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“APRIL” CALL FROM BAKU

Azerbaijani flag at the Lala-Tepe height



The “April” success of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces, who seriously ousted the Armenian forces in a number of sections of the front line, became a kind of test for relations between Baku and Moscow, showing, firstly, their strength in such a difficult situation, and secondly, the Kremlin’s desire to exploit the new opportunities that arose to get the Karabakh conflict resolution process out of the stalemate.

The further actions of the Russian leadership, after the clashes of 2-5 April 2016, clearly demonstrated that the Kremlin sees the most preferred option for progress in the Karabakh conflict in a model that will strengthen the position of Russia in both Azerbaijan and Armenia for purposes of regional security and future macroeconomic development. The problem is more than difficult, and long-term, and at different stages this model causes discussions and controversies, especially from different parties to the conflict. In a situation where all peaceful, “negotiated” ways of moving towards a gradual exit from the impasse proved impossible, Russia seeks to maintain a guaranteed opportunity, and respectively, effective levers of influence on possible hostilities leading to a change in the “status quo” that came about in the mid-1990s.

The role of a primary supplier of military equipment to Azerbaijan, which was deliberately chosen by Moscow and led to the significant strengthening of its combat capability, first emerged in 2010-2011 when a number of major agreements were signed for the supply of two divisions of S-300 PMU-2 anti-aircraft missile systems, several batteries of Tor-2ME anti-aircraft complexes and 60 multi-purpose Mi-17 and 24 Mi-35M helicopters. The cost of the contracts is estimated at three billion dollars, and the date of completion of deliveries is 2017. The planned strengthening by the Kremlin of the military-technical potential of Azerbaijan (http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2016-05-13/1_karabah.html) is not just a consequence of favorable export contracts of Russian defense concerns, but a long-term political line, the continuation of which was publicly confirmed by senior Russian officials after the April operations. While in Baku on 8 April, the “defense” Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Rogozin said that Russia will continue to supply weapons to Azerbaijan as a strategic partner in accordance with the contracts that have been signed. This is further proof that the line selected by Moscow was not deformed by the April conflict in Karabakh, as Yerevan might have expected.

New tanks of the Azerbaijani army at a parade



Around the conflict, and particularly around the efforts of the mediators, there is plenty of intrigue tied to a tangle of interests and contradictions. We'll probably never know all the ins and outs, maybe only from the materials of archives open to the public decades later. Nonetheless, a specific set of critical issues need to be put up for debate by the civil society of different countries interested in resolving the conflict, which in itself makes it possible to get the answers that may not be so obvious, but are nevertheless close to the real state of affairs. Let's try to examine some of them.

Call from Baku: Karabakh returns to the top rankings of world politics. The main foreign policy result Baku achieved through active counter offensive operations in the conflict zone is the return of the topic to the top position on the international agenda of the Eurasian region. The point is not about the headlines of leading mass media, of course - "State Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov discuss the Karabakh crisis", but the real attention of Moscow and Washington the crisis attracted after a period of international "indifference" to the subject of settlement. Let's look at the dynamics of ups and downs in the negotiation process in the last decade.

The current set of settlement principles (the so-called

"Madrid principles") is the result of the "Prague process", when a series of meetings between the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia started in Prague in 2004. In late April of that year, Warsaw hosted a meeting of the presidents of the two countries, which in fact became an impetus to the negotiation process "paused" in 2002 in connection with another electoral cycle of presidential and parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan and Armenia.

By 2005, the fourth, "mixed" ("package-phased") plan, which provided for the preliminary approval of the basic settlement principles, was submitted for discussion. In April-July 2006, the co-chairs of the Minsk Group published a series of statements which disclosed some of the proposals - a phased withdrawal of Armenian forces and the demilitarization of the occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh (within the borders of the Soviet NKAO), a special regime for the Lachin and Kalbajar districts (including a corridor between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia) and the holding of a referendum on the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh after Azerbaijani refugees return there. Also, it was planned to deploy peacekeepers in the conflict zone and render international assistance in mine clearance and the restoration of the occupied territories and districts of Nagorno-Karabakh affected



by the war. The preliminary version of the principles of the conflict settlement, later called "Madrid" principles, was handed over to the conflicting parties in Madrid in November 2007.

