

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE MODERN STAGE OF THE AZERBAIJANI-KARABAKH CONFLICT*

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Key words: Artsakh Republic, Republic of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani-Karabakh conflict, protracted armed conflict, ceasefire, large-scale war, security, containment, OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship, elections.

The Azerbaijani-Karabakh conflict, both in its nature and dynamics, falls within the concept of protracted armed conflicts, and as such could serve as a subject worthy of inquiry for analyzing and systematizing the attributes of protracted armed conflicts, their various types and the challenges they pose, as well as the corollaries when it comes to the economy, reversal in development processes, infrastructures, livelihoods, the human dimension, the political establishments, regional and international developments, and demographic security.

Common Article 2 to the 1949 Geneva Conventions provides that the conventions “apply to all cases of declared war or of any other armed conflict which may arise between two or more of the High Contracting Parties, even if the state of war is not recognized by one of them” [1].

The term armed conflict could be defined as a state-based conflict, a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or status of a specified territory where the use of armed force by parties of which at least one is the government of a state results in at least twenty-five battle-related deaths in one calendar year, and a major armed conflict could be defined as a conflict between and within states which results in at least one thousand deaths over the course of the conflict. Battle-related deaths include traditional battlefield war, guerilla activities, bombardments of military units and military installations, indiscriminate bombing of civilian residences, crossfire [2].

As to protracted armed conflicts, no commonly accepted definition exists of what comprises the notion. However, as I believe, this does not lend to protracted armed conflicts being accidental combinations of circumstances. Thus, I will try to put my finger on this shortfall and identify some distinctive features that account for the prolonged nature of protracted armed conflicts for the purpose of describing and explaining the dynamics of a protracted armed conflict situation, and singling out certain behavioral and structural characteristics:

- 1. There is no concluded peace agreement/the peace agreement is not materialized and ambiguous post-war situation; the validity of the peace agreement is contested by one or several of the warring parties that signed the agreement [3];*
- 2. Alienation from the logic of rational peace is evidenced, there is no balance between the logic of peace which focuses on securing the ceasefire and a peace settlement thereafter, and the logic of war, aggravation of antagonism between the parties to conflict is common [4];*
- 3. There is constant quest for maintaining an arms race leading to polarization and budget failure, with disproportionate military expenditures as the rationale for defensive purposes, compiling off-budget sources of military expenditure [5] (in rentier-state models such as Azerbaijan largely dependent on accruing external revenues from the export of natural resources, especially oil and gas, this is done via foundations, and the revenues are recycled with percentage distribution to military expenditures [6]);*

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4. *Mutual capacity assessment is made by parties to conflict to test the tensile strength by recurrent, small-scale escalations [7];*
5. *Pre-eminence of military threat of large-scale war outbreak in military-political forecasts and expert conclusions is common; the conflict is likely to erupt as soon as any change in the balance of forces or political elites or ecopolitical conditions occurs [8]; periods of differing conflict intensity are involved, with relative peace lasting for months at a time or another (In the Azerbaijani-Karabakh protracted armed conflict, the situation remains tense following large-scale military hostilities unleashed by Azerbaijan in April 2016 [9] that marked the worst bloodshed after the 1994 Ceasefire [10])*
6. *Deliberate multidimensional activities are carried out by one of the parties or the parties to conflict just below the threshold of overt military force to gain specific strategic objectives;*
7. *There is pronounced targeting ideological struggle in war;*
8. *Mutually wearing-away attritional warfare is pursued aimed at the destruction of the opponent's forces to the point of compromise and elimination of the long-run conflict settlement [11] (Azerbaijani strategy with this regard is the blockade/isolation of Nagorno Karabakh, sniper warfare and subversive incursions along the Line of Contact (LoC), military operations along the borderlibe as in April 2016 to grasp additional land, "salami slicing" employed);*
9. *New forms of technology influencing tactics and communications are involved;*
10. *Differing levels and moments of internationalization are common;*
11. *Third parties are involved in either helping the parties to conflict to regulate the incompatibility between them, or acting as intermediaries between the two parties, hosting negotiations, or monitoring the ceasefire or peace agreement. This could be a state or an organisation. In the Azerbaijani-Karabakh protracted armed conflict mediation efforts are made by the OSCE Minsk Group.*

However, as in any attempt to define and neatly categorize something or aspects of something as complex as an armed conflict, ample debate around definitions is common, and constructive feedback is welcome.

