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ONE TOPIC - TWO ARTICLES

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TOPIC - PROBABILITY AND RISKS OF THE RESUMPTION OF WAR IN THE KARABAKH CONFLICT ZONE - 2018

See the comments of the authors on the other article here -
<http://www.publicdialogues.info/node/805>



KHUMAR HUSEYNZADE

*Doctoral Candidate (PhD) in Historical Sciences,
member of the board of the "Azerbaijan without a
Dictator" Movement*

THE RISKS OF THE RESUMPTION OF MILITARY ACTIONS

<http://www.publicdialogues.info/en/node/806>

For already 24 years, two countries – Armenia and Azerbaijan – have been living in a state of neither peace nor war. Such a status quo was made possible, thanks to the 1994 ceasefire agreement. Although all these years the truce was repeatedly violated by both sides, there were no major changes along the contact line. It can be assumed that the existing status quo somehow suited all parties, including the external centers of influence. In my opinion, the status quo suited Azerbaijan and Armenia also because of fears that the situation could change for the worse for one of the republics. It is enough to recall the reactions of our societies to the non-official statements of Russian experts on the existing arrangements for the liberation of the five districts. There were protests about the impossibility of returning the districts in Armenia, and in Azerbaijan they spoke of the necessity to claim for the release of all seven occupied regions. That is to say, the thinking was the current situation is better than any change.

However, this situation cannot last forever. Sooner or later, one of the parties will try to change the situation in its favor. In April 2016, Azerbaijan tried it. We may give various evaluations to these events, but a change in the front line factually did happen. It is true that active hostilities were halted under the pressure of Moscow, but there is already a precedent for military solution.

Often when considering the options for solving the Karabakh conflict, they oppose the peaceful (political) and military options. In my opinion, it is wrong to talk about either a political or military solution, because they appear in pure form very rarely. In my opinion, only a military-political solution is more realistic. I will try to justify my point of view below.

The peaceful political solution to the Karabakh issue, without saber-rattling or an arms race, and moreover without military action, will require a number of prerequisites, both external and internal ones. First of all, there should be the readiness of societies and political elites to compromise and make peace. And this will take strong pacifist movements and sentiments in the societies both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. No serious politician will sign a peace treaty and make significant compromises without relying on the society. Because after all, even imperfect peace in the form of the above-mentioned status quo was a result of not political, but rather a military-political solution. The signing of the ceasefire agreement in May 1994 required several years of bloody battles. Only after the complete exhaustion of military, human, economic and other resources did the majority of the population in the societies, and political elites made this agreement, even though there were forces opposed this agreement even then. Today, the militaristic worldview prevails both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Both societies are very far from concessions and compromises. They are not ready for concessions and compromises, moreover they are not even ready to discuss them.

When we talk about a military solution to the Karabakh issue, there is practically no prospect here either. After all, a military solution implies the complete victory of one of the parties and the surrender of the other. Suppose, even if Azerbaijan decides to launch an offensive and liberate 1 or all the 7 regions around Nagorno-Karabakh. Will the conflict be resolved? The issues of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, the return of refugees, and so on will still remain unresolved. The Azerbaijani army will have to stop or move further into the territory inhabited by Armenians, which will cause great losses among the military and civilians. Azerbaijan will not be allowed to do this by external power centers (because of political considerations) and international organizations (because of humanitarian considerations). That is to say, it would still be necessary to return to the negotiations process. The same thing will happen if, say, Armenia starts hostilities in the direction of Kura, Ganja or Nakhichevan (about which we sometimes hear in statements made by Armenia). The parties will still have to sit down at the negotiations table. (That is to say, again there will be a military-political solution, simply with new trump cards in the hands of one of the parties).

Scenarios of the military-political solutions

Speaking about the military-political solution to the Karabakh conflict, we must understand that this concept presents itself with several options.

