorno-Karabakh's free development is of no consequence to their national dignity are the tasks that lie before outside mediators, as well as their partners within Azerbaijan and Armenia who are still committed to peace.

Even this late in the game, progress in the Karabakh conflict must still be defined in terms of process, not results.

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