Then comes a new period of decline in external attention to the conflict - now due to the international recognition of Kosovo (15 February 2008) and the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. A serious crisis in relations between Baku and the OSCE Minsk "troika" arose in March 2008, when Resolution 62/243 "The situation in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan" was adopted during a UN General Assembly meeting at the request of Baku. The resolution was the result of a military clash in the region near the village of Levonarkh in Mardakert District - at that time it was the biggest since 1994. The US, France and Russia refused to support Azerbaijan for various reasons. The resolution was adopted by a majority vote, Baku was not in isolation, but the aftertaste remained. In the autumn of the same year, the political and strategic consequences of the Russian-Georgian conflict return Karabakh to the epicenter of Russian foreign policy again. This period is already associated with Dmitry Medvedev.

In November 2008, Russian President Medvedev managed to do what no one had been able to do before - Ilham Aliyev and Serzh Sargsyan put their signatures under a document called the Meindorf declaration, in which the emphasis was placed on the establishment of confidence-building measures between the negotiating parties. Then, in November 2008, this event

caused a sea of optimism among observers, who called the declaration a harbinger of a speedy solution to a decades-long territorial dispute. Unfortunately, expectations were not met.

A series of tripartite meetings under the auspices of Dmitry Medvedev's diplomacy led to a certain breakthrough in Kazan (24 June 2011). By and large, the "Kazan agreement" remained behind the scenes - there is no reliable information about it, rather, speculation at different levels with official statements and press releases. When they come from the mouth of the senior leadership of one of the sides to the conflict, they become resonant. In an April interview with Bloomberg, President Serzh Sargsyan said that after Kazan he was ready to hand over some of the occupied districts to Azerbaijan, but the agreements were thwarted. It is still not clear whether it was a bluff by the Armenian president or Yerevan's real willingness following the Kazan decisions. We should also keep in mind that the Bloomberg interview itself was an element of blackmail against Moscow and the entire OSCE Minsk Group and Armenia's threat to quit the negotiations.

If we look at the April military operations in the context of the entire history of the negotiations, it can be concluded that the counteroffensive operation approved by President Aliyev actually began to implement the scheme of the Madrid principles - but only by force. Thus, Ilham Aliyev not only returned the status of the most important foreign policy topic of discussion to Karabakh,

but put the moderator powers of the settlement face to face with the need for radical solutions to overcome the negotiation deadlock. Incidentally, this also affected the format of the Vienna talks between the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia. For the first time they were attended not only by the Minsk Group co-chairs, but also by the foreign policy chiefs of the United States, Russia, France and the European Union.

But to a large extent, the “Karabakh challenge” is facing Russia, which shoulders the legacy of the Soviet breakup. We have already seen the ability of the Kremlin to freeze a conflict and manage processes in the “cold” mode. Scheduled for June, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s visit to Baku is to show how Moscow, as a leading regional player, is ready to carry the burden of responsibility in the new Karabakh agenda. In this case, when we talk about the need to control Karabakh processes in swift dynamics and with a variety of existing risks, we talk about Moscow’s ability to bring the parties to “a new plateau” of political agreements, because the return to the former status quo is no longer possible in practice.

Non-working hot “peace”. One of the tasks of the Russian president is to form a new stage in the Karabakh process with a serious legal act that is more binding than the ceasefire agreement of 12 May 1994.

The willingness of Baku and Yerevan to negotiate, which was demonstrated by the meeting in Vienna, and the desire of the OSCE MG to maintain the general direction of the peace process should be supported by a non-working ceasefire agreement. This is one of the paradoxes of not only the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh ethno-territorial conflict - in the absence of another “regulatory” framework, the mediators are trying to involve the parties in the conflict in the “Procrustean bed” of a non-working document, which only formally protects against military escalation.

