

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

“Nagorno-Karabakh”

Guests:

**Ambassador Carey Cavanaugh, Professor, Patterson School of Diplomacy
and International Commerce, University of Kentucky, and Chairman,
International Alert;**

**Everett Price, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission for Security and
Cooperation in Europe**

Host:

**Alex Tiersky, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission for Security and
Cooperation in Europe**

TIERSKY: Hello, and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky.

Listeners, if I had to boil the work of the Helsinki Commission down to a few core objectives, very high on that list would be the simple and seemingly straightforward goal of preventing conflict. Indeed, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which inspired Congress to create our commission, set out what is known to insiders as the famous so-called decalogue, or ten principles, to guide relations among the countries that signed up to the Helsinki Final Act. Now, that act now commits 57 countries of the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. These countries range from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as the saying goes.

The act includes principles like refraining from the threat or use of force. Another principle is the inviolability of frontiers. Another is territorial integrity – a commitment to the territorial integrity of states. Another is the peaceful settlement of disputes. Yet another commitment pertains to equal rights and self-determination of peoples. So despite governments committing at the highest levels to these principles, peace across the region remains stubbornly out of reach. Indeed, the region has seen a number of military conflicts since the Helsinki Final Act was signed.

Well, on today's episode we want to bring your attention to one of the longest running of these conflicts, a conflict that some believe exposes the friction between some of these core Helsinki Final Act principles. Today's podcast is about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which involves principally Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also so many other regional players. Listener, if you aren't very familiar with the ins and outs of this conflict, don't worry. You're in good company. This episode is for you. Your friends at Helsinki on the Hill have, as usual, drafted expert guides onto the show to instruct us all. So let me introduce them to you now.

First, I'd like to bring in Ambassador Carey Cavanaugh and introduce him to you. Ambassador Cavanaugh is a long-time expert on conflict resolution and diplomacy, a true scholar practitioner. Ambassador, thanks for joining us today.

CAVANAUGH: My pleasure.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, you had a tremendously impressive career as a Foreign Service officer at the Department of State, including in the most senior position dealing with this particular conflict from 1999 to 2001. We'll come back to that position a little later in our discussion but let me also mention you're also a professor at the University of Kentucky to some very lucky students. In your, quote/unquote, "spare time," you manage to also serve as chairman of International Alert, which is a major independent peacebuilding NGO which has its headquarters in London. Thanks, again, for joining us.

I want to also welcome to the microphone my good friend and colleague Everett Price. He's, like me, a senior policy advisor with the Commission. Everett, thanks for joining me today.

PRICE: Thanks for having me.

TIERSKY: So Everett carries a very broad regional portfolio at the Commission. It includes the South Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean, and OSCE Mediterranean partners for cooperation. He also supports the Commission's work on the Central Asian states.

Everett, I actually would like to start with you for a minute or two to give our listeners a really kind of wave-top description of this conflict, understanding that this is a really complex issue. We won't have time to delve into all of the ins and outs, all of the angles today. But let's start with the most basic question. Where is Nagorno-Karabakh?

PRICE: Nagorno-Karabakh is a disputed territory that lies between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the former Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, as the Soviet Union was collapsing, what was formerly an autonomous oblast, or an autonomous semi-self-governing region within the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan was at risk potentially of losing its autonomy and being integrated into Azerbaijan. The ethnic Armenians that constitute the demographic majority in that enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh feared that loss and feared, in some degree, for their security, because of historic tensions that had existed between the ethnic groups.

TIERSKY: OK. And there were a lot of people killed in the conflict.

PRICE: That's absolutely right. So the war raged from 1991 to 1994, at which point a ceasefire was signed. And that ceasefire continues to govern the conflict to this day. During the fighting about 20,000 lives were lost, and more than a million people were displaced in both directions.

During that conflict in the early '90s, Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence. That's a declaration that isn't recognized anywhere outside of Armenia. But essentially Armenians control Nagorno-Karabakh and all or part of seven Azeri provinces that surround it. Also, in response to the conflict, Turkey and Azerbaijan sealed their borders with Armenia, leaving Armenia only with land crossings to Georgia to the north and Iran to the south.

In April of 2016, a four-day war broke out that claimed about 200 lives in the course of just four short days of fighting. And that gave rise to a new urgency to see conflict diplomacy prevail in this region.