1. Demonstration of power. This is what the two parties have been doing for the last few years: strengthening the army, procuring weapons and demonstrating them, organizing military maneuvers and parades, conducting active military diplomacy, concluding agreements on military cooperation with other countries. The purpose of such a demonstration of force is to make the other side more amenable in the negotiations without the direct use of military force. In the so-called "arms race" over the past 10-15 years, Azerbaijan has achieved a certain advantage. Due to a more developed economy and larger financial reserves, Azerbaijan has managed to increase and update its arsenal with a number of new types of weapons. And it is important to note that this was done not only at the expense of Russian weaponry, but also weapons from other countries of origin, namely Turkey, Israel, Belarus, the Czech Republic, China, Pakistan, as well as due to the establishment of its own (including joint) military production. Firstly, it reduces the dependence of the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan on the Russian military-industrial complex, and secondly it forces Russia to conclude profitable contracts with Azerbaijan in order not to lose its positions in our market. Without gloating delight, it should be noted that Armenia's economy will not last long in such a race. The latest two contracts for the supply of Russian weapons to Armenia were secured by Russian loans. Time will not show whether Russia will continue arming Armenia on credit under its current economic situation and in the conditions of uncertainty of its relations with the new government of Armenia.

2. "Forcing peace." This is how Russia called its aggression against Georgia in 2008. To punish Georgia for its desire for European integration, cooperation with NATO and, most importantly, not taking into account Russian interests, Russia in fact cut Abkhazia, South Ossetia and part of the Gori region from Georgia. Then she had to openly enter troops into the territory of independent Georgia. If Russia for some reason decides to "force peace" onto Armenia, it will not even have to bring in its troops. Firstly, they are already deployed in Armenia. And secondly, Azerbaijan can do it for Russia on its own territory in Karabakh. It will be enough not to react very enthusiastically to the actions of the Azerbaijani army for 10-15 days. There will be loud statements and protests, the co-chairs will become acutely active. Then Moscow will act as a peacemaker and "once again save Armenia, but without any European integration." And the successive government of Armenia will launch negotiations with Azerbaijan without preconditions.

3. "A Preventive strike." The Armenian leadership, realizing the risks of the first two scenarios, and securing illicit Russian support, decides to inflict one or more preemptive strikes. These can be attempts to break through several places in the front line or strike at the infrastructure units of Azerbaijan. The Armenian expert community often speaks about strikes at Ganja, Mingechaur, pipelines or the Sangachal terminal, at the same time referring to the fact that Armenia has Russian "Iskenders". Then, as in the previous case, negotiations resume without preconditions.

Such a development is also probable without the participation of Russia. For example, the Armenian leadership may do this to relieve tension in the society and consolidate it in the face of a common enemy. Or those who disagree with the current military command may provoke a "pre-emptive strike," and then Moscow will act as a peacemaker and "once again rescue Azerbaijan." In this case, Russia will have to somehow resolve the issue with Turkey, yielding something in Syria.

4. **"An anti-terrorist operation."** Azerbaijan, using the example of Turkey (operations "Shield of the Euphrates" and "Olive Branch" in Syria), independently begins to carry out a sweep in the occupied areas or regains control over the sections of the Iranian-Azerbaijani state border. The operation will not aim at the liberation of all occupied areas, but rather the liberation as many settlements as possible, possibly one or two regions. Then, under international pressure, it stops the offensive. Negotiations are renewed, but already in conditions of a new status quo. At the same time, Azerbaijan can count on Turkey's political support and Iran's neutrality.

Undoubtedly, to implement one of the above scenarios or their variations, it will be necessary to take into account a number of internal factors in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the role of external actors with their own interests in the South Caucasus.

