



The Recent Escalation along Armenia – Azerbaijan International Border: Key Reasons and Possible Scenarios¹²

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On July 12, Azerbaijani forces attempted to take over an Armenian post along the Northern part of the Armenia–Azerbaijan international border. Repelled by the Armenian units, they turned to cannon shelling and the extensive use of UAVs. After two days of active clashes, the situation was calm on July 15, when new, albeit unsuccessful, attempts to seize Armenian positions were made on early morning of July 16.

While five days of hostilities did not bring significant changes on the ground, it might be useful to understand the key reasons behind these recent military activities, as well as to assess possible scenarios for the future.

In spite of hostilities being launched along the Armenia – Azerbaijan international border, some 300 km away from the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, these attacks should be seen within the

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overall Azerbaijani strategy on Karabakh conflict settlement. Since ascending to power in 2003, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev reiterated that the only acceptable solution for Azerbaijan was the return of Nagorno-Karabakh under the Azerbaijani jurisdiction. Since the late 2000s President Aliyev started to claim that the Republic of Armenia was located on “historical Azerbaijani lands” and that the Azerbaijani population should have an opportunity to return there.

Azerbaijan and Turkey were at the roots of establishing in 2009 the Cooperation Council of Turkic speaking states, an intergovernmental organization including Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan as full members, and Hungary as observer state. The key goal of this organization is to foster political and economic cooperation between Turkic speaking states. However, Turkey lacked a direct land connection with Azerbaijan. Currently Ankara has approximately 10 km of land border with the Nakhichevan Autonomous Region, an Azerbaijani exclave surrounded mainly by Armenia and Iran. Meanwhile, Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic separate Nakhichevan and Turkey from mainland Azerbaijan by some 180 km of land (45 km territory of Armenia and 135 km territory of Nagorno-Karabakh Republic). Not surprisingly, the inaugural summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic speaking states was organized in Nakhichevan, and very often Azerbaijani leadership has spoken about Armenia and the Nagorno Karabakh Republic as the only obstacles to the unification of the Turkish world spanning from Turkey till the borders of China via Central Asia. Thus, based upon official Azerbaijani rhetoric and statements, we may assume that the strategic goal of Azerbaijan is not only the liquidation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, but the takeover of at least some parts of the territories of the Republic of Armenia.

However, there is no strategy without tactics. The Azerbaijani tactics is based upon a step by step approach. As the first step, Baku would like to assert control over some parts of Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the second step would be the full liquidation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, and the last step the takeover of some parts of the Republic of Armenia. Azerbaijan may seek to implement the first phase of its strategy through launching large scale attacks against the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. However, the balance of power does not guarantee a positive outcome for Azerbaijan, while any defeat in a new large-scale war may end President Aliyev’s rule. Thus, war is the last resort, and the least desirable option for Baku. Another way is

to reach its goals via negotiations, which means that Azerbaijan must integrate its approach to the ongoing process mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group.

Without going deep into history and details, it may be necessary to briefly provide the summary of the Karabakh negotiations over the recent 16 years. Since 2004, negotiations have been conducted within the so-called “phased approach” framework whose key features were first articulated by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs in a July 2006 statement. They envisaged the return of some territories to Azerbaijan, an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh, security guarantees with deployment of peacekeepers and the determination of the final legal status of Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will. The April 2016 four-days war brought additional elements into the negotiations - the launch of an OSCE ceasefire violations investigative mechanism, and the expansion of the mandate of the existing Office of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson in Office. However, there were no significant changes in the negotiation framework and the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs’ statements in 2019 reiterated the necessity to find a solution based upon these elements.

The six basic elements were rejected by Azerbaijan as even theoretically they may force Azerbaijan to recognize the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. Obviously, this is not in line with the core goals of the Azerbaijani strategy and Baku rejected Kazan document in June 2011.

