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Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict

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1. Introduction:

The conflict between Georgia's neighbours Armenia and Azerbaijan escalated on the 27th of September of 2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh and its adjacent 6 regions, occupied by the Armenian armed forces, in the early 1990s of the 20th century, with the support of Russia. To this day under a million internally displaced persons from said regions reside in Azerbaijan, fuelling, among other challenges, great political, economic, humanitarian difficulties.

The international society does not recognise the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, nor does it recognise Armenia's jurisdiction over its adjacent 7 regions. Moreover, the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh is not even recognised by Armenia itself. Georgia, in keeping with the stance of the international community, supports Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and inviolability of its borders, calling for a peaceful resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has numerous contributing factors. In 1991 the, majority ethnically Armenian, Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Soviet Republic, nominally a part of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, declared its independence. Demographics played a key role in the development of the conflict, however, destabilising the entire South Caucasus region was on the agenda of the then-Soviet leadership and military institutions, as the Kremlin attempted to retain control over the three Caucasian Republics (where, at that point

in time, nationalist movements were brewing), by pitting various ethnic groups against each other. Thus, the then-Soviet leadership and, later, its legal successor, the Russian Federation, did little to nothing to, prevent, curb or regulate conflicts, which were emerging across the entirety of the territory of the former Soviet Union. Moreover, they further escalated the conflicts across the former Soviet Union that they had themselves willed into existence, simultaneously, expressing their official stance to be that of neutrality. Nevertheless, they covertly supported those parties more loyal to their interests, creating several “frozen conflicts”, exerting influence upon all states involved in said conflicts.

Despite these efforts, they could not avert the disintegration of the empire. Ironically, the aforementioned ethnic conflicts came as one of the main factors contributing to the final demise of the Soviet Union and the rise of new, independent states in its place, including Georgia. The Republic of Armenia has yet to issue a formal recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh’s independence, however, it continues to *de-facto* support the self-proclaimed republic both in terms of state-building, as well as development. This was, most likely, done to ensure direct incorporation of the territory under question into Armenia proper in the future.

The 1991-1994 military conflict came to an end with the signing of the 1994 ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As a result, Armenia enjoyed *de-facto* control over 20% of Azerbaijan’s sovereign territory, however, Baku never came to terms with the *status quo* established in 1994, attempting to resolve the issue diplomatically, including within the framework of the OSCE based “Minsk Group” (US, France, Russia).

Therefore, until recently the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict represented a so called “frozen conflict”, however, there were cases of escalation in the past, which grew into a military confrontations. The most recent case took place in July of 2020. Nevertheless, all of said cases were of local nature and never escalated into full-scale warfare. It was only the confrontation that took place on the 27th of September that grew out of hand and into a war, with aviation,

mechanised, MRLs (multiple rocket launchers) and heavy artillery units being deployed to the battlefield. The parties also report losses of territory, significant military and human casualties.

Both states of Armenia as well as Azerbaijan represent Georgia's close partners. Georgia is bound with said countries with ties of historical cohabitation and friendship, therefore, it is in the interests of Tbilisi to find a peaceful resolution of the aforementioned conflict with the involvement of the international community, within the framework of the fundamental principles of international law and norms.

2. Factors Contributing to the Escalation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict

It is noteworthy, that during the 30 years of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict both states continued their development as independent entities. Additionally, Armenia and Azerbaijan opted for differing strategies of said development, that were in accordance with their history, geography, national identity, traditions, as well as other relatively less significant factors.

After 1994, when an experienced politician and manager, Heydar Aliyev (and subsequently his son, Ilham Aliyev) came to power in Azerbaijan, Baku embarked down the path of stabilisation, reforms and economic development. Despite significant problems associated with the internally displaced persons in the country, He managed to establish an effective administrative chain of command and state institutions, attracting the latest tech available in the collective 'West' in terms of oil and natural gas extraction, *etc.* Additionally, in cooperation with Georgia and Turkey, Azerbaijan managed to construct the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, the Baku-Supsa and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum oil pipe-lines (along with the Trans-Anatolian and the Trans-Adriatic natural gas pipe-lines), providing its share to the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. Therefore, Azerbaijan carved out its niche of natural resources on the European energy market, thus, gaining significant revenues. This allowed Baku to establish a modern civil society, conduct a rearmaments and training programmes for its military. Armenia, on the other hand, was completely excluded from the aforementioned projects.

Furthermore, due to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict Baku refused to go down the path of European integration, never joining any other political or defence block for various reasons.

On June 8th of 2012 the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey signed the “Trabzon Declaration”, which became the foundation of the process of strengthening of the strategic partnership shared by said three states, which also included the military dimension of cooperation. The Ministerial of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia-Turkey-Azerbaijan was also established. The 2013-2015 action plan was formulated and implemented.

In 2016 the strategic council of the aforementioned three states was established, along with the format, which includes the Presidents, Ministers of Defence, as well as trilateral cooperation of Foreign Relations Parliamentary Committees. In terms of deepening trilateral economic relations there is also the practice of holding trilateral business forums. Additionally, Georgia and Azerbaijan are members of GUAM and the Eastern Partnership Initiative founded by the EU.

Considering all of the above, one may conclude that Azerbaijan is one of the closest partners of Georgia, along with Turkey, as, more often than not, these three states have to cooperate in order to overcome challenges faced by them.

Despite its conflict with Azerbaijan, with the aid of Russia and Armenian diaspora, Armenia too managed to form a modern civil society and formidable and modernised military, reaching military parity with Baku after placing a Russian military base in Gyumri.