Azerbaijan did not take advantage of the period of instability during the "velvet revolution" in Armenia for a number of reasons. Firstly, we must admit that Azerbaijan was not ready for such rapidly developing events in Armenia. Therefore, they did not take abrupt steps to destabilize an already unstable situation. Secondly, I think the leadership of Azerbaijan was not against the change of the intractable, "stubborn" Serge Sargsyan. Therefore, any action undertaken by Baku could be handy for S. Sargsyan, and would help him to remain in power because of the threat to Karabakh. However, this does not mean that if there is another event of instability, Azerbaijan will not try to take advantage of the situation. And then the internal Azerbaijani factors will play a role. The army, especially the officer corps and the generals, are eagerly awaiting for a permission to carry out an operation to liberate the territories. Part of the society, especially after April 2016, is also eagerly waiting and wants another victorious operation. In case of a successfully conducted operation, the image of the Liberator will be fixed after the leadership of the country. Today in the Azerbaijani society there are practically no real political, religious and ethnic groups that would oppose the liberation of the occupied territories. It may sound strange, but the liberation of some of the territories can even relieve some social tension. After all, the liberated territory will have to be developed, cleared up of mines, have restored infrastructure, roads, houses, schools, have the refugees return, and so on. All this will attract additional financial projects, loans, foreign investments, and most importantly this will create new jobs. The restoration of the village of Chochug Marjanly, after April 2016, can be a small example.

Economic instability, dependence on the price of oil and the interests of Western companies involved in energy projects may be the only deterrents here. We also need to take into account the example of Armenia, where the military, who achieved success in Karabakh in the time of operations, actually seized power. So, in case of a successful operation, the leadership of the country will have to consider the interests of the generals who have brought them the victory.

External factors and risks of war

The main and most important role is undoubtedly played by external factors that can both stabilize and, vice versa, destabilize the situation. Here whether we like it or not, Russia comes as a primary actor. It has sufficient, if not too many levers of pressure and influence on our republics. Of course, currently being under economic sanctions, having stuck in Ukraine and Syria, Russia would not want to have another volatile region at its side. But in case there is a threat of losing control in the South Caucasus, Russia can consciously go for fueling instability in the region, facing the risk of a merger of Ukraine-Black Sea, South Caucasus and Middle East foci. I can give you an incorrect example: in 1812 Russia surrendered Moscow to the French, but did not withdraw the troops from the Caucasus.

At first glance, it seems, that the United States have enough on their plate and can care less for the South Caucasus, but three big neighbors of ours are under American sanctions (Russia, Iran and Turkey). Their economies and financial institutions are feverish, which will certainly affect our region. Therefore, in my opinion, Washington has simply decided to deal with our big neighbors first, and then we will fall into their hands like ripe apples. Moreover, Azerbaijan respects the US energy interests, while Armenia and Georgia are striving towards the West.

Turkey is the only country in the region that holds pro-Azerbaijani positions. Unlike the previous decades, the Turkish-Iranian-Russian alliance of the day has been the most comfortable period for Azerbaijan. Despite a number of disagreements over Syria, Turkey, Iran (we'll talk about Iran separately) and Russia are very much interested in one another and depend on one another. We should bear in mind that Turkey treats Syria almost in the same manner as Russia treats the South Caucasus republics. They see these countries as their former territories. It is now difficult to predict how the division of the spheres of their influence in Syria and the South Caucasus will happen in the future. But we must understand that neither Turkey nor Russia will voluntarily withdraw from Syria, the same is true about our region. This may allow Turkey, jointly with Russia, to present itself even more actively as a regulator in our region. Turkey borders with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, its political, economic and military influence on the region will grow. If in the 1990s the leadership of Turkey did not venture openly to provide military assistance to Azerbaijan, the current leadership can provide direct military support and assist any initiative of Baku, as previously coordinated with it.

Within the triad of Russia, Turkey and Iran, the latter today seems to be the most vulnerable. Iran has been under sanctions longer than the others, and the US presses on it even more than North Korea. Iran, unlike Russia and Turkey, is accused of Islamic radicalism, and a serious protest is ripening in the Iranian society. Therefore, Iran will not actively interfere in the resolution of the Karabakh issue, but will try to retain its influence in both republics. For many years, there was a stand-off between Azerbaijan and Iran, the issue of South Azerbaijan was painful for both sides. In Azerbaijan there was an opinion that Iran provides economic assistance to Armenia in revenge to us. However, in the last decade we have witnessed a significant warming of relations. Joint economic and transport projects have rolled out, and Azerbaijan has invested in the construction of a railway in Iran.

