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BULLETIN

HIGHLIGHT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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I. Armenia's attack on Azerbaijan

On July 12, the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Azerbaijan reported a military incident along the border with Armenia. According to the Ministry of Defence, starting from the afternoon on July 12, the units of the armed forces of Armenia committed a provocation in the Tovuz direction of the state border. Hikmat Hajiyev, Assistant to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Foreign Policy Issues and Head of Foreign Policy Affairs Department of the Presidential Administration, noted that “the armed forces of Armenia had flagrantly violated the ceasefire regime and used artillery mounts to fire on the positions of Azerbaijan’s armed forces in the direction of Tovuz district.” Although the shootouts between the two sides are not rare, this time, however, the clashes did not occur on the Line of Contact (LoC) around occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding territories. The violence broke out at the direct border between the two countries, a couple of hundred kilometers away from the LoC. With heavy use of artillery, drones, cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, it became the single deadliest episode since the Four-Day War of April 2016. Although, following the attack, Yerevan unsurprisingly blamed Azerbaijan for the outbreak of violence, there are several reasons not only to be deeply skeptical of Armenia’s claim, but also be confident that it was a provocation instigated by Armenia.

II. Armenia's increasingly provocative and disruptive attitude preceding the attack

Since coming to power, Nikol Pashinyan has not only dragged out the negotiation process,

but also sought to actively derail it through his increasingly hostile rhetoric and actions. In March 2019, Pashinyan sought to transform the negotiation format by trying to introduce the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh into the process. The move was categorically rejected by Azerbaijan and the Minsk Group Co-Chairs as being against the basis of the peace talks set out in March 1992. In August 2019, during his visit to occupied territories of Azerbaijan, Pashinyan declared that “Nagorno-Karabakh is Armenia.” As Farid Shafiyev, Chairman of the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), pointed out, it was, in effect, “a declaration of the annexation of the territory of a neighboring country in violation of four resolutions of the UN Security Council (822,853, 874, and 884). Moreover, it was a return of the 1988 irredentist claim that, for so many years, the Armenian nationalists had tried to avoid.”

In May 2020, Pashinyan participated in the “oath taking ceremony” for the new head of the occupational puppet regime in Nagorno-Karabakh. Rather provocatively, the Armenian side for the first time decided to hold the ceremony in Shusha – the city that is widely recognized as the cradle of Azerbaijani music and culture. Azerbaijan condemned the event, stating that the only objective such provocations have is to undermine the basis of peace talks. In June 2020, the Armenian government went even further, announcing the construction of a new highway connecting Armenia with Azerbaijan’s occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region. It was such a provocative move that the members of the European Parliament – the Chair of the Delegation to the EU-Armenia, the EU-Azerbaijan and the EU-Georgia Parliamentary Committees Marina Kaljurand, the European Parliament’s Standing Rapporteur on Armenia Traian Băsescu and

the European Parliament's Standing Rapporteur on Azerbaijan Željana Zovko – had to issue a joint statement and note that “the decision to build this highway has been taken without the consent of the competent authorities of Azerbaijan – in violation of international law.” Emphasizing that they deplore this project since it does not “help to create conditions conducive to trust, peace and reconciliation,” they also pointed out that the decision to build a new highway could consolidate “the illegal occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and of its surrounding districts.”

As Dr. Esmira Jafarova, Board Member of the AIR Center, pointed out, “the last straw in a hostile build-up was the denial by Pashinyan of Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's comments about a staged, step-by-step solution to the conflict; Pashinyan denied that this was ever the subject of negotiations. The very recent threats by the Armenian Ministry of Defense, which publicly threatened “to occupy new advantageous positions” in Azerbaijan, further testified to the increasingly militaristic mood among Armenia's upper echelons.”