TIERSKY: Would you characterize it as a pretty tense situation today?

PRICE: It is absolutely very tense. There are regular ceasefire violations, though the good news is that in this past year, thanks to some informal agreements between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, there has been greater respect for the ceasefire terms, and historically low levels of casualties and ceasefire violations.

TIERSKY: Well, when I've read about this conflict, it seems to often be lumped into this category of what are thought of as, quote-unquote, "frozen conflicts," suggesting that maybe

nothing's actually happening, nothing will happen, and there's more or less a state of peace. What's your thought on that? Is this a frozen conflict?

PRICE: So you're absolutely right that that term is often applied to it. And I think increasingly people are getting away from that term and referring to these as protracted conflicts. And the fact that violence continues to erupt intermittently along what's called the Line of Contact – where the opposing militaries meet – testifies to the fact that the tensions at the core of these conflicts are never completely inert, and continue to flare up from time to time.

TIERSKY: That doesn't sound particular frozen to me.

I know this is an issue that the language itself that we use to talk about it can often be a bit controversial. It can make it difficult for us to have a kind of – a more casual conversation about this conflict. What's your thought on that? Is this – is this – how is language a part of how we talk about this issue?

PRICE: Sure. I'll be really interested to hear the ambassador's reflections on that given his long experience working on it. But it's true that the conflict is famously difficult to discuss. And even the most seemingly innocuous terms can be laden with political meaning for the sides and can lead to allegations of bias. I think one good example of this is the way that the OSCE discusses the conflict. The diplomatic process aimed at finding a resolution to the conflict is known as the Minsk process.

TIERSKY: So Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

PRICE: That's right. And the countries involved are called the Minsk Group, even though Minsk, as you said, is the capital of Belarus, which has no direct link to the conflict. In fact, Minsk wasn't even the place where the Minsk process got started. The senior OSCE diplomat following the conflict doesn't even have a reference to the region in question in his title. He's known enigmatically as the "Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson in Office on the Conflict Dealt with by the OSCE Minsk Conference."

TIERSKY: OK, so words clearly matter. Ambassador Cavanaugh, I'd like to bring you in here. What's your thought on this issue, first of all, of language, and how we talk about this issue?

CAVANAUGH: Well, I think language highlights that the solutions that need to be found here are diplomatic ones and not military ones. You see a situation where people are very passionate about what's taking place in the region, passionate about what their desires are. And how you express that, how you describe territory, who are local officials or national officials, how you describe the process itself becomes problematic. The title, as Everett just detailed, of the chairman in office's representative is a perfect example of that. It's a negotiated title, ridiculously long, to be able to not offend anyone. It's clear, you could point to it on a map, I could explain to my mother what this problem is in five words. But it would offend, no matter what, somebody on one side or the other if I boiled it down to that. And then I think the

challenge, how do you find a solution that works for all of them without boiling it down too much to become problematic too.

TIERSKY: Yeah. So I – when I introduced you, I alluded to a particularly relevant position you held during your time in government. In 1991-2001, you were at the so-called pointy end of the diplomatic spear on this conflict. Can you please tell us what that role was and how you approached it?

CAVANAUGH: Certainly. Actually, I have a long history dealing with this region of the world. I had been in Moscow during the collapse of the Soviet Union. I came back to the United States, to the U.S. Senate actually, and then returned following the breakup of the Soviet Union to open our embassy in Georgia. So I was in the Caucasus then. And started working – from the Senate side. I left, went back to State, and worked on regional conflicts in this area from the beginning, and in '99 moved up to being in charge of the U.S. effort of how would we deal with this precise issue of Nagorno-Karabakh.

At that time – the conflict, as we've already hinted at, had a somewhat convoluted history. The diplomatic process for it does too. Initially there was an OSCE effort and a separate Russian effort that was combined in the early 1990s, and in 1997 emerged an effort that entailed the United States, Russia, and France serving as equal co-chairmen of this Minsk process to deal with Nagorno-Karabakh. And I became the U.S. co-chairman of that Minsk Group.

TIERSKY: So, again, the other co-chairs of the Minsk Group process, other than the United States, are?

CAVANAUGH: France and Russia.

TIERSKY: OK. Let's sit on that for a second. It strikes me that Russia has a particular role in this region. Obviously, history would suggest as much. How do they approach this conflict? And how did they approach discussions with you in this co-chair Minsk process having to do with the conflict?