Iran has finally given its approval to the status of the Caspian. But the situation around Iran remains tense, and this is fraught with risks for Azerbaijan, and to some extent also for Armenia. In the event of a growing US-Iran confrontation and the proliferation of protests in the Iranian society, we may face a flood of refugees, especially through the uncontrolled Iranian-Azerbaijani border in Karabakh. Neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia will be able cope with such a flow (it can be a million or more people). This can be considered a humanitarian catastrophe for all of us. It is unlikely that even in the face of such a threat, Armenia and Azerbaijan will try to unite their efforts. Most likely, each of the parties will try to take advantage of the instability in the region to solve their problems, which may lead to a situation when all are at war against all.

I admit that the scenarios and risks in the article may seem somewhat hypertrophied, but as the Azerbaijani proverb goes, "Talk about the evil, the good will arrive by itself."



DAVID STEPANYAN

Political Commentator

AN ALTERNATIVE WHEN PEACE HAS NO ALTERNATIVE

<http://www.publicdialogues.info/en/node/807>

Introduction

Despite the indefinite ceasefire regime that has existed since May 1994 between the parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the situation remains tense along the contact line of the Defense Army of the unrecognized Republic of Artsakh and the Azerbaijani Armed Forces, as well as along the Armenia-Azerbaijan interstate border. Accompanied by numerous victims on both sides, periodic shootings continue to be an indispensable attribute of negotiations. Since 1994, the most significant violation of the ceasefire regime from April 2 to 5 in 2016 was the so-called "Four-Day War". The result of the offensive initiated by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces was the takeover of some positions and posts formerly occupied by the NKR Defense Army, as well as several hundred dead and wounded on both sides from among the military personnel and civilians. We have to state that the notorious armistice regime exists rather on paper than is observed by the parties in practice. Moreover, the permanent tension and shots across the borders make the opinion that the conflict is in a "frozen" state even more unconvincing. As a result, we are facing years of talk about an upcoming large-scale war.

Evaluating the Probability of a New War. Azerbaijan The Rhetoric

Against this background, the resumption of hostilities, at first glance, is quite likely. And, in general, many in the societies of the conflicting countries believe in the possibility of transforming the conflict from its current state of "neither war, nor peace" into a large-scale war. For Azerbaijan, the Karabakh war ended in the loss of 19 thousand square kilometers or 14% of the territory of the Azerbaijan SSR¹. These territories, including the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region and the surrounding areas, currently constitute the territory

¹ <https://www.litmir.me/br/?b=120760&p=1>

of the unrecognized Republic of Artsakh. That is why a certain stratum of citizens of Azerbaijan declares the desire for war from revanchist motives. Militaristic sentiments exist in both Armenia and Artsakh, however, for a variety of reasons they do not dominate in these societies. Here we should especially highlight the role of the Azerbaijani authorities in the generation of such sentiments.

The intention to "return the lands" was voiced by the highest authorities in Baku practically ever since the very start of the ceasefire regime. However, ever since Ilham Aliyev came to power, such statements have become much more frequent, and their geography has expanded. Previously, Baku claimed "only" the territory of the NKAO and the seven adjacent areas. However, today Ilham Aliyev has pretenses for the basin of Lake Sevan, Syunik region and even Yerevan². During negotiations on the settlement of the conflict, which have been ongoing since 1992 under the mandate of the OSCE Minsk Group, such claims by the Azerbaijani negotiators are never made, especially considering that the negotiations are held on the basis of the "Madrid principles" which presuppose mutual compromises. However, the level of perception of the neighboring Armenians by ordinary Azerbaijanis is certainly influenced. The analysis of opinions voiced in social networks from the neighboring country makes it possible to assume that the purposeful cultivation of the image of the enemy-Armenian in Azerbaijan is already bearing fruit. And revenge declared as a major foreign policy vector significantly increases the risk of a smoldering conflict in the hot phase. Baku continues to pursue an aggressive offensive policy along the domestic and foreign vectors with a view of bringing its own readiness to initiate a war at any time "to attention".