When it comes to the Azerbaijani-Karabakh conflict, the following issues further load the distinctive features singled out above: towards transition from a hotbed of conflict to a protracted armed conflict, the crux torpedoed settlement process reframes gradually into a system of measures and is repackaged into conflict management. Thus, the reopened armed conflict and recurrent escalation should be taken as conflict management crisis [12].

At least two military clashes – the August 2014 trench warfare and the 2016 April War - should be recalled in this context (following the 1992-94 Azerbaijani-Karabakh large-scale war) when the protracted armed conflict evolved into an apparent armed clash, transcending the threats and counterthreats limits. In fact, this shapes a situation when the conflict being in the domain of settlement and management - "soft power" diplomacy – breaks loose and as a result of unpredictable chain developments becomes more self-management-oriented [13].

Under the conditions of the protracted armed conflict the Artsakh Republic has adopted the following counteracting, containment and prevention measures [14] which could be classified according to their strengths and shortcomings as well as challenges.

Speaking on the strengths:

1. *The Defense Army and the Republic of Armenia are the guarantors of the Artsakh Republic security; the status and security of the Republic of Artsakh is an absolute priority of the Republic of Armenia in the negotiation process [15];*
2. *The independence and security of Artsakh are not subject to bargaining [16];*
3. *The Defense Army is always in readiness for defensive action and for offensive action when*

it is necessary [17]; “New war for new territories” strategy and “active deterrence” implying counter-offensive or preemptive measures has been introduced[18];

- 4. The Defense Army focuses constantly on the rationalization and refining of the military sector and existing weapons system [19];*
- 5. The recurrent escalations including the trench war enable keeping trench data current;*
- 6. The Defense Army implements unilaterally synchronized and agreed mechanisms for investigation of borderline incidents with ceasefire control devices along the borderline to nullify subversive warfare (in 2018, official Stepanakert voiced willingness to provide international mediators with data from video surveillance of the situation on the borderline) [20].*

When it comes to the shortcomings, the following should be outlined:

- 1. High level of unpredictability at some stage of the conflict;*
- 2. Incommensurability of the use of hard power and soft power, failure to comply with commitments in the diplomatic realm as a result of Azerbaijani destructive policy, the most recent experiences being obligations under the 2016-2017 Vienna, Saint-Petersburg and Geneva agreements which are now often discarded in the political discourse [21];*
- 3. Absence of policy by international agencies towards deterrence of the arms race and conflict settlement;*
- 4. Suffering from the protracted armed conflict syndrome Azerbaijan does not see increased confidence and stability as an investment towards ultimate peace and fears that the more solid the stalemate, the more permanent and legitimate it is, thus, Azerbaijan shows reflexive resistance to CSBMs amid calls focusing on the safety and welfare of civilian populations close to the line of contact (LoC).*

As for the challenges:

- 1. Civilian residents are affected by armed hostilities, and there is irretrievable loss among the civilians at a recurrent escalation of the conflict [22];*
- 2. The atmosphere of Armenophobia (anti-Armenian sentiments) and intolerance is nurtured by Azerbaijan, i.e. fostering of the idea of external enemies and generation-long trend toward hostility [23], any demonstration of softening in opinions is perceived as treachery, demonization coupled with inefficiency and non-materialization of peace and peacebuilding calls and mechanisms [24];*
- 3. The negotiation space is jeopardized as a consequence of polarization of standpoints of the parties to conflict; negotiations are seen by Azerbaijan as a way of imposing unilateral concessions [25];*

Thus, it could be concluded that the commitment to comply with agreements reached should be viewed as prospect of the Azerbaijani-Karabakh protracted conflict settlement. This could spearhead the setting up of mechanisms of mutual trust and mitigation of escalation in trench warfare.

The entire process of conflict settlement has been tailgated and shadowed with Azerbaijani destructive stance. Despite peacebuilding calls to the parties to conflict by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship [26] and United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres’ appeal for an immediate global ceasefire to fight the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic [27], on 2 May 2020, the Azerbaijani Defense Minister pointed to “high probability of resumption of hostilities” and that the command staff must be ready for “combat operation along the entire frontline” [28].