CAVANAUGH: Yeah. In answering that let me go back to this transition. As I said, initially their [Moscow's] view was they could do this by themselves. They didn't need to turn to OSCE. Europe had looked at OSCE as a new vehicle. It was a new institution to deal with conflicts in the European-Eurasian space, and felt that's where it should be dealt with. Russia didn't object to that but ran a parallel effort. Thinking, this used to be part of the Soviet Union. This is our backyard. We're the predominant local military power, predominant local economic power.

And what they discovered in the early years is that they couldn't solve it themselves. And it was clear to OSCE it couldn't be solved without Russia either. This fused the process. So as they fused them together, I think what emerged was an almost ideal negotiating format for Armenia and Azerbaijan. Here you had three veto-wielding members of the U.N. Security Council – you know, Washington, Paris, and Moscow. This is a serious issue, getting high-level

attention and a real commitment on the part of all three to work together to find it. It merged into a common process, with a surprisingly positive amount of cooperation that's lasted from 1997 to today.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, you've made it quite clear why Russia would have a particular interest in this conflict. You mentioned the Soviet history. You mentioned still in the Russian backyard. Why is this conflict relevant to the United States?

CAVANAUGH: It has been for a long time, and for a variety of reasons. One, when the Soviet Union collapsed, we had a view that we could do a lot to help here. We had a massive assistance effort under George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton to help them make this transition from what had been a communist system to a more open, free-market, democratic system. So we were engaged on that side.

We also have had, and been the beneficiaries of, a significant immigration from Armenia to the United States for decades, back to the last century. Actually, now two centuries back. And so there is a strong tie between Armenian-Americans back to Armenia itself. So we have a domestic political tie to that, a domestic political focus on how do we help the Soviet Union, and we had an economic tie.

This region of the world is known for its energy resources. We looked at this as a – following the collapse of the Soviet Union – an area that should be able to operate independently of Russia. And we made a major economic commitment, primarily through private investment, to look at how do you build an oil pipeline and gas pipeline structure that would allow energy resources from both the Caucasus and Central Asia to be able to reach European markets without going through Russia, which would mean without being under Russian control.

So for political reasons, cultural reasons, historic reasons, economic reasons we were drawn into this area to make a positive impact. The other piece, and I think it's already started to emerge in our discussion, this is a very unique piece of territory. Nagorno-Karabakh's not very big. Population, not very big. But if you look at where Nagorno-Karabakh lies, between Armenia and Azerbaijan, if you look at where this region lies, between Europe and Asia, between north and south, with the Caspian Sea on one side, in the east, the Black Sea in the West, it's a crossroads.

And it's a crossroads that brings together in historic terms the major European empires of the Russian Empire, the Persian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. So Turkey, Iran, Russia are all surrounding this region. And all of your listeners, I'm sure, are aware, the United States often has issues with Turkey, Iran and Russia. So political drawing is significant.

TIERSKY: Yeah. And I'll just call back to some of the figures that Everett cited for us earlier. The last all-out war between the sides resulted in, Everett, was it 20,000 lives lost and over a million refugees. So a real kind of conflict there is just apocalyptic.

OK, you've explained clearly why the United States should care about this conflict, and making sure it doesn't flare up, let alone getting to some sort of a definitive resolution of the

conflict. Talk to us about how the United States has engaged, both during your time at the State Department and since then. As a co-chair, you were involved in discussions, you mentioned, with the French and the Russians. How much weight was put behind those conversations? Talk to us about how the United States has approached trying to address this potentially dramatic conflict.

CAVANAUGH: I think we've approached this a very positive way. And I think it's one where we've shown – been able to show the potential that you can achieve with cooperation between Russia and the United States. And surprisingly, for all the issues that get raised about President Putin, Russia too has used this process to look at a very positive way of how do we engage to help on this. OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, was established under the principle of consensus. No member could be forced to do things they don't want to do.

TIERSKY: Everyone has a veto.

