NATIONAL UNITY JOB 1

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Despite receiving international condemnation, the latest clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian troops in Artsakh were favourable to the Baku government: Armenians lost strategic positions along the line of contact and they agreed to surrender villages neighbouring the Lachine Corridor by August 25. These latest provocations entail strategic threats to Artsakh and RoA.

With Russia preoccupied in Ukraine an emboldened Azerbaijan acts politically and militarily with diminished fear of retaliation. Furthermore, the behaviour of Russian peacekeepers in handling their duties to halt Azeri encroachments is highly questionable. Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Baku has, on more than one occasion reiterated it has the right for a "corridor" to Nakhichevan through Syunik in return for the Lachine Corridor which connects Armenia to Artsakh. Azerbaijan is obviously trying to establish "Lachine – Zangezur" equation as the baseline of further negotiations with RoA. Moreover, Azerbaijan tries to impose its perspective towards the November 9, 2020 ceasefire and towards the Russian peacekeeping mission. It has not concealed its displeasure at the presence of Russian forces intended to protect Artsakh Armenians. It has often criticized the mission and tried to downplay its role. This renewed attitude might be a prelude to a demand to terminate the Russian peacekeeping mission in Artsakh: Azerbaijan has refused to sign the mandate of this mission retaining its "right" to call for its end at any time.

The RoA government claims it had submitted an official demand in Feb. 2021 to revise the mandate of the peacekeepers in Artsakh. Unexpectedly, PM Pashinyan criticized the peacekeepers on August 4 thus instigating an argument with Russia. The response came fast on August 5 from Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov who said he did not see any official demand from RoA regarding a revision of the peacekeeping forces mission. While this public argument continues, it suggests that there is a deep dissociation, to say the least, between RoA officials and Lavrov. Why did Pashinyan make his comments remain unexplained? Is it that he is aware of upcoming developments and that his act was a pre-emptive move? Or could it be that Pashinyan had received promises from Western powers, namely NATO and the US, to replace the Russian peacekeepers in South Caucasus? All scenarios sound like high security alarms for Armenians in Artsakh and Syunik.

Adverse speculations regarding Artsakh and Syunik had been exacerbating since war broke in Ukraine. Russia is preoccupied due to the war. More importantly, Russia is in dire need for new economic partnerships and outlets to sustain its shrinking economy. It is looking for new partners and allies in the region and the world. The Putin – Erdogan Sochi summit on August 5 came within this framework. The secrecy that surrounded talks between the two presidents and their possible outcomes justified assumptions of ulterior intentions and ratification of secret deals between the two countries. Armenians are worried about fallouts that might be unfavourable to them.

Armenians need to unify as a nation over a single agenda: safeguarding Artsakh and preserving the territorial integrity of RoA. Political errors by government officials may result in devastating

outcomes. The parliamentary opposition in RoA must also assume its constitutional responsibilities and return to the National Assembly where extensive security issues are being discussed. Boycotting parliamentary sessions and resorting to street protests do not serve the Armenian position as the nation and the state face recurring existential threats. Diaspora Armenians must shun self-consuming internal political debates and intensely lobby in their respective countries for Artsakh and RoA. On previous occasions, Diaspora Armenians have demonstrated creative and fruitful approaches in support of national interests. They can act similarly if there is the will to do so.

Photo in teaser reproduced from David Alton's website, "Cross party bicameral letter..."

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