The Reality

However, there are serious restrictions on the way of this policy. The external vectors are as follows: the Defense Army of Artsakh, the Armenian Armed Forces, the possible reaction of the international community and the world centers of power. And the internal vectors are as follows: serious issues with the economy, the polyethnicity of the population that is harshly suppressed, yet continues to feel more and more dissatisfied with the permanent rule of Ilham Aliyev. Meanwhile, the accident at the Mingachevir hydroelectric station in early July this year that de-energized almost the whole of Azerbaijan visually demonstrated the degree of energy vulnerability of the country that is an exporter of energy resources. The attempt at a protest action in Ganja in the same period became evidence of growing public discontent with the power. Despite the fact that almost all religious preachers (both Shiites and Sunnis) have long been imprisoned, Baku immediately tried to ascribe a religious character to the unrest in Ganja. According to the Azerbaijani conflicts specialist and human rights defender Arif Yunusov³, the Azerbaijani society is split into believers and secular ones, with no trust between the two groups. The latter in a panic fear of believers, which often prevents them from seeing the constant presence of the "Islamic factor" in games within the government. According to the expert, the Mingachevir accident and the unrests in Ganja are links of the

² <https://ru.sputnik.az/azerbaijan/20180208/413968729/azerbajdzhan-armenija-karabah-konflikt-irevan.html>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-anQgjzmYY>

same chain leading to Baku. The authorities needed an excuse to divert public attention from the consequences of the accident, hence the assassination attempt on the mayor of Ganja with the subsequent murder of two police colonels.

The very fact of such manipulations testifies to the presence of a smoldering potential for a riot in Azerbaijan. And it seems that it is precisely the unleashing of a large-scale war that is quite capable of becoming a spark for its ignition. People, including Ilham Aliyev, have fresh memories of the march by the rebellious colonel Suret Huseynov onto Baku in 1993 that culminated with the resignation of Abulfaz Elchibey. Later, Heydar Aliyev managed to calm Huseynov down by only appointing him prime minister. And in the case of a second Karabakh war, the military may well repeat Huseynov's march, especially if we consider the presence of a large number of dissatisfied people in the country. Here we arrive at a very interesting topic that is relevant for Azerbaijan and was relevant for Armenia, too, until the most recent times. In the midst of the "four-day war", the leader of the "Pre-Parliament" movement, Zhirayr Sefilyan, accused the Armenian authorities of refusing general mobilization for domestic political reasons.⁴ After that, the seizure of the Yerevan Police regiment in July 2017 clearly demonstrated the weakness of the illegitimate authorities over a handful of armed members of the Sasna Tsrer group. In this light, it seems that the general mobilization of tens of thousands of armed citizens who hated the authorities involved a threat of a violent shift of this very power. After the Velvet Revolution in April-May 2018, the situation with the legitimacy of power in Armenia has changed. Whereas a general mobilization is still equal to death for the leadership of Azerbaijan. A large-scale war without general mobilization seems to be a nonsense. Another significant obstacle to the revanchist plans of Azerbaijan is the polyethnicity of the population. The Lezgin, Talish, Tat, Rutul, Tsakhur people, Mountain Jews, Avars and Ashkenazi Jews are not at all eager to lay down their heads for their homeland, where, to put it mildly, they are not treated in the best way. Baku is making significant efforts to underreport statistical data in order to assimilate the national minorities living in the country. So, officially, Azerbaijanis constitute 90% of the country's population, while unofficially alone Kurds make up more than 10% of the population in Azerbaijan. The official number of the Dagestani-Lezghin community in Azerbaijan is reported to be 200,000 people, which according to Lezgin sources, is understated by half. The number people representing Iranian ethnic groups residing in the south of the country reaches half a million people, according to unofficial data. According to an expert at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences Andrey Areshev, Baku's policy of assimilating the national minorities in Azerbaijan creates conditions for future domestic political destabilization because of ethnic belonging.⁵ As a consequence, separatist sentiments are ripening among ethnic minorities, often striving for independence, after the example of the idea on creating Talyshistan.

