



Picture 1. The place of escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan<sup>1</sup>

## THE ESCALATION ON THE BORDER BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN: POSSIBLE REASONS AND IMPLICATIONS

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In July 2020, the most recent escalation on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan brought the so-called “frozen” Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to the spotlight again. However, this time the skirmish occurred not in Nagorno-Karabakh, the occupied territory of Azerbaijan, but in another area, which is an official border far away from Nagorno-Karabakh (Picture 1). The first question which comes to mind is: Why Tovuz, and not Nagorno-Karabakh? We will try to shed light on this question on the basis of conclusive facts and sources.

The realities of modern international relations proved that most countries in the world were not able to cope with the current challenges. The current international situation requires a flexible, well-thought-out response within an unpredictable security environment, which simultaneously reflects the national interests. Azerbaijani is one of the few actors in the current complex international relations, which has a unique foreign policy strategy and can protect its national interests at the highest level.

However, Azerbaijan has been involved in the conflict as a result of Armenia’s unfounded territorial claims. Armenia with close political, economic and military support of foreign patrons, has occupied 20 percent of Azerbaijan’s territory (Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent regions). Reacting to this occupation the UN Security Council unanimously adopted four

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<sup>1</sup> Murat Sofuoglu, “Why Azerbaijanis and Armenians have been fighting for so long”, 16 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2p6t3sj>

resolutions – 822, 853, 874 and 884 in 1993, which demanded an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from occupied Azerbaijani lands. These resolutions confirmed that the Nagorno-Karabakh region is an inseparable part of Azerbaijan. In May 1994, a Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement was signed between the two countries. But sporadic shootings, as well as skirmishes have been taking place until now and the negotiations have not yielded any substantial results so far.<sup>2</sup> After 27 years since the UN Security Council resolutions on withdrawal of its armed forces from Nagorno-Karabakh, and the adjacent regions were adopted, Armenia has not yet fulfilled them. On the contrary, it eschews the negotiation process, violates the cease-fire agreement. And that was the main cause of escalation in the frontline in August 2014, in April 2016<sup>3</sup>, and most recently in July 2020.

Today, the principled and consistent position of the Azerbaijani leadership on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is leading to a completely new situation in the region. One of the first reasons for this is that Azerbaijan is not the same country with whom the Armenians fought in the early 1990's. At the same time, serious results have been achieved in conveying the truth about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to the world community. Thus, a new reality has emerged in the region in connection with the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As the President Ilham Aliyev stated on May 26, 2017: *“Nagorno-Karabakh is a historical land of Azerbaijan. The Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be resolved on the basis of the resolutions of the UN Security Council within the framework of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani state and people will never allow the creation of a second contrived Armenian state on our ancestral lands. The territorial integrity of our country is not and will never be the subject of negotiations”*.<sup>4</sup>

However, Armenia does not seem to be the only “architect” of the latest escalation. There might be some other actors, as well as a strong network of internal actors, namely “the fifth column”, which has been involved in the fight against Azerbaijan’s national interests. In order to shed light on this issue, it is important to comprehend the domestic and regional state of affairs.

We will commence with the “the fifth column”, which is much more difficult to fight than an overt enemy. The representatives of this “column” are prevalent in all sectors of all three countries in the region. Scott Radnitz breaks down “fifth column” claims into three types:<sup>5</sup>

- ethnic – the “classic” type in which representatives of an ethnic group are said to be working with an outside (usually neighboring) state against the interests of the state in which the group resides;
- subversive – which describes the collaboration of people with presumed grievances against the state with outside supporters;
- collusive – less recognized type, which involves politicians who are said to be secretly working to advance the interests of a foreign state.

The first type was observed in Azerbaijan in early 1990's. However, in the last two decades the government has made giant strides in integrating the ethnic minorities. The second and third

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<sup>2</sup> Elman Nasirov, Khayal Iskandarov, Sadi Sadiyev, “The realities against Armenia’s “Nagorno-Karabakh strategy of preemption”. *The European Geopolitical Forum*, 28 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/3fPLoz2>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Summit of D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation”, October 20 2017, <https://bit.ly/2CCCwhH>.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Radnitz, “The Real or Imagined Infiltration of Fifth Columns in the Post-Soviet Region, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 548 , November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2WUC31q>.

types are being apparently observed in Azerbaijan, which can also be associated with the latest escalation. President Ilham Aliyev has initiated large scale domestic reforms, which simultaneously encompassed the neutralization of the “fifth column”. As President Aliyev mentioned: *“In the new political configuration, there will be no place for the treacherous representatives of the fifth column”*.<sup>6</sup> The bottom line is that activities of the “fifth column” are grist to the mill of the external actors, particularly Armenia, therefore this escalation might have been triggered by Erevan in pursuit of preventing the neutralization of the “fifth column” in Azerbaijan or at least to divert the attention of the President Ilham Aliyev away from his principled stand against the internal traitors.

Georgia is the most cited country from the South Caucasus which conducted harsh reforms to neutralize the “fifth column”. However, the progenitors of those reforms, Mikhail Saakashvili and his team, have been eventually declared outlaws since the sweeping neutralization was not as effective as it was meant to be. Azerbaijan took stock of it, and President Ilham Aliyev was more prudent regarding the struggle against the “fifth column”.