It must be noted that the agreement does not work on three points today. First, the number and scale of military incidents occurring on the contact line of the parties. For a long time, the tacit “norm” of incidents was within the range of separate sniper shootings, which, however, happened on a weekly basis. On 4 March 2008, this barrier was passed as a result of a military clash near the village of Levonarkh in Mardakert District. According to the estimates of the parties, from 2 to 15 fighters were killed in the incident, and heavy hardware and artillery were used. At that time, the clash was the largest since 1994. The incident brought history to a new “norm” of the so-called Nagorno-Karabakh status quo, in which

the number of weekly shootings exceeded one hundred. The next stage of aggravation was the active use by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces of air assault groups to probe the enemy’s defense. One of the most notorious episodes occurred near the village of Chayli in June 2010: more than five fighters were killed. Moreover, this episode was one of the biggest moments of a patriotic rise in public sentiment in Azerbaijan. In the course of a clash, there was a fight between Azerbaijani warrant officer Mubariz Ibrahimov and four Armenian soldiers - all participants in the fight were killed. Subsequent history became an indicator of public attitudes to the conflict - Ibrahimov was awarded the title of national hero, and his dedication became a model for fostering Azerbaijani patriotism: a number of streets, several schools and a new ship of the Palmali group of firms were renamed after him, and an athlete from the coastal city of Lankaran, Elshan Salayev, who swam 30 km in the Caspian sea in 8.5 hours, dedicated his achievement to Ibrahimov. Why am I listing this? It is clear that to the casual observer such euphoria appears to be anti-Armenian propaganda. However, for Azerbaijan the meaning is different – for a long time society has accumulated pessimism about the ability to win on the front and even distrust in its own armed forces which lost the war in the mid-1990s due to a number of factors combined. Therefore, Ibrahimov’s act, from the point of view of public mentality, was a kind of social expectation of the opposite - hope, and for many Azerbaijani people on the street, especially the younger generation, it was a signal that the military option is not closed. Thus, it was an additional factor that undermined the basis of the 12 May 1994 agreement.

Another significant episode in the same row – the Mi-24 helicopter of the Armenian forces shot down in November 2014 as they openly used this hardware near the very ceasefire line as part of the Unity 2014 operational-tactical exercises. In subsequent years, even before the

ATGM drills of the Azerbaijani army





A tank of the Armenian army destroyed by a direct hit

April clashes, the sides to the conflict reached “the norm” of more than a hundred firefights on a daily basis, often using 120-millimeter mortars. Looking ahead, we note that the unfreezing of the conflict was the result of Russian policy leading to a change in the status quo and, as a consequence, the balance of forces between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Below we will show that this was not a mistake or a system failure in foreign policy planning.

But let’s get back to the agreement of 12 May 1994. The second point to be mentioned is the ceasefire agreement envisaged the deployment of an advance team of observers. Who are they - officers of the OSCE Mission, police or peacekeepers? If we look at the text of the Bishkek Protocol of the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly of 5 May 1994 on which the ceasefire agreement is based, after the point on the ceasefire, it says “to discuss the initiative on the creation of a CIS peacekeeping force”, and in the context of the Karabakh settlement. In addition, the protocol on trust between the defense ministries (also one of the foundations of the armistice directly recorded in the preamble to the agreement of 12 May 1994), signed on 18 February of the same year in Moscow in the presence of Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, pointed out, albeit indirectly, the need to deploy peacekeepers. This point was crucial in the mediating mission of Grachev, which is indicated by a series of memoir sources. At the same time, Baku resisted the deployment of only Russian peacekeepers, so three days after the signing of the Bishkek Protocol, the Azerbaijan party set a condition that the word “international” observers must be added to the text.

Finally, the third and again completely non-working point of the 12 May 1994 agreement is “the need to conclude a peace treaty (an agreement on the cessation of the conflict) no later than 22 May 1994”. Comments are unnecessary here as the train has long gone.

