Delicate Balance of the South Caucasus

South Caucasus has long had a reputation as one of the hottest and most volatile regions. The Nagorno-Karabakh war, the Georgian-Abkhazian, Georgian-South Ossetian, and last but not least, the Russian-Georgian South Ossetia war, convincingly support the validity of this reputation. Not to mention the small regular altercations between warring parties. Of particular concern to the international community is the fact that the conflicting parties are far from full-fledged peace, are heavily armed, and continue to build up their military capabilities. And as we know - where there is a gun, it must shoot eventually. Therefore, there is heightened interest in how and with what the countries are armed, which we will fully elucidate.

Recently, the Russian Council on Foreign Affairs released the military budget of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, and also disclosed the firepower of the armies of these states.

Azerbaijan

In terms of military power and scale of military spending, Azerbaijan is the leader in the region. Last year, its military budget was $3.7 billion. Sixty-seven thousand soldiers and officers serve in the Azerbaijani army. There are 340 tanks (T-90SA and T-72) and about 700 armored fighting vehicles (AFV) and infantry fighting vehicles (BMP) in service. The Air Force includes 14 MiG-29 fighters, 19 Su-25 fighters, about 40 Mi-24/35 attack helicopters, and 30 Mi-8/17 military transport helicopters. Soviet-era vehicles in Azerbaijan have been upgraded and modernized.

Baku's wide range of trade relations for military equipment is noteworthy. Azerbaijan did not buy weapons in Russia up until 2007, when Moscow delivered 62 T-72 tanks from its own arsenal, as well as new BTR-80s. Since then, Russia's share in the Azerbaijani market has been constantly growing. And in 2010, Russia began to dominate this market. Baku has already purchased 24 Mi-35M helicopters, 60 Mi-17 helicopters, two divisions of S-300PMU-2 anti-missile systems, 130 T-90SA tanks, 100 BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, 70 BTR-80/82 armored personnel carriers, about 450 various artillery systems and MRLSs, 300 portable air defense systems, and 1500 missiles for them. The price of the package of Russian contracts with Azerbaijan is almost $2 billion.

In addition, Baku purchased weapons from Ukraine: twelve 300mm Smerch MRLSs and 3 Tochka-U tactical missile launchers, 210 guns and mortars, 45 T-72 tanks, 132 modernized BTR-70Di armored personnel carriers, and 14 modernized MiG-29 fighters. Until the mid-2000s, Belarus was listed among the suppliers of Azerbaijan, supplying 60 T-72 tanks and three 203mm 2S7 Python self-propelled artillery guns. Israel is quite active on the Azerbaijani market: Spike-LR and MLRS Lynx antitank missiles, as well as Heron and Searcher unmanned aerial vehicles.

Armenia

Armenia's military budget last year did not exceed $447 million. Forty-five thousand soldiers and officers serve in the Armenian army. There are 200 tanks (mostly T-72), about 100 infantry fighting vehicles and 140 armored fighting vehicles, and 240 artillery pieces in service, and the Air Force includes 15 Su-25 fighters, ten Mi-24 combat helicopters, and ten MI-8/17 military transport helicopters.

In terms of arms purchases, Armenia trails not only Azerbaijan, but also Georgia. Last year Armenia received from Russia 35 T-72 tanks and 110 armored fighting vehicles (BMP-2 and/or BTR-80), and a few years ago it received 480 AK-105 rifles, 36 RPK-74M machine guns, several sniper rifles, and 52 SV-98s, 32 KS-23 special carbines, 60 GP-30...
Yerevan received 2 L-39 training planes, 230 pistols, 60 rifles, 16,500 automatic rifles, and 2501 machine guns from Ukraine four years ago. Before that, Armenia purchased 35 Kh-25ML and Kh-29L aircraft missiles from Slovakia, 250 Zastava M93 sniper rifles and 100 AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers from Serbia in 2007, and 200 mortars from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Most important to note is the fact that the 102nd Russian military base will be deployed in Armenia until 2044, which is equipped, according to official figures, with 74 tanks, 17 infantry fighting vehicles, 148 armored personnel carriers, 84 artillery systems, including the MLRS Smerch, 18 MiG-29 fighters, air defense missile systems S-300Bs and Buk-M1-2s. The base garrisons 5,000 troops. Armenia and Russia have signed a treaty of alliance: in the event of military aggression against Armenia, Russian will fill the role of an ally. However, it is not entirely clear what would occur if military action were to unfold in Nagorno-Karabakh. After all, this republic claims independence and, therefore, the military agreement between Russia and Armenia would appear not to extend to that territory.

Georgia

After Mikhail Saakashvili came to power, Tbilisi started to increase military spending. In 2003, Tbilisi spent $30 million on defense, by 2007 spending rose to a billion dollars; that is, by a factor of 24.5. Prior to the five-day war in South Ossetia, spending reached 8% of GDP, however, after the war, it has declined, and Georgia's military budget for last year did not exceed $ 400 million. Twenty thousand soldiers and officers serve in the Georgian army. There are 90 T-72 tanks, 63 infantry fighting vehicles and 137 armored fighting vehicles, 185 artillery pieces, 12 Su-25 fighters, and about 30 Mi-8 and UH-1H Iroquois transport helicopters.

