

Azerbaijan's attack on Armenia border

On 12 September 2022 Azerbaijan forces started to shell the Armenia border. After 3 days of heavy clashes at least 200 soldiers on both sides were killed and Azerbaijan seized about 10 square km of Armenian land in Syunik province. This caused a new wave of antigovernmental protests in Armenia, organised by pro-Russian opposition, which accuses Prime Minister Nicol Pashinyan of "treason." Opposition asserts that Pashinyan is ready to give up Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) and even Syunik to Azerbaijan in exchange of normalisation of relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Azerbaijan's attack targeted internationally

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recognised area of Armenia, which turned to Collective Security Treaty Organisation for assistance, applying article 4 of the Treaty. However no military assistance was provided and Kazakhstan, one of the key members of CTSO, explicitly excluded possibility of taking part in any military action against Azerbaijan, calling it a friendly country and stressing significant trade cooperation with it. On 14th September clashes stopped and a ceasefire was reached. On the next day Russian leader Vladimir Putin met with Azerbaijan president Ilham Aliyev as well as Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Samarkand. This escalation came shortly after Russia had suffered heavy losses on Kharkiv frontline in its war against Ukraine.

Historical roots of Armenia and Azerbaijan conflict

Latest clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan are part of the protracted conflict between these two countries. Though the main reason of it is the status of Artsakh, it also concerns Syunik province and never demarcated border between these two countries. Artsakh, known also as Nagorno Karabakh, is an Armenian populated territory, which during the Soviet times was made part of Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic as an

autonomous oblast. In 1988 representatives of Nagorno Karabakh demanded unification of this oblast with Armenian SSR, what was rejected by Soviet Union authorities. This had led to ethnic cleansings and massacres and finally referendum organised in Nagorno Karabakh on independence, shortly before Soviet Union collapsed and Azerbaijan itself declared independence. The full scale war that began afterwards between Azerbaijan and Armenia was won by the later and the ceasefire was agreed in 1994. The non-recognised Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, that later changed its name to Artsakh, controlled not only most of the territory of former autonomous oblast (excluding the Shaumyan region) but also adjacent territories including Kalbejar and Lachin corridor securing Nagorno Karabakh to have connection with Armenia.

Due to the Soviet principle of "divide and rule" the borders of various administrative units of Soviet Union were drawn with a purpose to cause territorial conflicts in case of separation. It was also a case with Azerbaijan – Armenia SSR border however territorial conflict has deeper historical roots here. When Soviets conquered South Caucasus in 1920 it was agreed between them and Turkey, with whom they were allied at that time, that Nakhichevan and Syunik (called at the time Zangezur) will become part of Azerbaijan SSR. However Soviets couldn't quell an Armenian rebellion in Zangezur so they conceded to the demand to make Zangezur part of Armenian SSR. Nakhichevan, which half of the population was at the time Armenian, became an Azerbaijan SSR exclave. Moreover, to complicate things Soviets decided to draw some other Armenian and Azerbaijan exclaves respectively on the territories of each other. After Soviet Union collapsed and the war erupted they were annexed by both countries, however this was not recognised by neither of them nor by any other country, so it still gives the basis to territorial claims.

44 days war

Moreover, during Soviet times there was no need to demarcate the border as it was only an administrative and non-state border. Additionally Soviets constructed roads and railways in such a way that they crossed the territory of neighbouring republics. Until the "44 days war" in 2020 it didn't cause any problem for Armenia, which controlled all adjacent territories. Azerbaijan in its turn had to use transit road through Iran for transport from and to Nakhichevan. Armenia however lost the "44 days war" and Azerbaijan reconquered all the territories that didn't belong to Nagorno Karabakh in Soviet times as well as parts of former Nagorno Karabakh oblast. The rest of this territory fell under

control of Russian so called "peace forces". But Azerbaijan disputed also the state border, especially in Syunik, moving it deeper into Armenian territory and taking under its control parts of the Goris-Kapan road, which is part of a strategic route connecting Iran with Yerevan and leading further North through Georgia to Russia.

While Artsakh in fact has no strategic but just emotional significance and its population after 2020 has shrunk to just about 100 thousand people, Syunik plays a formidable geopolitical role. Population of this mountainous province is also small, just about 150 thousand, but it links Iran with Armenia and separates Turkey and Nakhichevan from Azerbaijan and, through Caspian Sea, other Turkic countries (members of Turkey lead Organization of Turkic States – OTS). Meanwhile Turkey is promoting the slogan "one nation, two states" with regard to Azerbaijan and trying to strengthen cooperation in the OTS format and thus gain more influence in post-Soviet Central Asia. Surely, this contradicts Russian interest, however, contrary to the popular opinion, the "44 day war" was not a proxy conflict between Russia and Turkey. There's lot of evidence suggesting that Azerbaijan beforehand got Russian approval to militarily regain control over those territories.

This strengthened Azerbaijan – Russian relations enabled Russia to deploy its forces in Artsakh, thus not only taking control over this disputed area but also gaining leverage against both Armenia and Azerbaijan. While Armenia is nominally an ally of Russia in CSTO, in fact relations with Azerbaijan were always more important for Kremlin. Moscow treats Armenia more as a hostage than an ally, assuming that Yerevan has no geopolitical alternative. In this sense frequent Azerbaijani attacks on Armenia serve Russian interest as a reminder that if Armenia was not loyal to Moscow and start cooperation with the West (USA and Europe) it's security and territorial integrity would be compromised. Russian influence was also supposed to be strengthened through the control over transit routes: from Armenia to Artsakh and from Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan, which was also agreed in the ceasefire agreement after "44 days war."