The external actors overtly or covertly support their “representatives” in all three countries. Thus, the external actors (countries, organizations, or individuals) play a crucial role in shaping events in the South Caucasus region. It would be therefore relevant to elaborate on each and every external actor involved in the region.

The United States wants to see the South Caucasus as a Western-oriented region. The United States considers the region as a part of Europe and is interested in joining the countries to European institutions.

Through the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program, the EU has become a major investor and actor in the South Caucasus countries. An aim of the EU is to promote stability and development in the region and forge closer ties.<sup>7</sup> However, the ever-increasing need for the diversification of energy sources and cooperation in energy transit issues has, perhaps, made the West attach a great deal of importance to the South Caucasus region (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey corridor) as a reliable transit route avoiding Russian and Iranian territories.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Brussels’ clout in the South Caucasus remains modest. EU soft power has little bearing on settling the Abkhazia or South Ossetia conflicts in Georgia or the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>9</sup>

Turkey, the staunch ally and the linchpin of NATO in Central Asia and the Caucasus has given primacy to relations with Azerbaijan, both because of the close cultural and linguistic affinities between the two states, and because of Azerbaijan’s pivotal geopolitical position. Turkey has unflinchingly supported Azerbaijan since the latter gained its independence. It maintained close relations with Georgia as well. Turkey has been the driving force behind most of the regional cooperation projects with the contribution of Azerbaijan. The initiation of strategic projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) crude oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) natural gas pipelines,

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<sup>6</sup> İlham Əliyev fəvqəladə hal tətbiq ediləcəyini və “beşinci kolonun” təcrid ediləcəyini istisna etməyib, 19 Mart, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3hxB9jh>.

<sup>7</sup> Khayal Iskandarov, Piotr Gawliczek, The “New Great Game” in the South Caucasus: Competition for power and influence, *Journal of Scientific Papers «Social Development and Security»*, 10(1) (2020): 25-33.

<sup>8</sup> Elman Nasirov, Khayal Iskandarov, Sadi Sadiyev, “The South Caucasus: A Playground between NATO and Russia?” *Connections QJ* 16, no. 3 (2017): 47-56.

<sup>9</sup> Jos Boonstra, “The South Caucasus and its Wider Neighbourhood”, Working paper, funded by the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement n° 613354 - CASCADE Project, FMSH, Paris, December 2015, 15.

Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway are milestones of this cooperation.<sup>10</sup> Armenia is the only country excluded from this cooperation. Turkey and Azerbaijan have no diplomatic relations with Armenia to the detriment of the latter's economic circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

There is a significant overlap of interests regarding the region between the EU, Turkey and the US. Thus, the Western strategy for the region is oriented towards the fulfillment of these primary strategic objectives of the West:<sup>12</sup>

- keeping the permanent and unobstructed flow of oil and gas from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea to the West;
- building an infrastructure of pipelines that would completely skirt Russia (and Iran), and open up the Central Asian energy reserves to the world markets, reducing the possibility of obstruction and blockade of pipelines that Russia could impose;
- keeping Russian and Chinese influence as weak and distant as possible. This is a very difficult task now, and it will not be any easier in the future;
- reducing security challenges (terrorism, drug trafficking, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction) to the most minimal level possible.

Russia is very much engaged in the South Caucasus, despite not having unlimited influence there, but still it retained substantial leverage and has been reasserting its influence in the area. Moscow has a military-strategic, economic (especially in energy field), as well as domestic and political leverage over the region. All three countries remain closely connected to the Russian economy through infrastructure, trade, investment, and remittances from permanent diaspora populations and migrant workers.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the US/EU approach of trying to change the values and norms of the region, which is potentially a threat to the political and economic elites of the region, Russia applied a regime stability approach.

Another country that closely monitored the region is Iran. Tehran did not want the participation of non-regional powers to the processes in the South Caucasus and would prefer the “3+3” model that considers the engagement of only three neighboring countries: Turkey, Russia and Iran.<sup>14</sup> However, Iran's role for the foreseeable future in the South Caucasus is unclear. It seems unlikely that Tehran will become a substantial factor in the near term as energy infrastructure (if agreed on and built) will take many years to come into being.<sup>15</sup>

China is foremost an economic actor in the South Caucasus. Trade levels have steadily risen over the last decade; China is now the third or fourth trade partner of the South Caucasus states. China's Silk Road Economic Belt program has been meant to revive the Silk Road trade land route from China through Central Asia and the Caucasus to the Middle East and Europe.<sup>16</sup> China does not play an important role in the domestic affairs of the South Caucasus, as do Russia and the EU.<sup>17</sup> It does not jeopardize Russian dominance in the region because its influence is not accompanied by a political and military presence unlike the West.

Referring to the recent escalation on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, an Armenian analyst, Benyamin Poghosyan, claimed that Baku wanted to assert control over some parts of

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<sup>10</sup> Khayal Iskandarov, Piotr Gawliczek, *Ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> Khayal Iskandarov, *The South Caucasus–NATO cooperation*, Riga: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2019, 56-57.