CAVANAUGH: Everyone has a veto. It makes the U.N. seem simple. (Laughter.) But there's a positive side to that. It makes people comfortable being able to fully explore what could be done with the understanding at the end of the day you'll still have the ability to say no. And what this peace process has led to is also a greater understanding that it isn't up to Russia, or the United States, or any outside country to impose solutions, but to work with parties to find one. And what the United States has done with this Minsk Group process is work with the key players that I've mentioned, France and Russia, to help find a solution. But it has to be a solution that's amenable to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. So that's been very positive.

While we've done that we've also worked bilaterally to provide economic and humanitarian assistance to the region itself, a significant amount to Armenia which does not have vast energy, oil and gas resources [like Azerbaijan]. And we've also worked through nongovernmental organizations to do things at local levels to improve both the situation on the ground from a humanitarian aspect, but also a political one that would be more conducive to cooperating with neighbors.

TIERSKY: Would you say this multilateral and bilateral approach has been pretty consistent over administrations.

CAVANAUGH: I think it has. And I think particularly on this conflict. I wish we had had a similar level of cooperation and engagement on Ukraine, for instance, where we saw the opposite – an outside power trying to impose changes on the ground militarily that has led us to where we're at a horrible impasse in many ways on Ukraine. And in Georgia we've seen some of that too. In Armenia-Azerbaijan, we have not. We're able to work here in a much more cooperative way.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, let's go to a specific instance of your engagement in this conflict, and trying to seek a solution. I know you were an absolutely key player in a summit meeting in Key West, Florida, that you helped organize. I'd love for you to talk to us about the leadup to that summit, what was the goal, and what you thought might have been achieved there,

and what the outcome of that summit was, and what that tells us about the issues that we've been discussing about how difficult this conflict is to address.

CAVANAUGH: I'd be glad too. And I think it fit into the discussion we were just having on this cooperative approach that emerged between France, Russia, the United States on the problem. Many people were surprised that early on in the Bush administration, one of the first acts he engages in and supports is the peace effort on Nagorno-Karabakh. It shouldn't be a full surprise. This tightness of cooperation between France, Russia, and the United States was done at a mediator level where we had, you know, Minsk Group co-chairs – that I was, as I said, the one for the United States – but also at the Secretary of State level, also at the presidential level.

So ten days into his presidency, President Bush gets a call from the French President Jacques Chirac, who wants talk about Nagorno-Karabakh. Chirac had just been talking to President Putin about Nagorno-Karabakh. And Putin had made an effort to try to get them to move a peace proposal forward. That wasn't quite working. So Chirac was bringing them all to Paris to make another pitch at it and making some headway. He brings it up with Bush in part because if that doesn't work it's the U.S. turn next. Would the United States be willing to engage to do that process?

President Bush had already had a conversation with Russia, a congratulatory one. Russia had also already raised Nagorno-Karabakh. So here an obscure area for many people, not obscure to a brand-new government who discovers, I need to know about this place. This place matters. And that led to peace talks in the United States in April of 2001, nearly three months after the president takes office.

TIERSKY: Mmm hmm. So these were the famous Key West talks.

CAVANAUGH: Key West talks.

TIERSKY: And can you talk about your role in organizing those talks?

CAVANAUGH: Sure. The challenge was with a new administration, how are you going to do this? Where are you going to do this?

Russia did not particularly want to have negotiations in Washington, D.C. We were fine with that. Actually, the White House didn't want to have negotiations in Washington, D.C., either. So that was convenient.

The French raised, don't have negotiations anywhere you've had them before; so don't do them at Camp David and don't do them at Wye Plantation, that kind of thing. And we accommodated that as well. The other thing the French were worried about, don't do it on a military base. We had already had the discussions on Bosnia –

TIERSKY: In Dayton.

CAVANAUGH: At Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. And this [Nagorno-Karabakh peace talks] shouldn't have a military cast. It had to have a political one. So my challenge was where do you find a venue that's conducive to these kind of talks?

I needed a place you could bring leaders they would be very happy – so not in a rush to leave. And one that had sufficient support structures – communications, military – to be able to do peace talks.

I had – something one does as a mediator – I'd worked on Greece-Turkey-Cyprus and other things before. And as you travel around the country, you're always keeping an eye out for appropriate venues. (Laughter.) I had one, the Grand Hotel on Mackinaw Island in Michigan, I'd always thought of. You know, if you ever need an isolated place, this was one. But this wasn't right for these talks. April in Mackinaw, there's still ice. (Laughter.) But I'd been at the Truman White House in Key West at one point.