When Russia in 2014 put forward a modified version of the Kazan document - the so-called Lavrov plan - which allegedly dropped the notion of legally binding expression of will, it seemed that Azerbaijan should welcome this initiative. However, the Russian offer came with strings attached, i.e. the requirement to deploy only Russian peacekeepers in the territories along the border with Iran, which should be returned to Azerbaijan. Both Azerbaijan and Turkey understand well that the deployment of Russian peacekeepers means *de facto* establishing a Russian military base in Azerbaijan, which would become a significant obstacle in the way of the Azerbaijani – Turkish strategy to establish direct land corridor between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan. That is why in 2014 – 2019 Azerbaijan was not overly optimistic regarding the possible implementation of the Lavrov plan. It should be noted that neither the U.S. nor France was happy with the Lavrov plan either, as they didn’t want to see a significant boost of Russian influence in Azerbaijan and in the South Caucasus in general. Thus, since 2014, the Co-Chairs of

the OSCE Minsk Group jointly continued to promote the Kazan document, while Russia simultaneously was pushing also the Lavrov plan. Given these fissures among Co-Chairs, the negotiation process drifted from conflict settlement to conflict management.

Meanwhile, both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh Republic were not ready to accept the Lavrov plan. It's necessary to mention here that both the Kazan document and its ensuing versions have been essentially based upon the inherently flawed "*Land for Promise*" formula. They effectively suggest that the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic should concede large territories to Azerbaijan only to receive a promise by Azerbaijan and the international community to hold a legally binding expression of will to settle the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh in an indefinite future or to settle it through open-end negotiations. This is neither a fair nor a symmetric deal. The April 2016 four-day war effectively brought the number of Armenians who were ready to accept this option to zero. Despite some discussions that after the "2018 Velvet Revolution" Armenian new leadership might be ready to move forward in this direction, it became obvious that any step towards accepting such a solution would be the shortest way to losing the power in Armenia.

At the beginning of 2020, Azerbaijan was at a difficult crossroads. It had no viable option to realize the first phase of its Karabakh strategy through military activities, and the only option to get some territories was by putting external pressure on Armenia to accept either the Kazan document or the Lavrov plan. However, Russia obviously had no interest to put pressure on Armenia and to deteriorate relations with its sole ally in the South Caucasus for the implementation of the Kazan document, while the US and France were neither willing nor able to force Armenia to accept it. For the time being, the preservation of the *status quo* was presumably a satisfying outcome for both. Meanwhile, theoretically, Russia has had the necessary capacities to overcome the Armenian resistance against the Lavrov plan.

Thus, at least in a short term perspective (1-3 years), Azerbaijan has two options - to accept the status quo or to accept Lavrov plan, and hope that Russia will implement it by forcing Armenia to accept it, and persuade the US and France not to spoil it. In that case, Azerbaijan might take over some territories but would have to accept the *de facto* establishment of a Russian military base on its territory.

What may the recent escalation tell us about Azerbaijan's choices? Given the growing Russian calls to Armenia and Azerbaijan to de-escalate and accept the international mediation efforts - on July 17 the Russian Security Council chaired by president Putin discussed the latest developments on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, emphasized the imperative need for the sides to ensure a ceasefire, and expressed readiness to mediate between the two sides – we may assume that Azerbaijan has significantly increased the level of escalation on the Armenia – Azerbaijan border to create a pretext for Russia to organize a new Russia – Armenia – Azerbaijan trilateral summit on Karabakh.

If this was the case, Azerbaijan might have most probably hinted to Russia its willingness to accept the Lavrov plan. At the summit, Kremlin might offer this option to both sides as the only way to prevent the outbreak of a large-scale war along the Armenia–Azerbaijan international border, which might involve Russia and Turkey and create another possible hotspot between NATO and Russia. The necessity to prevent such an outcome might be used by the Kremlin to persuade the U.S. and France not to spoil the agreement on the Lavrov plan. As for Azerbaijan and Turkey, they might calculate that the Lavrov plan was the only viable option to realize the first phase of their joint Karabakh strategy. Meanwhile, Ankara and Baku might hope that in a long term perspective (10-15 years) Russia's decline was inevitable and, in that case, Russian peacekeepers deployed to Azerbaijan would not be an insurmountable obstacle to realize the remaining phases of the Karabakh strategy – to fully retake Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and parts of Republic of Armenia and to establish a continuous Turkey – Azerbaijan – Central Asia land and sea corridor.