These statements by Azerbaijani officials reflect oil prices close below zero [29] in unprecedented collapse bringing the risk of social discontent and unrest. Shifting off the load of social unrest in Azerbaijan being causa sine qua non for the Azerbaijani authorities, another escalation of the conflict could be just around the corner.

In the spring of 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections were held in the Artsakh Republic [30]. All the 14 candidates, referred in their electoral programs to safeguarding the

security and conflict prevention as priorities for the state in the protracted armed conflict.

President-elect of the Artsakh Republic Arayik Haroutyunyan, a political figure and former prime minister, highlighted defense and security as first point of blanket provisions of his electoral program with respect to conflict settlement for the years 2020-25 as well as public administration and governance under the protracted armed conflict conditions. Namely, consistent reinforcement of the defense army through weaponry replenishment, development of engineering infrastructures, consistent refining of civil defense assets were highlighted. In this context, ensuring the security presupposes conflict containment [31].

In parallel, in the foreign policy realm, the Artsakh Republic and the Republic of Armenia will pursue the policy towards peaceful, definitive and comprehensive settlement of the Azerbaijani-Karabakh conflict, focusing on the inalienable rights and security interests of the Artsakh Republic people. This means the principles of conflict settlement as proposed by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship would be finalized in Stepanakert. Otherwise, without the direct participation of the Artsakh Republic, there can be no realistic expectation of any diplomatic progress.

Prevention of the conflict escalation with the security enhancement and counterattack toolkit in case of large-scale offensive is an imperative for the Artsakh Republic given the protracted armed conflict imposed on it. In this way, the security of the Artsakh Republic is thereby the key and the prerequisite for regional stability in the broader South Caucasus region.

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SUMMARY

Distinctive Features of the Modern Stage of the Azerbaijani-Karabakh Conflict
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As Albania took over 2020 OSCE Chairmanship, prevention of conflict escalation and enhancing dialogue were declared as priorities [32].

With this view, it becomes topical to take a look at the Azerbaijani-Karabakh conflict as a *protracted armed conflict* in the OSCE area, Azerbaijani *modus operandi under the protracted conflict* and tasks ahead of the Artsakh Republic as the country held Presidential and Parliamentary elections in April 2020.

ԱՄՓՈՓԱԳԻՐ

Ադրբեջանա-դարաբադյան հակամարտության արդի փուլի բնութագրիչները
Արմինե Գրիգորյան

Բանալի բառեր՝ Արցախի Հանրապետություն, Ադրբեջանի Հանրապետություն, Ադրբեջանա-դարաբադյան հակամարտություն, «սողացող հակամարտություն», հրադադար, լայնամասշտաբ պատերազմ, անվտանգություն, զսպման մեխանիզմներ, ԵԱՀԿ Մինսկի խմբի համանախագահություն, ընտրություններ:

2020թ. Ալբանիան ստանձնել է ԵԱՀԿ Նախագահությունը՝ որպես գերակայություններ նշելով հակամարտությունների կանխարգելումը եւ երկխոսության խորացումը:

Այս համատեքստում կարելու է ուսումնասիրել ադրբեջանա-դարաբադյան հակամարտությունը՝ որպես ԵԱՀԿ օրակարգում ընդգրկված «սողացող հակամարտություն», խոսել ադրբեջանական գործելակերպի դրսևորումների եւ վերջերս՝ 2020թ ապրիլին Արցախի Հանրապետությունում կայացած նախագահական եւ խորհրդարանական ընտրություններից հետո հանրապետության անելիքների մասին:

РЕЗЮМЕ

Характерные черты современного этапа азербайджано-карабахского конфликта
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Ключевые слова: Республика Арцах, Республика Азербайджан, азербайджано-карабахский конфликт, затянувшиеся вооруженные конфликты, режим прекращения огня, широкомасштабная война, безопасность, механизмы сдерживания, сопредседательство Минской группы ОБСЕ, выборы.

1 января 2020 года Албания начала председательство в Организации по безопасности и сотрудничеству в Европе (ОБСЕ). Председательство Албании основывается на таких важных целях как предотвращение эскалации конфликта и укрепление диалога.

В этой связи изучение азербайджано-карабахского конфликта как затянувшегося вооруженного конфликта в регионе ОБСЕ, основного образа действия Азербайджана в условиях затянувшегося вооруженного конфликта и задач, стоящих перед Республикой Арцах, когда в апреле 2020 года в стране прошли президентские и парламентские выборы, имеет важное значение.