And it offered something that was almost unbeatable: a presidential aura, but not Washington, D.C.; in a place that did not have a major Armenian American community; but did have a military base, and did have a significant Drug Enforcement Administration operation. So excellent communications back to Washington, reasonable security, and a place that you could bring the leaders to they'd be happy to come to.

It was funny at the time, I got dinged by Fox News. A local station here ran a story here in Washington – oh, you've chosen [Key West], I'm from Florida, to be close to your relatives. (Laughter.) And I had to explain I'm from Jacksonville. And actually, if I had done the talks in Washington, I would have been closer to my relatives than doing it in Key West, Florida.

TIERSKY: Well, it sounds like an absolutely delightful location. And, you know, I'm thinking now maybe we need to take the podcast on the road for our next episode.

But let's shift a little bit. It's a fascinating exposition on how you got to Key West, and this particular location that was so – you know, you set the table for some really useful negotiations. But of course, if you are ready to commit that the heads of state of France, the United States, Russia would participate – and, of course, the sides in the conflict – would participate in person in a summit meeting, you had to have some feeling of the contours of what they might decide on. Can you take us through what that –

CAVANAUGH: Some of that remains on the table today, so it's actually not fully public yet. But in 1999 the president of Azerbaijan, prime minister of Armenia, in a personal dialogue they had established, started discussing the parameters of a solution that might work, that they liked the sound of, weren't quite sure how to do it. And they turned to the three co-chairs to help – how would you put this on paper? It's easy to imagine leaders who can make the political – have the political sense to go, here's a compromise that could play out. But to write that into treaty language, to make sure the language you would write conforms with international norms, is not easy. So they looked back to us and said: Could you start working on this, figure out how would this – if we followed these parameters -- how might that solution work?

And that's what Russia had been working on. That's what France had been working on. It's what the United States had been working on. And that's where we had gone through these series of meetings with Putin, meetings with Chirac. And the point we were at wasn't on how do you deal with the big question, it was in the more finer points. So all of a sudden you didn't need to have a summit that would bring Putin to Florida. The aim wasn't to have Putin come to Florida. The aim was to have the leaders start working on these finer points of how do you get a package that really is amenable to all.

A setback occurred in this process. Actually, almost 20 years ago to this day, I think – October 27th, 1999 – there was a shooting at the Armenian Parliament. Gunmen break in. strafe the dais and the front of the parliament with machine gun fire, killed the prime minister, killed the speaker of the house, a number of key figures including a couple of Armenians who were closest to Russia.

There were instant concerns. Was this [attack] related to the peace process? It turned out it was related to military pensions. But people were concerned. And that was a setback in this process. And I think two years later we were dealing, when we looked at Key West, with the setbacks that start – their roots go back to that assassination – group of assassinations. So there was a lot of outside drama on it. But we were making progress on concrete details.

TIERSKY: Had Key West been a full success, clearly you had set the conditions for forward movement. But had it been a full success, we wouldn't be here today talking about this conflict that continues to be protracted.

CAVANAUGH: I don't think we would, yeah.

TIERSKY: So –

CAVANAUGH: Though we wouldn't fully be talking about the Key West success either.

To give you a sense, again, of how cooperation in a diplomatic process worked, it had already been agreed, if we had complete success that we would not conclude it in Florida. This would be problematic for Russia politically. They didn't want to have a solution brokered in the United States.

TIERSKY: My goodness.

CAVANAUGH: And we wouldn't like a solution brokered in Moscow. Already decisions had been reached that if it kept moving forward that at a neutral venue in Europe this thing would be brought to a conclusion.

TIERSKY: But, ambassador, using this example of the Key West summit, you've really given us a great sense of the complications of the diplomatic overlay of this, as well as some of the potential inherent in the co-chair format, where different countries that have a role to play in the region are trying to help the sides come to an agreement.

I'd like to move this closer to today now, because we understand some of the complexities now involved in addressing this conflict. We see dynamics including the relative defense spending of each side potentially playing a role in how this conflict evolves. Are there trends in that vein that you are concerned about?