III. Reasons for the attack

From the military standpoint, initiating a ground offensive in that specific area would have not served Azerbaijan's any strategic interest. The Armed Forces of Azerbaijan already holds the higher ground in the Tovuz direction of the border. Azerbaijan would have not improved its strategic position or gained any tactical advantage by initiating a costly military operation trying to seize heights it does not need in complicated mountainous terrain and high altitude. Meanwhile, the attack is perfectly in line with Armenia's aggressive new military strategy, unveiled by

Armenia's Defence Minister Davit Tonoyan last year in New York. According to this new strategy, Armenia “will rid of this trench condition, the constant defensive state, and will add the units which may shift the military actions to the territory of the enemy.” It is clear that Armenia's sudden attack amidst the COVID-19 pandemic testifies to Yerevan's intention to exploit every single opportunity to occupy even more territories of Azerbaijan.

Second of all, the attack is also indicative of Armenia's objective to drag the CSTO and Russia into the conflict. Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) which clearly states that an attack on a member state is an attack on all member states. A direct military offensive on Armenia, which is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), does not fit into the long-term strategy that Azerbaijan currently pursues. Vasif Huseynov, a senior adviser at the AIR Center, noted that “Armenia hoped that the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) would stand with Armenia and support its war against Azerbaijan.” Armenia also has signed several bilateral defense treaties with Russia. In 2015, Russia and Armenia signed an air-defense agreement and established a joint air-defense system. Notably, the agreement does not apply to Nagorno-Karabakh. The fact that the attack did not take place on the Line of Contact (LoC) around occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding districts, but along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, few hundred kilometers from the LoC, further strengthens this argument.

Moreover, the area where the clashes occurred is at the core of Azerbaijan's vital infrastructure network. With the newly launched Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and the Southern Gas Corridor, among others, these critical

infrastructures are fundamental to Azerbaijan's national and economic security and they could easily become targets of attacks during the conflict. The Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) is a critical aspect of the EU's diversification of energy supplies strategy. Today the importance of the SGC is more obvious than ever. The SGC is not only going to diversify European supply sources, but will also make the European gas market more competitive. Despite the challenges stemming from the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the construction of the SGC continues uninterrupted. The SGC is planning to be fully operational before the end of 2020 and TAP is almost completed. When it is finished, gas from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz Stage II will be delivered via TANAP to the Turkish border with Greece and then via the TAP pipeline will be transported across Greece, Albania, and the Adriatic Sea to southern Italy. Dr. Esmira Jafarova noted that "such critical infrastructure, vital for Europe's energy security, passes close to the border area that includes the Tovuz district attacked by the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia on July 12–14. Armenia is the only country in the South Caucasus that is isolated from these regional energy projects owing to its policy of expansion and occupation. It is thus the only country that does not have anything to lose from creating chaos and destruction around this critical energy infrastructure. Jealousy and the feeling of self-imposed isolation from all regional cooperation initiatives have no doubt increased Armenia's hostility toward these energy projects." As Shahmar Hajiyev, a leading adviser at the AIR Center, noted, "Armenia's attack in the direction of Tovuz on the Azerbaijan–Armenia border could be characterized as a threat to all inter-regional energy projects." To sum up, according to Dr. Esmira Jafarova, "Armenia intended to target critical energy infrastructure implemented by

Azerbaijan and its international partners, thereby jeopardizing the energy security of not only the neighboring region, but also of the greater European continent."

Threats to attack the Mingachevir Dam, the critical element of Azerbaijan's largest hydroelectric power plant, also testify to Armenia's desire to destroy Azerbaijan's critical energy infrastructure that underpins the entire economic fabric of the country. As Dr. Esmira Jafarova put it, "hydroelectric power comprises the largest component in Azerbaijan's renewable energy potential, today standing at around 17–18% of the overall energy balance of the country. It is not difficult to imagine the magnitude of civilian casualties in case such a destruction materializes." Moreover, as Orkhan Baghirov, a leading adviser at the AIR Center, pointed out, the attack also raises "security concerns about the other regional projects that are planned to pass through this region or to be connected to the existing infrastructure such as Trans-European Transportation Network (TEN-T). European Union's project TEN-T is a planned network of roads, railways, airports and water infrastructure which also extends to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries including Azerbaijan. In other words, the attack in Tovuz region also demonstrates the intention of Armenia to attack at these strategic projects."

