RESHUFFLING THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY MOSAIC IN SOUTHERN CAUCASUS

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On March 10 Azerbaijan sent to the Republic of Armenia a five-point proposal for 'peaceful' settlement of the conflict and 'normalization of relations'. RoA Foreign Ministry confirmed its receipt and stated that it had appealed to the OSCE – Minsk Group co-chairs "to organize negotiations on a peace treaty between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan." These official declarations and related military and diplomatic developments require multifaceted analysis before drawing conclusions.

This latest Azerbaijani diplomatic maneuver does not incorporate any new demands; however, it is engulfed with significant political and military developments. Since the eruption of war in Ukraine Azerbaijan has tried to maximize its benefits in the region. It first tried to replace Russian oil and gas supplies to Europe, but its proposals were initially turned down although new rounds of negotiations are expected to take place in the coming weeks. In Artsakh, Azerbaijan tried through military escalation and incursions to assess Russia's threshold, probably to launch a new all-out invasion. For the first time since the second Artsakh war Russia accused Azerbaijan of violating the ceasefire and endangering peace and security in the region.

Azerbaijan continues denying the existence of a conflictual issue called Artsakh. It persistently reiterates that the 'Nagorno-Karabagh' matter has been settled as of November 9, 2020. As such, according to Azerbaijan, mutual recognition of territorial integrity also means sealing the fate of Artsakh. RoA continues to restate that the status of Artsakh is unresolved. In its reply to the Azerbaijani proposal that was sent on March 14, RoA reiterated this position. Upon his return to Yerevan after his summit with President Aliyev in Brussels on April 6, PM Pashinyan also confirmed it.

The President of the European Council Charles Michel who hosted the tripartite meeting stated that EU along with Russia will assist both countries in the delimitation and demarcation of their borders. For the first time since November 2020, EU declares its willingness to get directly involved in this Southern Caucasus conflict. RoA has been trying for a long while to involve the participation of the international community to resolve its conflict with Azerbaijan, and the tripartite announcement on April 6 granted RoA that political gain.

The third point of the Azerbaijani proposal is related to opening transportation and communications between Azerbaijan and the RoA, a stipulation shared by all parties of this conflict. Aliyev, at least for the time being, dropped his demand to establish a 'corridor' to Nakhitchevan through Zangezur. Instead, Aliyev signed an agreement with Iran to construct a route that extends from southwest Azerbaijan to Nakhitchevan through Iran. We assume that Aliyev is convinced he will not be able to attain a concession of a 'corridor' from RoA except through war and occupation. Azerbaijan is currently not capable to pay the price for such a venture even with its close alliance and coordination with Turkey. Despite this reality, Armenians should stay alert to resist Aliyev's expansionist aspirations.

Analyzing the re-formation of the complex political mosaic in Southern Caucasus, it is safe to derive without candid optimism the following conclusions:

1. Peace and stability in Artsakh were reaffirmed through Russia's reactions to the recent Azerbaijan hostilities, Minsk Group announcements as well as the EU position. This is important for Armenians because it may suggest that the EU and the USA are flexible in dissociating South Caucasus conflict management from the ongoing war in Ukraine. As such, Azerbaijan cannot start a new military venture on Artsakh benefiting from the instability created by the war in Ukraine. Not only the new Western attitude may worry Aliyev, rather the fact that Russia has shown no tolerance towards efforts to redefine its role in Artsakh. Azerbaijani military will have to deal with the Russian troops in addition to the Armenian forces in case of any new hostility in Artsakh.
2. Resolution adopted by Artsakh Parliament on April 5 was not a coincidence. It clearly reiterated that RoA is their security guarantor and that they behold the right of Artsakh people to self-determination. Pashinyan, on the other side, also stated on April 7 that any peace talk with Azerbaijan must consider the pending issue of Artsakh which can only be resolved through meeting the rightful demands of its people. Both Armenian entities reaffirmed the alignment between peace talks and the right of Armenians in Artsakh to self-determination.
3. Azerbaijan has been calling for the establishment of a new bilateral cooperation group under Russian auspices that starts work immediately to resolve 'all issues and establish peace.' They failed to enact such a new mechanism. Against the will of Azerbaijan, mandate of OSCE – Minsk Group is *de facto* expanded to include Azerbaijan – Armenia conflict. OSCE – Minsk Group was formed in 1994 with only one objective: to convene a conference on the 'Nagorno-Karabakh' conflict that involves Armenia and Azerbaijan. The most significant diplomatic development in the recent weeks is the acceptance of OSCE – Minsk Group to get involved in the border issue between the two countries. This is a fundamental gain for Armenians. This should restrict Aliyev's aggressiveness towards Armenia unless he chooses to behave erratically and irrationally.

The war in Ukraine has strained relations within the Minsk Group, however. A new restart might be needed to reactivate its smooth functioning despite Western sanctions against Russia and current heightened tension between them.

RoA should continue its policy of neutrality regarding the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. RoA abstained twice voting in the UN General Assembly; Russia did not get offended, and the Western powers did not object. Internally, preparedness of RoA and Artsakh to confront any military hostility that Azerbaijan may undertake against their territories is still the basic and most crucial guarantor for continued existence of Armenians on their historical homeland. RoA and Artsakh should accelerate developing their military capabilities to be able to resist and surpass the highly advanced fifth generation Azerbaijan army. These efforts must be coupled with heightened internal political

dialogue and understanding, without which Armenians lose immunity and national will to resist external threats. Diaspora Armenians on the other hand, have a key role to play in properly explaining the conflict to the international community. Diaspora communities should continue to lobby for the recognition by their respective governments of the right of Artsakh people to self-determination. Secondly, the diaspora lobby should expose the expansionist aspirations of Aliyev and the threats that Azerbaijan poses towards peace and security in Southern Caucasus.

According to Lavrov US and French co-chairs have ceased to cooperate in OSCE Minsk Group; however, there is no confirmation of this news by the western partners.

Comments

Roubik – 2022-04-10 23:39:12
Artsakh territories currently occupied by Turks must be returned to Armenian homeland. Nakhichevan and Western Armenian territories occupied by Turks also ought to be returned to Armenian homeland . The world must stop playing politics with peoples' lives.

Nigohos B. – 2022-04-10 22:25:23
Thank you Keghart for your endless effort that you are doing for a log time. My suggestion is: through trusted organization collect money to develop and buy arms to defend ourselves. If there is such a trusted organizations I would like know. Regards, Nigohos B.

Samuel D – 2022-04-10 21:56:40
There is only one solution: Moving all diaspora, Armenian wealth to Armenia and Artsakh. New initiative should start by research and development to boost Armenia economy, and military expansion by young generation. At the right moment Armenia should take what belongs to us since the time of creation, Ararat mountain, Nakhijevan and Artsakh which were handed over to the enemy by that khazar Stalin. There is no other way. Armenia and Artsakh can not rely to others. We must rely only on our own power.