CAVANAUGH: Definitely. Actually, I think the defense spending is a problem. And I think it doesn't help this region, the enormous amount of weaponry that gets poured into it each year. Both Azerbaijan for spending precious resources on so much defense equipment, and Armenia for being drawn closer and closer to Russia to have to rely on it for greater amounts of defense equipment. And Russia provides both of those sides with substantial defense sales. That's not to say there aren't other corners of the world where the United States provides weaponry to all sides that are in conflict. So it's not an international issue that's easily dealt with there, but it is a troubling one.

I think the challenges that we see today are the same ones that have been there since the beginning. And it ties back to your discussion of the founding principles of OSCE, and even back to the founding principles of the United Nations. The United Nations recognizes the importance of territorial integrity, of sovereignty. Countries are defined by a land border. They're allowed to protect their land border. The United States embraces that, always has. The United Nations also recognizes the right of self-determination, often deemed ethnic self-determination, that people should have a general right to be ruled under systems that they feel are appropriate. [The principles] are in conflict with one another. They're [both] enshrined in the U.N. charter. When OSCE is established, they're enshrined in the Charter of Paris. In OSCE there is no mechanism that bridges that easily. And then you add on top of it a point that you made at the top of this discussion – peaceful resolution of disputes.

So what are we looking at in this conflict? We want to see a solution. It has to be a political one. It has to be able to accommodate, to some degree, that issue of sovereignty, but also that issue of self-determination, which really means it goes back to the parties. How do they find a solution that can work for them? And then the international community, how do we make sure that conforms with international principles and help them implement it.

I don't think arms sales help them implement a solution. I think it runs the risk of making it more likely to get a fight. And that's the danger in that. But Russia, aside from that, has still been helpful in pushing them to find the political solution to this problem.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, I really appreciate the way you've described the shared responsibility for resolving this conflict between the parties, who need to come to an agreement, but also the international community that has to set the conditions and support whatever agreement that they come to.

Everett, I'd like to bring you back into the conversation now, because I think some of our listeners will be aware that there's been a pretty dramatic change in leadership in Armenia recently. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how – what that change has been, and any implications you see in terms of how that might impact discussions on Nagorno-

Karabakh. Ambassador, of course, I'd like your thoughts on that as well. But, Everett, could you start us off?

PRICE: Absolutely. That's a great question, Alex.

In Armenia about a year and a half ago, there was a major political uprising that overthrew a ruling party that had been in power for about two decades and brought in a new political leadership that brought with it a kind of anti-corruption, pro-reform ethos with it, that has represented a really revolutionary change.

Now, the individual that was at the helm of this protest movement that overthrew the previous government is a man by the name of Nikol Pashinyan, who now represents, as prime minister, Armenia since last year. [He is] the first leader of the Armenian state in the past 20 years or so who is not from Nagorno-Karabakh originally, or was not part of the original pro-independence or pro- autonomy movements of Nagorno-Karabakh. And so that lack of a direct tie to the Nagorno-Karabakh cause is something that has added a new element to the negotiations between the sides on this issue.

I think there are positive elements to that. One is that he is not viewed by the Azeri side as being too beholden to the cause itself. But then on the other hand, there is a concern from Karabakhi-Armenians that he doesn't fully represent their views. And there used to be an understanding that the Armenian side could often represent the Karabakhi-Armenian side as one of the parties to the conflict. And so now there is a question about whether or not that representation is adequate. And that has added a(n) additional complicating dimension to an already complicated diplomatic process.

TIERSKY: Thanks, Everett.

Ambassador.

CAVANAUGH: That problem's also been there since the beginning. It has manifest with this new election that it's the current challenge of the negotiating format. There are still meetings between presidents. There are still meetings between foreign ministers. But they've not been very productive since this change of government in Armenia, in part because this is an unresolved issue. When we were talking about Key West, at that point the leader of Armenia had been the leader of the Karabakh-Armenians. There was no doubt he understood the issues and could speak for them. Pashinyan has been very frank and honest, he can't. He's not from that region. He's not of that group of Armenians. And he's argued they should be at the table.

The challenge in negotiations – there are many: where do you do them, how do you do them, what shape is the table, who's at the table? And, who's at the table is always a basic, fundamental question. And for mediators, the answer is always as few people as possible to get the deal done.