Armenia's internal political dynamics could have also played a significant role in the decision to instigate the provocation. As Fuad Chiragov, the Head of the Regional Security Department at the AIR Center, pointed out, "narratives about democratic transformations and reforms have become the soft-power buzzwords for the new government of Armenia and its Western audience. Pashinyan government officials have been trying their best to exploit these narratives in the foreign

policy realm and use them to justify the occupation of the territories.” However, Armenia’s new political leadership has just recently come under fire for their increasingly hostile treatment of political opponents in the midst of COVID-19. In June, Donald Tusk, the president of the European People’s Party (EPP), tweeted out that the EPP was “concerned by numerous instances of backsliding of democracy in Armenia”, adding that “we call on Armenian authorities to refrain from pressuring the opposition.” According to Fuad Chiragov, “recent developments in Armenia in the midst of a coronavirus pandemic, criminal persecution, intimidation tactics against political opponents and illegal attempts to change the constitution are clearly against the popular narratives about democratization.” Moreover, as Dr. Esmira Jafarova pointed out, “this attack against Azerbaijan along the international border between Armenia and Azerbaijan reflects the deep frustration of the Pashinyan regime in its inability to bring about the promised changes. Economic problems were heightened by the COVID-19-induced challenge and decreasing foreign assistance, and this was all happening against the backdrop of Azerbaijan’s increasing successes domestically, economically and internationally.”

IV. Attacks against Azerbaijanis living abroad

On July 21, approximately 50 members of the Azerbaijani community in the US were assaulted by Armenian extremists during the rally in front of Azerbaijan’s Consulate General in Los Angeles. The organized assault of local Armenian diaspora groups led by the Armenian National Community of America (ANCA) left 10 Azerbaijanis injured, including a

young woman and a police officer. The assault was condemned by Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and the Los Angeles Police Department launched an investigation into the assault. On July 22, a string of attacks on Azerbaijanis took place in Brussels where the members of the Azerbaijani community, during the peaceful protests, were attacked by Armenian extremists using stones, explosives and other weapons. These gruesome attacks left 6 members of the Azerbaijani community, including a journalist, wounded and in need of medical attention. The Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan also experienced destruction of property and the representative of the diplomatic mission were also injured. The Armenian extremists involved in the attacks were later detained by the Belgian police. On July 26, during the peaceful protest in Vancouver, Canada, an assault by Armenian extremists was attempted against the members of the Azerbaijani and Turkish communities. However, the Canadian police managed to prevent the attack. Unfortunately, on the night of August 1-2, armed Armenian extremists attacked and wounded two Azerbaijanis living in Toronto, Canada. The Canadian police opened an investigation into the matter. As Dr. Esmira Jafarova noted, “such violent incidents against peaceful demonstrations then boiled over into threats and further attacks against Azerbaijani diplomatic representations in Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Poland, and Australia, among other countries. The violence on the battleground that we recently witnessed against Azerbaijan’s Tovuz district on July 12–14 is now being replicated against representatives of the Azerbaijani diaspora globally, including journalists and, particularly worryingly, against the diplomatic missions of Azerbaijan overseas –individuals who are protected by the relevant international conventions including, among others, the

Vienna Convention of 1961. These provocations are all happening in the full light of day in progressive European and American cities, in blatant disregard of all existing international norms and rules.”

