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Armenia-Azerbaijan

Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and role of Russia

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The end of July saw a flaring up of the simmering conflict around the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh republic. The confrontation between the Nagorno-Karabakh, that is, Armenian, and Azeri militaries in the course of which both sides sustained serious losses (at least 20 reported dead), marked a new level of escalation.

Against the background of crescendoing militarist rhetoric and the de facto end to the status quo, at the initiative of Vladimir Putin, two- and three-way meetings took place between himself and Presidents Sargosian and Aliiev. Although these meetings were planned long before the escalation, according to a number of experts, their results could play a decisive role for the unfolding conflict.

The steady stream of cross-border shootings preceding the escalation is in many ways characteristic for the logic of the last 20 years: constant up and downs, which allow the authorities parasiting upon the war, to keep hold of their throne.

Indeed, few other governments have reached the level of professionalism in war speculation demonstrated by the Armenian and Azeri regimes. Warming up nationalist sentiments, they periodically put forth the possibility of a war, thereby legitimizing their own power and pushing aside social problems. Neither side would like to give up such a useful instrument.

This elaborate mechanism of periodic escalations worked not without the participation of third powers such as Russia, the EU, the USA, and Turkey as well as some well-known transnational corporations, which have never been known for their squeamishness about war profits.

As the main player in the region, Russia deserves special attention. On the one hand, it keeps military bases in Armenia for free, selling that country defensive weaponry and claiming the responsibility for its security; on the other, it sells massive amounts of offensive weaponry to Azerbaijan and doesn't recognize Nagorno-Karabakh People's Republic.

At the same time, there are ways in which the current events don't fit into the typical geopolitical scenario of the conflict. Could we say that the elaborate system of three-way negotiation has crashed? Or maybe it has moved up to a new level or changed the format?

But let's give the regimes their due—they are good at hiding their traces and it is difficult to assert anything with a degree of certainty. There are different versions. Some experts think that the border clashes represents typical Azeri militarism while the level of escalation and the above-average number of casualties could be explained by an unusually severe reaction by the Armenian side.

There are those who blame the recent escalation on Russia, which pursues several possible goals: 1) of forcing Armenia to cede the disputed territories to Azerbaijan in exchange for integration into the Eurasian Union, 2) of reconciling both parties and incorporating them into the Eurasian Union, or 3) of introducing a Russian peace-keeping garrison in the disputed territories.

Others are inclined to blame the West, intent as it is on creating newer sources of instability on the periphery of the emerging Eurasian Union.

Given the pre-existing opposition the choice of theory is a matter of taste. As the presidents watched sambo at the Sochi summit, the two peoples, holding their breath, awaited the unfolding of the events: would there be war or not, now or in a month, would it offer a decisive solution to the issue, and in general, what is to be done, and who is to blame.

On August 7th, two days before the beginning of the negotiations, Azeri President Aliyev posted over 60 openly militaristic messages on his personal twitter account about the “unfinished war”, which Azerbaijan was finally in a position win, about the country’s military preparedness and potential, the bravery of the soldiers, and so on.

A day later, on August 8th, an anti-war rally took place in Yerevan. In their announcement, the organizers of the “No to war!” initiative attributed all the responsibility for the bloodshed to the governments of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and “outside forces” and pointed to the necessity for creating a dialogue between the two societies as the only alternative to the failed negotiations between the official powers. The call for peace, issued by the organizers, was directed not towards the authorities but towards the societies of both countries.

Notwithstanding the mass denunciation of the initiative—“not only by nationalists but also by many liberals, including representatives of non-governmental organizations, which have long worked at “regulating the conflict”—as well as the threats issued against the participants, the rally took place uninterrupted, without fights, arrests or clashes with the police.

The same morning, though, the human-rights activist Intigam Aliyev was arrested in Azerbaijan. A few days earlier, the founder of the Baku Club of Human Rights, Rasul Dzhafarov, was arrested and the head of the Baku Institute of Peace and Democracy, Leyla Yunus, was charged with state treason, spying, and tax evasion. By some accounts, a full-scale persecution of the participants in the Tekalin process has been launched.

Given this wave of arrests, it is hard to expect Azeri civil society to respond to the peace call issued by its Armenian peers.

Also on August 8th, Karen Petrosian, an Armenian citizen and resident of the Armenian border village Chinari, died on the other side of the border, in the hands of the Azeri military. According to official sources in Baku, the reason was heart failure. In the announcement of the Azeri Ministry of Defense, he was detained as a saboteur, but their Armenian peers categorically deny this accusation. According to the relatives of the deceased as well as his medical record, Mr. Petrosian had no problems with his heart but did suffer from mental illness, was unable to read or count, and simply couldn’t have been a saboteur.

In the evening of August 8th, the Azeri branch of Radio Free Europe published an online video from Azeri border village of Agbulag, where Karen Petrosian was arrested. In the video, we can see how the villagers clash with the military and the police during the arrest. We can only guess their motivations: whether they understood what fate awaits the prisoner or are simply afraid of the end of the two village’s peaceful co-existence.

Karen Petrosian’s death, whether caused by premeditated murder or criminal negligence, provoked a massive reaction in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Armenian side interpreted this incident as an open provocation, and significant parts of Azeri civil society also condemned it.

It has to be acknowledged that in this context the meeting of the presidents was an achievement in itself. During the three-way negotiations, the Armenian and Azeri presidents were restrained and formalistic in the extreme. They practically said nothing: they supported regulating the conflict, they referred to the resolution of the UN’s Security Council and the resolution of the conflict on the basis of a just compromise. Every side, however, has its own vision of justice.

Russia's role in these circumstances is hard to underestimate. During the course of the whole negotiations process, Putin took on different personas: sometimes as the dove of peace, sometimes as a passive observer for whom "international formats for resolving these conflicts exists" and who "has great respect for these international formats", but who at the same time insisted that "we have special, particularly close relations [among these countries], deep pre-history, so to say" and that "at any rate, it's always useful" to meet and talk.

Putin's peace-making process was truly impressive, in Russian media coverage, that is. If until recently Russian TV channels insisted on the inevitability of the war, now we are showered with assertions that no war is impossible.

If not war, then what? Most likely, a preservation of the status quo: there will be new escalations, manipulations of the threat of war, and if nothing changes, new occasions for hatred in both sides.

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