Besides, religious separatism is maturing in Azerbaijan, and the authorities react to it roughly, too. The reaction of Baku was most pronounced in November 2015 against residents of the village of Nardaran, the population of which differed in their particular

⁴ <http://novostink.ru/armenia/156602-sefilyan-odno-tolko-zayavlenie-o-vseobschey-mobilizacii-prinudit-protiv>

⁵ <https://ria.ru/analytics/20141120/1034261686.html>

religiosity and opposition to secular power.⁶ At that time, the operation to prevent the terrorist attack planned by the "Muslim Union" group took the toll of four citizens and two policemen. The famous Muslim theologian Taleh Bagirzade and his followers were arrested. The Nardaran people are Shiites, the influence of Iran is very noticeable in the village, which makes the authorities of Azerbaijan feel worried. However, Baku has established a very strictly control over the activities of other religious communities, especially those living in the north-eastern regions of the Sunnis-Salafis. According to the expert at the Center for Caucasus Problems and Regional Security at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, ethnographer Ahmet Yarlikapov, the rapid conversion of the Azerbaijani population into Sunnism is already entering a hardly controllable phase, which is significantly promoted by Baku's policy of limiting Shiism, i.e. the Iranian influence.⁷

Thus, the probability of Azerbaijan's initiation of a full-scale war is small. Due to the combination of the above factors, Ilham Aliyev will not try to solve a thirty-year-old, stagnant problem by military means, neglecting the bouquet of modern domestic, religious, ethnic, geopolitical and even global challenges. In such conditions, for the Azerbaijani clan-based an oligarchic system of power a new war will be equivalent to cutting the branch it is sitting on. Perhaps no one can predict the possible course and outcome of hostilities against the background of the chaotic and variegated ethno-confessional map of Azerbaijan of the day, as outlined above. In this light, the only "internal" cause of the war will be the situation when Aliyev has almost been overthrown and all he can do is an attempt to cling on a straw. However, due to a number of reasons, including the above- mentioned ones, such a scenario seems unlikely.

Evaluating the Probability of a New War. Armenia and Artsakh The Rhetoric

The leadership of Armenia had long got used to the militaristic-revanchist rhetoric of their colleagues from Absheron during all these years and commented rather sluggishly, as extreme necessity arose. In Artsakh, oddly enough, they generally treated this rhetoric rather indifferently. This was before the change of power in Armenia as a result of the Velvet Revolution. July 2018 was marked by a number of rather tough statements made by the Armenian Defense Minister David Tonoyan,⁸ his counterpart in Artsakh Levon Mnatsakanyan⁹ and, most importantly, the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan.¹⁰ It

⁶ https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2015/11/151127_azerbaijan_nardaran_religion_protest

⁷ http://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=33020

⁸ <https://eadaaily.com/ru/news/2018/07/22/armeniya-gotovitsya-k-voyne-s-azerbaydzhanom-intervyu-s-ministrom-oborony>

⁹ <https://armenpress.am/rus/news/941683.html>

¹⁰ http://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=33347&lang=2

seems that such a sharp change of sentiments in Yerevan and Stepanakert is primarily meant for the world centers of power and only after Baku itself. The Armenian authorities have realized the impossibility of any positive progress should they continue to hunker down. Hence, the need to inform the international community about their own capabilities and deriving intentions. In other words, aggressive, if you would like, approach of Yerevan and Stepanakert that is symmetrical to that of Baku, should no longer be a surprise to anyone.