These organized attacks on the members of the Azerbaijani community living abroad is in line with the decades-old scare tactics and the instrumentalization of terrorism by Armenian extremist organizations such as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutyun), the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), and the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG). As Dr. Esmira Jafarova put it, “in the context of pursuing their dream of “Great Armenia” and demanding “historical justice,” these organizations have not shied away from the instrumentalization of terror and violence across the decades. The murder of Turkish diplomats abroad as an instrument of Armenian terror has been well documented since the 1970s. In addition, the Orly Airport bombing in Paris in 1983 was committed by an Armenian militant, Varuzhan Karapetian, the head of the French branch of ASALA.” These attacks also echo the attacks against Azerbaijanis by Armenian terrorists in the 1990s. In March 1994, Baku Metro bombings left 27 people killed and wounded a further 91. As Dr. Esmira Jafarova put it, “what we are witnessing today around the world – against peaceful Azerbaijanis and representatives of the country’s diplomatic service – epitomizes the very nature of Armenian terrorism and violence against civilians.”

V. Implications of the attack

After the change of leadership in Armenia in 2018, Azerbaijan expressed its willingness to negotiate with those sensible forces in Armenia’s new leadership that were ready to

take a constructive position on the conflict. As Farid Shafiyev, Chairman of the AIR Center, pointed out, “when the incumbent Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, acceded to power two years ago after the so-called Velvet Revolution, some optimism was voiced about positive dynamics in the conflict negotiation between the two warring parties.” Fuad Chiragov also noted that “people in Azerbaijan have been cautiously hopeful that changes in Armenia would eventually have a positive impact on the resolution of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.”

Without the resolution of the conflict, sweeping political and economic changes that Pashinyan supposedly seeks to achieve will largely remain a pipe dream and will not have a serious effect on the Armenian people’s life. For the previous regimes of Robert Kocharyan and Serj Sargsyan, the leaders of the so-called “Karabakh clan”, it made sense to avoid the resolution of the conflict since the conflict justified their hold on power. As Fuad Chiragov noted, “the clan has ruled the country since the 1990s and had a negative impact on the lives of millions of Armenians, draining the economic and human potential of the country and depopulating Armenia, which was also in regional isolation and engaged in a conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan.” Despite the fact that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a fundamental burden on Pashinyan’s own reformist agenda, he has not only refused to engage in substantive negotiations until now, on the contrary, through his recent actions he has aggravated the conflict even further.

Cavid Veliyev, the Head of the Foreign Policy Department at the AIR Center, pointed out that “Armenia is satisfied with the stalled negotiations within the framework of the Minsk Group as this allows Armenia to continue with the status-quo.” However, the status quo is not sustainable. After the so-

called Velvet Revolution, then-U.S. Ambassador to Armenia Richard Mills tried to warn the Armenian society about the grave consequences of the unresolved conflict, stating that “the status quo is no longer in Armenia’s favor – from closed borders to the strain on the country’s material and human resources to corruption risks associated with the conflict.” Refusing to engage in any meaningful negotiations and constantly raising tensions through provocations is a strategy that will lead to nowhere. As Dr. Esmira Jafarova, a Board Member of AIR Center, noted, “attacking Azerbaijan as was just done on 12-14 July, 2020, and jeopardizing the lives of both Azerbaijani and Armenian servicemen as well as other potential innocent lives, especially in these difficult times, is not a panacea to Armenia’s lingering problems and failures. This might shift attention in a short while, but will not deliver the “expected” results in the long run. The sooner Armenia’s leadership realizes this, the more chances its might still have to deliver on its promise of “flourishing Armenia” and do a better job in saving its people from COVID-19 and the associated problems.”

Vasif Huseynov noted that “the recent escalation has indubitably shown that the imitation of negotiations between the sides over the last few years due to Armenia’s abuse of the peace process to prolong the status-quo and consolidate its control over the occupied region must stop, and its leaders should be pressured into substantive negotiations by the international community.”

The latest skirmishes testified once more to the dangerous unsustainability of the status quo around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Although many hoped that the Velvet Revolution would rekindle a deadlocked negotiation process, Armenia’s new political leadership does not seem to be interested in peace. With each new violent incident, the situation around the conflict is becoming even more complex, risking spiraling out of control and getting into a full-blown war. As Dr. Farid Shafiyev pointed out, “the window of opportunity for a breakthrough in the negotiations has now closed. How the events will unfold is hard to predict, but peace is no longer on the horizon in the South Caucasus.