Who is Capable of Settling the Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan?

One year after the second Karabakh war, the border between the two republics is again turbulent. Periodically, the media and official representatives of Armenia and Azerbaijan report about the violation - by the enemy, of course - of the ceasefire, defined by trilateral Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan statement of November 9, 2020, and sometimes even about the wounding and death of servicemen on both sides. Border incidents frequently lead to serious aggravation, but they don’t escalate into large-scale hostilities.

Another armed aggravation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border began on November 14 and escalated into open hostilities, which lasted for two days. They only stopped after Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu held talks with Zakir Hasanova, Minister of Defense of Azerbaijan.

At the same time, there was a particular disappointment in Yerevan in response to Russia’s actions, clearly expecting that Moscow would act not only as a negotiator on Armenia’s side. However, Moscow, which initiated an end to the bloody Karabakh war a year ago, has confined itself to the role of diplomatic mediator in the conflict between the two Transcaucasian republics. That being said, since the latest escalation and hostilities on the border, Yerevan has been in no hurry to officially ask for help from Russia or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which Armenia is a member, and Russia is the leader.

Undoubtedly, many of the recent incidents on the border between the two countries are due to lack of regulation for
the moment, as the demarcation and delimitation of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan have not been settled yet. After Armenia lost the positions it had held for the previous decades as a result of the second Karabakh war, Azerbaijan returned to its border and began to fortify it and build engineering structures. The Armenian side perceived these actions as hostile occupation, although no physical barriers were breached.

At the same time, many experts admit that Baku is the absolute culprit in the clashes, acting in the logic of the victorious side, which is in a hurry to consolidate its success. Its main objective is to force Armenia to sign an agreement on the delimitation of borders and to refuse any discussion of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, Azerbaijan clearly believes that the border treaty removes any question of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, a clear line should be drawn according to which the signing of a document is not synonymous with removing the Karabakh status issue from the agenda, as these issues should be kept separate. Although Azerbaijan “packs it all in,” Moscow and Yerevan are interested in unbundling this package.

Many countries and international organizations have recently tried to settle the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey, in particular, was among such peacemakers, as it recently has been very actively trying to spread its expansion not only in Central Asia but also in the Caucasus. But it should be recalled that the Armenian side will not consider Turkish soldiers as peacekeepers in the region, primarily because Ankara does not recognize the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire and aggressively opposes any decision on this issue. In the circumstances outlined, it should be objectively acknowledged that the last armed incident of November 14 was ceased not by Turkey or any other party but only after Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu talked to his Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts.

European Council President Charles Michel also tried to contribute to the settlement of the conflict by inviting Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to meet in Brussels in December on the sidelines of the Eastern Partnership Summit, which is notoriously and unabashedly anti-Russian.

The President of the European Council had previously demonstrated his own peacekeeping ambitions in the South Caucasus when he visited Baku and Yerevan in July this year. Despite the existence of trilateral agreements between the leaders of Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan reached on November 9, 2020, and January 11, 2021, proposing a road map for the Karabakh settlement with the participation of key regional players, Charles Michel deemed it necessary to submit his own peace plan. In response to this visit of the President of the European Council to Yerevan, there was a noisy protest rally outside the government building by the oppositional Dashnaksutuyun party. Addressing the President of the European Council with cries of “Shame!”, the participants stated that “Europe is trying to buy Armenia and impose its agenda on it,” seeing a catch in the EU plan to provide €2.6 billion financial aid to Armenia. Pointing out that “Armenia is not for sale,” representatives of Dashnaksutuyun accused the EU leadership of lack of support for Yerevan during the second Karabakh war and unwillingness to uphold European values. Notably, the clashes on the border continued even after the arrival of the President of the European Council in Yerevan, which to a certain extent may indicate the minimal impact of Charles Michel’s peacekeeping efforts.

Eventually, after another armed escalation on the border between the two states in November, Russian President Vladimir Putin set out to resolve relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and held a trilateral meeting with the leaders of these countries on November 26 in Sochi. The Russian President began this negotiation process with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, followed by a trilateral meeting with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The Russian President met separately with the Armenian prime minister afterward. The negotiations lasted for about three hours. As a result, the politicians made a joint statement and agreed on the mechanisms of delimitation and demarcation of the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Specifically, the text of the statement indicates: “To take steps to increase the level of stability and security on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and to work towards the creation of a bilateral commission on the delimitation of the state border between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia with its subsequent demarcation with the consultative assistance of the Russian Federation at the request of the parties.” The parties agreed to continue to follow the 2020 peace agreements “in the interest of ensuring stability, security and economic development in the South Caucasus.” They further agreed “to intensify joint efforts aimed at the earliest possible resolution of the remaining tasks arising from the statements of November 9, 2020, and January 11, 2021,” the document states. Mechanisms for demarcation and delimitation of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan will be established before the end of the year. Another critical, sensitive point is related to humanitarian issues. In addition, there was a detailed discussion of economic issues, development of economic ties. And as a first step, unblocking the transport corridors was determined.
The statement of the three countries’ leaders says that Russia will continue to provide all necessary assistance for the normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Putin, Aliyev, and Pashinyan also stressed the need to launch projects as soon as possible to unlock Nagorno-Karabakh’s economic potential.

Further developments will show whether the recently openly hostile parties, still in the state of a simmering conflict, will be able to continue their discussions at the negotiation table on contentious issues. One must not forget that disputed territories and disputed borders have more than once in the history of mankind led once-friendly nations to fratricidal war. But it should also not be forgotten that only a diplomatic solution to the dispute will help restore peace and good neighborliness. Provided, of course, that the political forces involved in the conflict can make reasonable compromises and unless the ruling elites once again try to exploit inter-ethnic issues for their own political interests.

But despite all this, the trilateral meeting in Sochi once again clearly demonstrated that there is no alternative to Russia’s role as a key mediator in the region. This is not only due to Russia’s politico-military and economic leverage over the parties to the conflict and Russia’s military presence in the region but also due to Moscow’s measured political line. At the same time, this does not rule out that, in addition to preserving Russia’s key mediating role, it will also be possible for other centers of power to be involved in the settlement process from time to time.

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