<sup>12</sup> Khayal Iskandarov, Piotr Gawliczek, *Ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> Khayal Iskandarov, *Ibid*, 57-58.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

<sup>15</sup> Jos Boonstra, *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

Nagorno-Karabakh and take-over some parts of the Republic of Armenia.<sup>18</sup> This statement is pretty ludicrous. Because there was not even a single shooting in Nagorno-Karabakh at that time and the escalation occurred in Tovuz, which is far from the occupied lands. If Baku wanted to take control over Nagorno-Karabakh, it could have done it easily, since it is an internationally recognized part of Azerbaijan. Regarding his second point about Azerbaijan’s “plan” to take over some parts of Armenia, it is pretty obvious that Baku would prefer to restore its control on its occupied territory rather than seizing another country’s lands. Dumping the responsibility for this fight over Azerbaijan is an absolute nonsense.

The escalation was in the national interest of Armenia and its external supporters, since it was much easier to manipulate Armenia against Azerbaijan and Turkey. As it is seen from the picture, Tovuz is the region where the vital energy and railway routes are passing through (Picture 2). This fact proves that Tovuz was not chosen accidentally by Armenia as the place of this escalation.



**Picture 2. Oil and gas pipelines of Azerbaijan<sup>19</sup>**

Turkey and in broader context the West are vitally concerned with the security of these routes. Following the realization of the BTC pipeline, Azerbaijan’s new Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) project was generated. The Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and its follow-up Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) have been main parts of the SGC transporting natural gas from the Shah Deniz-2 gas field to the West. Those pipelines would enable the export of natural gas from the Middle East to Europe, along with that from the Caspian basin. Seven countries are involved in the implementation of the SGC: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and Italy. In the future, the three Balkan countries may also join the SGC. The SGC is one of the priority projects of the EU and 10 billion cubic meters of Azerbaijani gas is estimated to be transported from the Caspian region to the West through Georgia and Turkey. The first gas through the Southern Gas Corridor was delivered to Turkey on June 12, 2018 and to Greece on June 15,

<sup>18</sup> Benyamin Poghosyan, “Escalation along Armenia – Azerbaijan Border: Key Reasons and Possible Scenarios”, July 22, 2020, <https://bit.ly/32NGCOF>.

<sup>19</sup> “MS-2016-South-Caucasus-map”, April 20, 2016, <https://bit.ly/32Q19o1>.

2019. Turkey and Azerbaijan formally marked the completion of TANAP on November 30, 2019, a milestone in a major project to help reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas. TANAP crosses the breadth of Turkey, east to west, and could transport up to 16 billion cubic meters (bcm) of Azerbaijani gas a year. Europe is allocated 10 bcm, with 6 bcm earmarked for the Turkish market. Capacity could be increased to 31 bcm with additional investment.<sup>20</sup> Hayk Gabrielyan, an expert at the Armenian Institute for Security and International Affairs, confirmed that the escalation could have been triggered by a gas conflict between Turkey and Russia. Gabrielyan stated that Russian gas supplies to Turkey have decreased by 40%, and instead, Azerbaijani gas supplies to Turkey and Europe should soon increase via the Baku- Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline, which passes through the Tovuz region of Azerbaijan.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Gabrielyan indirectly pointed out the possible involvement of Russia.

For the time being, it is not feasible that Armenia will dare to disrupt the transportation of energy to Europe. However, they might be manipulated by some other actors, which are interested in European energy market confusion. This escalation proved that the pipelines were vulnerable to Armenian artillery strikes. It would not be difficult to understand all repercussions of this escalation if the Armenian attack was not thwarted. This is the most serious threat that the European countries (which need Caspian energy resources) should ponder over to ensure the security of energy supply.

### Conclusion

It is clear-cut from the above-mentioned facts that Armenia may not be the only actor behind the recent escalation on the border. To cut a long story short, the escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in July 2020 on the border called Tovuz demonstrated the use of force as means for coercion. For many people it was an ordinary clash between warring parties. However, it was not that simple. The confrontation did not occur in Nagorno-Karabakh – a bone of contention between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as Nagorno-Karabakh has been an internationally recognized part of Azerbaijan which was occupied in the early 1990s. In case Azerbaijan launched any operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, third parties would not have any right to overtly support Armenia. However, a counterattack launched by Azerbaijan in Tovuz against Armenia with the purpose of seizing a military post, as Armenians claimed, would have given grounds for the third parties, i.e. members of the CSTO and in particular Russia (according to Armenian expectations), to respond by undertaking coercive measures against Azerbaijan. That is in fact what Armenia wanted to achieve by requesting help from the CSTO, which was eventually denied. Therefore, Azerbaijan behaved prudently and refrained from seizing lands. Ankara's full support to Baku, as a stakeholder of the energy projects initiated by Azerbaijan, balanced the parties in the region and neutralized the attempted coercion.

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<sup>20</sup> Khayal Iskandarov, Piotr Gawliczek, Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Naira Hayrumyan, "Who provoked the escalation on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border and why? Is Russia involved?" 16.07.2020, <https://bit.ly/3jI4862>.