Russia is also unhappy with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power after mass protests in 2018 that ended the rule of pro-Russian "Karabakh clan" accused of ruining the country with overwhelming corruption and represented by former presidents Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan. Pashinyan never crossed a red line in his dealing with Moscow, nevertheless he tried to balance international relations of

Armenia with developing relations with European Union and USA. In this context Russian purpose of "44 days war" was to "discipline" him and weaken his position as a leader, who lost the war and bowed to enemy's territorial demands. In fact, after "44 days war" pro-Russian opposition organised mass protests, however in snap parliamentary elections in June 2021 Pashinyan's party won and retained absolute majority. Among large part of Armenian population there was also growing sense of Russian betrayal. On the other hand neither Europe nor USA provided any assistance to Armenia despite some pro-Armenian statements, especially from French president Emanuel Macron and some American politicians including Joe Biden (who was not president at the time). It was clear that Artsakh became an instrument to blackmail Armenia.

Armenia and Russian aggression against Ukraine

Russian invasion of Ukraine had significant impact on the situation in South Caucasus. Armenia, beware of its precarious situation, couldn't stand against Russia but also didn't support it. Some critics pointed that Armenia didn't vote against the war in UN General Assembly but they overlooked that Azerbaijan position was the same despite it was not under such national security pressure as Armenia. Moreover, at the very first day of the war Azerbaijan leader Ilham Aliyev visited Moscow to sign the agreement on strategic alliance with Russia. In the following months EU organised series of negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan but to no avail. At the same time Nikol Pashinyan made an effort to normalise Armenia-Turkey relations and in July there was a phone conversation between him and Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan. However it was clear that no normalisation is possible without giving up Artsakh to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan doesn't agree on any special status of Artsakh and even if it did, the local Armenian population would not trust it. It means that if Artsakh is ceded to Azerbaijan, Armenian exodus from there should be expected.

Azerbaijan's control over parts of the route from Iran to Yerevan caused tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan as there were cases of harassment of Iranian truck drivers and later Azerbaijan started to collect high toll for pass. It also led to the construction of a new road bypassing the stretch controlled by Azerbaijan. Interestingly it was also shelled during last clashes. In late August Azerbaijan took over the Lachin corridor – the only road connecting Armenia with Artsakh, while according to the ceasefire agreement from 2020 it should happen only in 2024. Armenia uses now a temporary road as a bypass. On the other hand

transit route through Syunik, linking Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan, that was also agreed upon in 2020 ceasefire agreement, so far has not been established.

Undoubtedly it was not a coincidence that the last escalation happened shortly after Ukrainian counterstrike on Russian forces in Kharkiv frontline. While there's little doubt that so far Azerbaijan attacks on Armenian forces served Russian interest, this time it was rather an attempt to profit from Russian weakness. Azerbaijan rightly assumed that the change in the balance in Turkish-Russian relations, in Turkish favour as Russia needs Turkish support with regard to sanctions and NATO enlargement, meant that no Russian or CSTO intervention is probable. The only conundrum is a potential Iranian military intervention if Azerbaijan decided to capture Syunik. While Iran's reaction to the classes was not very strong it upheld its position that it will not let for any geopolitical changes in the region. In this context it must be remembered that present day Armenia and Azerbaijan belonged to Persian Empire before it was conquered by Russia in early XIX century. Moreover, unification of Azerbaijan and Turkey would pose a serious security threat for Iran's territorial integrity as there are two provinces named Azerbaijan in Iran. Iran has also strong historical relations with Armenia, while Azerbaijan has close security cooperation with Israel.

Recommendations and conclusions

1. Artsakh remains the main (but not the only one) problem in Azerbaijan – Armenia relations. Azerbaijan lack of flexibility on its status makes any peace agreement almost impossible. At the same time Russia took de facto control over Artsakh.
2. Azerbaijan's attempt to take over Syunik with military means cannot be excluded. Regardless Russian position it can lead to a big international conflict as this region plays huge geopolitical role, especially with regard to Iranian vital interests.
3. Nikol Pashinyan is trying to normalise relations with all Armenia neighbours, prioritising Armenia territorial integrity and sovereignty over Artsakh. Pashinyan is aware that Artsakh conflict makes Armenia hostage to Russian policy. Such normalisation does not serve Russian interest, thus Russia is inspiring antigovernmental protests and accusations of treason against Pashinyan.
4. Russia is not an ally to Armenia and regards its relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan as much more important issue. Last escalation showed also that CSTO lost any significance.

5. Joe Biden administration and Democratic Party majority in Congress are much more sceptic towards Turkey, which has impact on American-Armenian relations.

6. Both EU and USA should not allow the future of South Caucasus to be decided in Turkish-Russian bargaining process. Thus stronger pressure should be exerted on Azerbaijan to stop military provocations against Armenia and any war crimes or crimes against humanity should be strongly condemned. Efforts for finding a peaceful solution to Artsakh conflict, that will not lead to Armenian exodus, should be increased.

7. Armenia status as a hostage of Russian policy should be challenged through stronger USA and EU support and cooperation in security field. Armenia should be assured that Russia is not the only guarantor of its territorial integrity. In this context the recent visit of US delegation with Nancy Pelosi to Armenia is a very good development.

8. Armenia and Georgia are the only democracies in the region, so it is very important to work on improvement of relations between them. Strategic alliance between these 2 countries would give Armenia connection to Europe through Black Sea and open an alternative route from Europe to Iran, which is rich in energy resources, thus changing the geopolitical map. Poland can play a positive role in this process as its relations with both Armenia and Georgia are based on a long tradition of friendship.

9. Democracy in South Caucasus should be strengthened through various civic initiatives and Russian influence should be challenged. Any antigovernmental protests should be assessed by the links of their organisers to Russia.

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