In general, since the April armed clashes, there has been a certain illusion that the ceasefire agreements are

more important than, for example, the Bishkek Protocol. The value of the truce is not in the document itself, but in the presence of political agreements reached at meetings between the top officials and military leadership of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia closed from the public and most of the diplomats. The 12 May agreement, as well as the Bishkek Protocol and earlier statements by the Council of CIS Heads of State (15 April 1994) became a public echo of earlier work, particularly, the agreement at the level of military forces involved in the conflict, which took place under the auspices of the defense minister of the Russian Federation on 18 February. It is clear that it is impossible to stop the fighting immediately, even when the fundamental decision on their termination has been made. The main conclusion that emerges from the history of the 1994 settlement is the ability of Moscow to exert major influence on the sides to the conflict. Now, of course, the CIS format is not suitable for this, but no one has canceled Moscow’s ability to change the situation, and no one has seriously challenged.

Thus, we are dealing with an obvious paradox – an armistice agreement, which is almost non-working, is nearly the only “final” document, on which the public diplomacy of all the members of the OSCE Minsk Group is based. On the eve of the Vienna meeting and afterwards, Foreign Minister Lavrov and Secretary of State Kerry almost unanimously confirmed the importance of the 1994 agreement. Nevertheless, it is obvious to all, including the mediators that the settlement process is in an impasse – there is a need for a new, more decisive phase, the keys of which are rather in the hands of Moscow.

Therefore, one of Vladimir Putin’s missions is to form a new stage with a new legal act that is more binding than the 12 May agreement.

However, there is a danger that all this will lead again to what has already been experienced.

With a sword and plow. What could be an incentive for Russia’s attention to the region? Moscow’s line can be called a “sword and plow”: that is military buildup combined with economic development programs. Three billion dollars’ worth of military contracts only with Baku until 2017, the intensive involvement of Yerevan in the EAEU, encouragement of agrarian export to the Russian market from both countries, transregional development corridors and other projects - in a gradual and measured movement to the goal.

The interest of the Intergovernmental Commission

Village of Seysulan liberated by the Azerbaijani army



in projects in the field of mechanical engineering, announced by Rogozin, can be associated with the expansion of agro-industrial projects by Moscow and Baku. Therefore, the metaphor about the plow is directly related to the economic policy of the Russian Federation with regard to Azerbaijan.

It is worth recalling that Rostselmash planned to start assembling agricultural equipment in Azerbaijan. And the Ministries of Agriculture of Azerbaijan and Russia plan to set up a working group both in the field of agricultural cooperation and on the supply of agricultural equipment. Perhaps it will be not just one but several machine-building factories in order to reduce the import of components from Russia and launch their production in Azerbaijan in the future within the framework of the localization program. In turn, the raw material for agro-processing at Azerbaijani enterprises will also come from Iran.

Another intersectoral project is the pharmacological cluster. Several Russian companies from St. Petersburg and the Ural region are ready to carry out high-tech projects to create a modern pharmaceutical industry in Azerbaijan. The new branch will provide a double effect: firstly, it will allow Russia to export its technologies to the South Caucasus region in practice, and secondly, medicines of good quality will appear on the Azerbaijani market to be acquired by citizens and purchased by the state in the national currency without spending hard currency.

The future of bilateral and multilateral relations - as well as the prospect of post-war development of Karabakh districts - belongs precisely to such joint high-tech enterprises within the framework of the model of foreign import substitution. Moreover, these projects will also involve third countries, in particular Iran, with which prospects of trans-regional development are linked. Cooperation with Iran is becoming one of the priorities for Russia and Azerbaijan.

It should be understood that the whole Azerbaijan-Armenia-Iran link is of paramount importance to Russia. Only the "whole" region may outweigh individual contracts and projects in individual vectors. But the main role in the macro-region is played by Azerbaijan. If this view is correct, then the resolution of the Karabakh conflict is in the interests of strengthening Russia's positions. And in this case, the interests of Russia in Azerbaijan will be multiplied by the positions of the Russian economy in Armenia: the opening of transport communications will unlock trade routes and create a more favorable investment climate. It will also be possible to create electricity "bridges" for the growth of the industrial potential of Russian companies in Armenia...

The settlement of the Karabakh conflict will not come soon, but the interim results must demonstrate to all stakeholders that the path is correct. If this process is conducted correctly and neatly, a big war between Azerbaijan and Armenia can be avoided. Nevertheless,



small tactical clashes will probably take place, and you cannot avoid them. The breakdown of the balance occurred not in April 2016.