For some time after that war, Tbilisi does not purchase weapons, but in 2011 it bought from Bulgaria 12 2S1 122mm self-propelled guns, 1500 automatic rifles, 450 machine guns, and 600 disposable RPG-22 grenade launchers. It is worth noting that Georgia has refrained from building a powerful army, and focused instead on creating compact armed forces capable of conducting joint operations with NATO.

"Judging by the data of the Russian Council on Foreign Affairs, the armies of the three Caucasian states are fairly balanced, considering the limitations imposed by their financial and economic capabilities. They also have heavy weapons for the Army, are Air Forces, and anti-aircraft defense systems." Said the well-known expert on military matters, Viktor Litovkin, Head of the ITAR-TASS military news editorial office. At the same time, he pointed out the lack of data on naval forces, although Azerbaijan and Georgia both have Navies. Viktor Litovkin also stressed the importance of factors such as economic capacity and manpower, which are also glossed over in the above report.

"The strength and power of an army lies not only in having a large number of tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, armored combat vehicles, artillery, air defense systems, missile launchers, and aircraft. Factors such as economic capacity and manpower are also important (in Baku these are larger than in the other two countries), as well as personnel's experience, training, and readiness to fight for their country's interests, ignoring hardships and difficulties, even in the face of substantial losses. That is to say, the moral and psychological state of the troops, and the military and political leadership of the country." Said the expert.

In his opinion, this situation is very different. It is difficult to assess the moral and political state of the Georgian army after August 2008, but on the basis of international experience, it cannot be good. In addition to the structure of the military, Georgia itself was in limbo. On the one hand, the country's authorities have admitted to the failure to solve the problem of lost territories by military means. On the other hand, in this respect, i.e. regarding the restoration of territorial integrity, no negotiations are underway. Furthermore, the army has been rebuilt to NATO standards, Georgia has not been accepted into NATO.

"I do not think that after the lessons that the Georgian leadership and the Georgian troops received, they would dare to attack Tskhinvali or threaten Sukhumi again. Both South Ossetia and Abkhazia signed contracts with Russia on mutual assistance. Both countries are home to Russian military bases. Tbilisi understands that war with its former autonomous regions means war with Russia. And neither NATO, nor the United States, as in August 2008, would
place themselves at any risk of a nuclear missile strike. Hence comes the philosophy for the army: small, well-trained, but for undertaking combat missions in the role of partners. I stress: not allies, but partners. Georgia will not join NATO soon, if at all. At least, it will not happen before 2020, even provided that it renounces Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But it won't renounce them, isn't that right?" Says Victor Litovkin.

With regard to Armenia and Azerbaijan, the expert drew attention to the fact that in the dossier of the Russian Council on International Affairs on the Armenian army, there is not a word about Nagorno-Karabakh. And yet it is also a part of the, if not de jure, de facto Armenian army, and not the weakest part. "The Constitution of Armenia, if I'm not mistaken, states that Armenia is responsible for the fate of Karabakh. What does this mean? If someone (we will not specify) were to attack Nagorno-Karabakh, then they would be attacking Armenia as well. Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and its allies in the organization are required to provide any necessary assistance to a country that is subject to aggression. Russia, first and foremost. Moscow and Yerevan have a mutual assistance agreement. Furthermore, the district of Yerevan and Gyumri houses a Russian military base. Without going into details, let me recall the uproar, which was caused not so long ago by a statement of the base commander in print. And he said that the Russian military base will certainly defend its ally. It couldn't be any other way." Said Viktor Litovkin. In his opinion, if this contingency were not looming over Baku, it would have long ago attempted to reclaim those lands that it lost by force. And the fact that Russian arms supplies to Azerbaijan are on the scale of billions of dollars, any fear to break the balance between unfriendly countries, is, in the expert’s opinion, due to the fact that Baku knows what could happen if the gun were to shoot in the other direction.

The question naturally arises: If the internationally recognized Caucasian states are not going to fight each other, then why this crazy spending on armaments? Could there be any other conflicts? For example, consider the very complex relations between Baku and Tehran. It's no secret that certain circles in Azerbaijan look toward the border areas of Iran, which are known as "Northern Azerbaijan". It is also well known that in Iran from time to time, they are beginning to "study" the terms of the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, which surrendered the Persia areas on which Azerbaijan was later built.

Viktor Litovkin, regarding the contingency for Iranian-Azerbaijani conflict, said "It cannot be ruled out. But only under the condition, that the U.S. attack Iran. Under that guise, Baku may take some efforts to realize their interests." However, he stressed that a military conflict between Tehran and Washington is far from precipitating. The situation with the Kurds and the terrorists of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is much more dangerous, and has to potential to draw not only Syria and Iraq, but Turkey and Iran into an armed conflict. "How it will backfire for Baku, that's my question. But it is in precisely these tensions that I see the main conflict, which has the potential hurt the South Caucasus." Concluded Viktor Litovkin.

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