Additionally, along with establishing an alliance with Russia, Armenia also embarked down the path of European integration, engaging the EU in terms of preparations to sign the association agreement. However, after the meeting of the Russian and Armenian Presidents in 2013, Armenia, “unexpectedly”, changed its approach and opted to alter its political course towards joining the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

Despite this the Armenian government repeatedly expressed readiness and willingness to more actively cooperate with the EU, signing the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Brussels in 2017. Therefore, in spite of its close, strategic partnership with Russia, Armenia continues to uphold its traditional ties to Europe. This process is significantly aided by the rather influential Armenian diaspora residing in Europe and the US.

At this point in time there are no confirmed reports, regarding the initiator of the first shots. The threat of re-escalation of the conflict was ever-looming from both parties, due to the high concentration of fire-power and military personnel along the front line. According to the statement made by the Azerbaijani side, it is conducting “counter-attacks”, after the Armenian side opened fire, however, Yerevan refutes said statement.

One thing is clear, that full-scale military activity is underway, which causes devastation and human casualties. It is also possible that the unyielding positions shared by both parties stems from the fact, that the attention of world leaders is diverted towards other issues, such as the Coronavirus pandemic, the global economic recession and the US presidential elections.

It is often discussed in expert circles that the cautious positions demonstrated by Russian and US administrations so far, could be associated with the presidential campaigns currently taking place. In case the OSCE-based Minsk Group, comprised of France, the US and Russia, manages to stop the ongoing bloody conflict, it would register as another significant diplomatic success of the current US administration in the Middle East.

Although almost all leading global powers and authoritative international organisations called upon the parties to cease hostilities and return to the negotiating table in order to resolve disputed issues, expressing concern over the escalation of said conflict, it is noteworthy that not a single international forum managed to be successful in terms of solving the question under scrutiny. 20% of Azerbaijan’s territory remained occupied by Armenia, which might have forced the both parties to take radical action.

3. Possible Influences of the Escalation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict on the DeGeorgia and the South Caucasus Region

Considering the mode of modern warfare any military confrontation can have devastating influences and outcomes, both within the conflict zone, as well as in terms of the investment environment in the wider region, along with the destruction of infrastructure, the economy, *etc.* In case the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict continues to escalate, there is the possibility for spill-over of military confrontation along other points of their shared border. This includes the direct vicinity of Georgian borders. Therefore, there is the risk for the conflict to spill over into Georgia too, around the Tsiteli Khidi (the Red Bridge) region, where the borders of all three South Caucasian states converge.

It is noteworthy, that Georgia has not completed the demarcation and delimitation of its state border with said country. This could potentially lead to misunderstandings, making the entire process more troublesome. Additionally, it is also possible that the belligerent parties may employ land-mines around roads and other strategic points along Georgia's border, in order to ensure that Georgian territory not be used for unexpected, back-channel crossings (there have already been such cases near the Tsiteli Khidi). It goes without saying that the process of recovering and utilising said mines is extremely complex and dangerous.

According to the available data, Armenia possesses the "Iskander" and "Tochka-U" type operational tactical rocket launchers, while Azerbaijan employs the "Polonez", "Tochka-U", and "LORA-140" type rocket launcher systems. Both armies, thus, pack destructive might. Long-range artillery pieces in possession of both belligerents also include the "Smerch", "Uragan" and "Grad" type multiple rocket launcher systems. In fact, the Armenian party has already issued statements regarding their readiness to employ said weaponry, with the Turkish President Erdoğan calling Armenia a "bandit state". In response the Armenian President Armen Sargsyan state that "If the international community fails to get involved in the South Caucasus region, it would spell disaster for everyone". In this regard, the closer the

confrontation takes place to Georgia's borders, the higher the chance of Georgian territory coming under attack, "whether by change or otherwise".

In the case of a prolonged conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, both parties will require military supply management in order to continue intensive operations. Main supply lines for both belligerents, however, crisscross Georgian territory, which increases the chances for Georgia to be dragged into the conflict. The ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities residing in Georgia, as well as Georgian nationals of other ethnic descent, may attempt to participate in the military operations, or otherwise engage in the war, once again, increasing the chances for Georgia to be dragged into the conflict. This may lead to the military action to be diverted towards Georgian territory, which may, in turn, bring devastating results to the country.

Under the aforementioned hypothetical circumstances, infrastructure of regional significance may also come under attack. This includes, the Mingecevir Reservoir, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Supsa and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipe-lines, along with the Baku-Akhalkalaki-Kars railroad, built specifically around Armenia. Another piece of such infrastructure includes the Metsamor nuclear power station in Armenia, the destruction of which may cause long-term ecological catastrophe.

If the military confrontation continues to escalate it is also not beyond imagining that the belligerent parties start attacking strategic sites, including major cities and settlements. This will lead to destruction and human casualties. This would, in turn, guarantee a refugee crisis, which would only exacerbate the existing difficult situation already existing in Georgia in this regard. Considering all of the above, Georgia called upon both parties to cease hostilities, proposing to host peace negotiations in Tbilisi.

It remains unclear who will take the upper hand in the aforementioned military confrontation. Turkey, a NATO member, overtly supports Azerbaijan, however, official demands are yet to be made to call NATO into action. On the other hand, Armenia shares a mutual defence

alliance with Russia. In any case Georgia must do its utmost to refrain from involvement in the military confrontation, in order to ensure that war does not come to Georgia. It must join the international community in its efforts to peacefully resolve the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. In this regard, if the conflict continues to escalate, Georgia must follow a cautious and pragmatic foreign policy, down the path of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, strengthening its economic positions, as well as defence capabilities.