The planned strengthening of the military-technical potential of Azerbaijan by the Kremlin is not simply a consequence of lucrative export contracts by Russian defense concerns, but a long-term political line, the continuation of which was publicly confirmed by senior Russian officials after the April operations. Note that the problem of “fixing the MTC market”, which is often mentioned while explaining the reason for arms sale, could be solved by a policy of a total embargo on arms supplies to Armenia and Azerbaijan. Technically, this would be feasible, given the consistent work of the OSCE Minsk Group powers: throughout the years of the conflict neither Moscow, nor Washington offered even a partial embargo on the sale of lethal military equipment to the sides to the conflict, although this issue could lead to competition and prompt the US and Russia to oust each other from the region. But that did not happen. Therefore, if desired, Russia could create a regime that would not allow its competitors in arms exports to penetrate the region.

While in Baku on 8 April, Dmitriy Rogozin stressed that Russia will continue to supply weapons to Azerbaijan as a strategic partner in accordance with the contracts that have been signed. This was further proof that the

line selected by Moscow was not deformed by the April conflict in Karabakh, as might have been expected.

From Putin’s point of view. Finally, about the main mechanism of the Karabakh settlement. Much, if not everything, depends personally on President Vladimir Putin, who has good and long-lasting friendly relations with President Ilham Aliyev, and last but not least – the ability to seriously influence the president of Armenia. At the same time, the conflict itself receives effective impulses to be settled within the framework of multi-speed and multi-format economic integration under the auspices of the Russian Federation. Armenia is “pushed” into the EAEU (in 2015, Armenia became the leader in terms of supplies within the EAEU: dairy products - 2.5 times, vegetables and tobacco products - twice, pharmaceuticals and furniture – by 50 per cent). Economic cooperation is being developed with Azerbaijan by creating opportunities for joint projects in various sectors. Both countries are involved in Russia’s orbit at a more sophisticated level of interaction. Finally, there is a pause in the Ukrainian crisis, and the Syrian conflict has entered into a routine framework. This forms a certain slot in Putin’s schedule, which may be taken by the Karabakh process. Let’s hope.

So, let’s summarize interim results. In the political plane, the advantages achieved by Baku are obvious. This can be seen, as they say, by the naked eye.

The map of the Azerbaijan Republic with the indication of occupied territories



First, Moscow essentially supported Baku by not intervening in the military conflict for more than a day after the apparent success as a result of the offensive of the Azerbaijani army. This is a very important point, because no one was one hundred per cent sure how Moscow would act in this crisis. Baku's calculation, as it turned out, was the right one. Naturally, Moscow's official position is neutrality.

The second point is when the Kremlin finally intervened. Putin did not make a targeted critical assessment condemning Baku, which is what Yerevan expected. Yes, many people said that no such criticism would come from Putin, since Azerbaijan is acting in its own territory. But there was no absolute guarantee, taking into account Putin's reactions to international crises of recent months. Therefore, Aliyev's calculation proved true here as well. For years, Russian experts have been talking about the need for balance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and in general, in the Moscow-Yerevan and Moscow-Baku vectors of relations. This was the case and still works in a number of cases (Dmitriy Medvedev's

parallel visit to Yerevan and Baku underscores it once again). Azerbaijan, for obvious reasons, does not need the so-called status quo. And it was violated in a military way. If the old rules of balancing (retention of the status quo) were so valuable for the Kremlin or extremely necessary for maintaining Russian interests, Moscow would have definitely found the opportunity to put pressure on Baku: some kind of sanctions, trade restrictions, or any other type of "quick" pressure - specifically, the military contracts could have been frozen.

For this reason, the Kremlin, apparently, is ready to change the status quo in favor of Baku to some extent, while maintaining leverage over the situation, and the continuation of military contracts is only a trait. Characteristically, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Rogozin mentioned it publicly, although delivery schedules for the 2010-2011 contracts and new deals in the field of military-technical cooperation are rarely made public. And this, of course, is bad news for Yerevan. 🌱