The Reality

At the same time, there is no demand for a new war with Azerbaijan in Armenia and Artsakh, just as it was not there before. In both republics, there are citizens who hold extremely uncompromising sentiments, who are guided by the "not a single inch of land to the enemy" slogan in the Karabakh settlement. However, even these people do not seek a large-scale war with Azerbaijan. There is no such demand by the new Armenian authorities either. If earlier, the Republican Party of Armenia had turned the appeal to the threat of war into a frequently used internal political crib, the new and currently provisional Government of Armenia simply does not need it. In other words, replacing the illegitimate government with a power supported by society has by definition removed the interconnection of domestic policy and the threat of war from Azerbaijan. The existing status quo is beneficial to the Armenian republics, in general; accordingly, there is no reasoning in a new war either. And Yerevan and Stepanakert are not clearly going to threaten such a status quo for the sake of adventurous and phantom plans for "going out onto to the Kura" or "returning Nakhchivan".

The Factor of Arms Race

There is another factor potentially increasing the probability of a large-scale war, and this is an arms race that has reached an unprecedented level in the recent years. The main supplier to both sides to the conflict is the OSCE Minsk Group co-chair country, i.e. Russia. It is followed by Israel, China, Pakistan, Turkey, Ukraine, and more recently, Armenia's CSTO ally – Belarus. The other two co-chairing countries - the United States and France - do not supply weapons to the parties to the conflict. With its financial capacity exceed the Armenian one, Baku can set the direction in this race. In 2018, defense expenditure in the state budget of Azerbaijan was increased by 6.1% (to \$ 1.6 billion)¹¹. Armenia's defense expenditure (\$ 512 million) is three times less. As a result, Yerevan goes for reciprocating purchases, making a bet not on the quantity, but on a certain asymmetry, which allows to neutralize the advantages of Baku, entirely based on quantity and quality. In the recent years, Azerbaijan has acquired the most advanced weapons: T-90S, Multiple Rocket Launcher "Smerch", IFV-3, heavy flamethrower systems TOS-1A, Israeli UAVs of all classes, OTSC "Tochka-U" and LORA, heavy MRL "Polonaise" "Smerch" and T-300 Kasirga, cruise missiles SOM-1B. Meanwhile, before the April war in 2016, Armenia basically armed its forces with Soviet-made weapons and equipment "from warehouses".

¹¹ <http://armiya.az/ru/news/134048>

Here the 5 divisions of air defense systems S-300PS / PT-1, T-72 tanks, IFV-2 need to be mentioned. However, after April 2016 it turned out that modern weapons were also supplied: "Iskander" missile launcher, "Smerch" MRLS, "Infauna" electronic warfare system. In the past two years, the Armenian armed forces have replenished their armor with ATMC "Kornet", MANPADS "Igla-S" and "Verba", short-range missile systems Tor-M2.

The impressive number of heavy MRLS purchased by Baku testifies to the tendency to build up long-range weapons, which leads to the shattering of the balance of power again. According to the intelligence officer, military expert Vladimir Vartanov¹², the Azerbaijani command began equipping its frontline with long-range guns after the destruction of two of its explosive ordnance disposal teams in the south and north of the contact line in Artsakh in February 2017. The latter, in his opinion, became possible because the Armenian forces had elementary military systems of night surveillance at their disposal. The expert is convinced that the balance of forces, which is again violated as a result of the procurement of long-range artillery and MRLS by Azerbaijan, is necessary and possible to be restored mainly by training Armenian servicemen for a lightning attack in mountainous conditions. Such an attack will make it possible to reach a level of contact allowing to deprive the enemy's artillery of the opportunity to strike at the Armenian troops.