Where we're at now is -- it's clear, because of the person himself, Pashinyan, not being from Karabakh -- you may need more people at the table. But as we started with the challenge of

words and definitions, it's very hard for Azerbaijan to say, well, "we'll sit down at the table with Nagorno-Karabakh." They don't recognize an independent Nagorno-Karabakh. To them that's "we'll sit down with ourselves at the table and negotiate." They don't see that formula working. They'll sit at a table with Armenia and negotiate, but they don't want to deal with what they regard as themselves directly.

In the early '90s, in fact, Karabakh was also at meetings of the co-chairs. And in fact, in two guises: the people in the region that is now occupied by Armenians, and people who had been displaced by the region -- that community would also send representatives to the talks. And where they're edging toward [today] is an altering of the formula that might bring both those parties back. Azerbaijan right now is resistant to that. But Azerbaijan has also changed its representative of the Karabakhi community to one with more diplomatic experience, which I think is showing potential anticipation that change could come.

OK. One positive thing I'd like to highlight, that we've always had difficulty getting confidence-building measures in this region. And in [November 2019] we saw a very strong one: an exchange of press between Armenia and Azerbaijan that just took place and brought three reporters from Armenia, including one from Karabakh, into Azerbaijan to get a sense of what's going on in the country, to be able to report back on what's happened in this interim of living apart for 20 years. And, at the same time, three reporters from Azerbaijan went to Armenia and went into Karabakh to look at the occupied areas, and be able to report back to their people, as well as to what might be done.

This was done with approval at the highest levels. So the president and the prime ministers signed off on this, kept it completely secret. They had no problems whatsoever on security. But [this exchange was] a very positive sign. They're looking into how you start rebuilding a relationship between the peoples on both sides of the Line of Contact.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, I think throughout this conversation one of the key things that you've done is for anyone who is under the misimpression that conflict resolution was a simple and straightforward task, you've clearly disabused us all of that notion. Let me ask you, we're nearing the end of our episode here, I would like your assessment about the potential for return to an all-out conflict between the sides here. Ultimately, this is why this is -- you know, we're trying to address and prevent the worst-case scenario. How do you feel about where that's going?

CAVANAUGH: I mean, I worry about that. That's obviously a concern I think everyone has. I think at the same time, for your listeners, I should point out, many people will have listened to this discussion we have had and go, well, why are we there? There's 20 years and there's no solution. You know, this doesn't seem to make a lot of sense.

Part of the answer to that question is how do you measure success? This is 20 years that there has been no major return to total fighting that we saw in 1994. Where Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States are all in this close-knit area, and general peace has been maintained. As a conflict management mechanism, we've done very well here, at a very low cost. And we've

made a difference in the lives of people in Armenia, and in Azerbaijan, and in Georgia, and in Turkey, and in Russia, and even in Iran. So the positive there is that.

The potential for violence to break out—you bet. That's why we stay there. And I think it's why people should expect to see the United States diplomatically to continue to engage in lots of these efforts. Our diplomatic engagement makes a difference. It enhances global stability, saves lives, it advances our values. When we say we value peace above everything else, it values our country to be there in that mix, advancing that goal. And the world sees that.

TIERSKY: Ambassador, those are – those are terrific words, I think, for us to close our episode on. With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. Ambassador Cavanaugh, thank you for joining Everett and I on the podcast today.

Before we go, I'd love for you to tell our listeners how they can find out more about this conflict resolution work that you lead. Can you remind us of the NGO that you chair and where folks can learn more about it?

CAVANAUGH: Certainly. I'm currently chairman of International Alert, which is in London. And they've been doing a lot of work in the Caucasus under the European Partnership for Nagorno-Karabakh. And we didn't mention the EU in here. They're not formally part of this co-chair process; I think they were a little frustrated by that. And what it's led to is they've made a much greater contribution on the nongovernmental organization side to help work with civil society organizations on dealing with this problem.

If you go to our website, International Alert's, you can see some research we've recently done in the conflict zone, along the Line of Contact and the border areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan, to get a sense how this conflict is impacting people on the ground. Random shelling, random sniper fire. What this does to their psyches and their communities and their thoughts on how to address that. And I think that work has really opened up some avenues for better understanding of what might be doable in the future.

TIERSKY: That's great, ambassador. Thank you for that.

Listeners, as you know, we're always interested in hearing back from you with feedback. Get in touch via our website, our Facebook page, or on Twitter. Thanks, again, for joining us for Helsinki on the Hill. Ambassador, Everett, thanks to both of you. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.

(END)