Recognizing the arms race as a factor contributing to the escalation of the situation around the conflict, it is impossible to ignore the following important circumstance. Missile systems with a range of tens and hundreds of kilometers are a double-edged sword and play the role of a so-called deterrent weapon. In the scales of Transcaucasia, the "Polonaise" systems that are at the disposal of the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan, and the "Iskander" systems that are part of the arsenal of the Armed Forces of Armenia and even the Soviet, yet modernized "Scuds" play the same role as intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads of the time of the "cold" war ". The presence of a nuclear power plant in Armenia and oil drilling facilities and oil refineries in Azerbaijan only give additional credibility to this assertion.

Potential External Catalysts

The analysis of the possibilities of unfolding a large-scale war over Karabakh due to geopolitical factors makes it possible to state the absence of an interest in such a scenario by Russia, the US and the European Union in the near future. For similar reasons neither Turkey nor Iran have such interest either. Both the world and regional centers of power currently have enough problems on other geopolitical platforms. They do not need another conflict with very vague prospects at the crossroads of the zones of influence of Russia, the US, Turkey and Iran. In this respect, it is important that the Karabakh status quo, by and large, does not confine itself to the parties to the conflict. The status quo of 1994 is the status quo among all the above-mentioned external players with interests in the region. Given the presence of Iran in the region, Israel and China can also be considered as external players with interests here. Accordingly, the consequences of the violation of the

¹² http://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=33132&lang=2

24-year status quo by one of these players will roll out far beyond the region, which, at least at this stage, is not sought by anyone.

Thus, the main risk for igniting the Karabakh conflict seems to be its geographical location not far from the blazing Middle East: Syria and Iraq. And also the immediate neighborhood with the zone of potential instability - Iran. In recent years, major world players are trying to solve their problems through "hybrid wars" in the territory of third countries: Ukraine, Syria, Iraq. And because it is still unresolved, this smoking Karabakh conflict has every prospect of becoming another platform for geopolitical showdowns. For example, after settling the conflict around Ukraine. Or in the event that Iran does blaze up, which in the light of recent events in the neighboring country looks even more menacing. In this light, the transformation of Karabakh into a second Syria is the most dangerous, undesirable scenario of all existing one for both Armenia and Azerbaijan. With all the attendant "delights" in the form of Islamic radicals, terrorists, religious extremists, chaos, destruction, and so on. No one has canceled the global confrontation between the US and China, but at the same time it is impossible to enter the phase of a direct military confrontation (i.e., in the Third World War). And this confrontation is doomed to continue in the territory of third countries. Even at the cost of their complete destruction.

Conclusion

Due to the continuing saturation of the already militarized region of the conflict with the most powerful weapons and the still existing balance of forces the outcome of a large-scale war over Karabakh by the victory of one of the sides is, a priori, impossible. The parties are not able to take over Baku or Yerevan for a number of the above-mentioned domestic and foreign policy reasons. The scale and range of destruction will be the consequences of the 1991-94 Karabakh war tens, if not hundreds of times. In such conditions, a new war will push back the whole region for decades. Perfectly understanding all these established realities, the leadership of Azerbaijan is left with nothing else but shaking the "ax of war". Baku realizes that if the negotiations on Karabakh are not backed up by the threat of war and the death of dozens of servicemen annually, will inevitably turn into something like the negotiations on Northern Cyprus.

However, there is an alternative. And it consists in a peaceful, political, and compromise-based solution to the Karabakh conflict that already has no alternative. A settlement capable of pulling Armenia, Azerbaijan and Artsakh out of the list of potential "brown" zones of global confrontation. From the list of eternally unstable "third world" countries. It seems that only legitimate, democratic authorities will be able to come to such a settlement and stop the conflict. And there is no need to invent a bicycle here, because the fact that democracies do not fight was outlined in general by Immanuel Kant in the treatise "Towards Eternal Peace" as far back as the 18th century.¹³ And the "Velvet Revolution" in Armenia seems to be the first small step on this long towards peace that has no alternative.

¹³ https://www.civisbook.ru/files/File/Kant_K_vechnomu_miru.pdf