
AZERBAIJANI PRESS: MILITARY ASPECTS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN BAKU AND TBILISI

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On 9 March 2018, the Azerbaijani and Georgian defence ministers [Zakir Hasanov and Levan Izoria respectively] signed in Baku a plan of military cooperation for 2018. During the meeting, the ministers, Zakir Hasanov and Levan Izoria, discussed cooperation in arms control, prospects for military cooperation and joint drills, and [cooperation] in efficient organisation of defence of major transport and energy projects implemented with the participation of the two countries.

Military cooperation between the two South Caucasus countries, which began in 2007, has been successfully developing on a bilateral basis, within the Nato framework and in the format of tripartite military cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey.

In 2012, the sides signed in Trabzon (Turkey) a declaration on cooperation in foreign policy, settlement of [Azerbaijan's breakaway Nagorno-]Karabakh, [and Georgia's breakaway] Abkhazia and South Ossetia problems, and economic and transport spheres. In May 2015, the defence ministers of the three countries discussed in Ankara security of the railway lines and the energy supply infrastructure. In December 2015, yet another similar meeting was held in Istanbul, which was dedicated to defence security and modernisation of the armed forces. In February 2017, the Georgian and Turkish defence ministers discussed in Brussels the signing of an agreement on tripartite military cooperation.

Diplomatic activities regarding military cooperation between the three countries immediately started being used in the practical field. In 2012, the Georgian Armed Forces participated in the Azerbaijani-Turkish drills for the first time, and in August 2014, the three countries reached an agreement on setting up a new diplomatic format: Tripartite meetings between defence ministers to be held twice a year. Apart from this, the sides decided to hold drills on a regular basis, agreeing to hold them in early summer every year.

Military cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan stem from historic, cultural, and ethnic closeness of the two countries, raising no questions. However, Georgia's enthusiastic joining of bilateral cooperation is indicative of the fact that the chief conductor of the process is Nato, which is apparently trying to counter the Kremlin's expansionism by uniting and strengthening a kind of security belt, which comprises former Soviet countries. In other words, in the South Caucasus, we are witnessing the revival of GUAM [regional organisation for Democracy and Economic Development of four post-Soviet states - Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova] possibly in a somewhat different shape.

A similar process is also noticeable on the western borders of the former Soviet Union. At the parliamentary forum held in Chisinau in early March 2018, parliament speakers of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia signed a resolution on joint counteraction to Russian aggression and coordination of activities on a number of related problems, including reintegration of occupied territories, issues of security and economic cooperation, and those of integration in the EU. Representatives of the European Parliament, the US Congress, and MPs from a number of EU countries were invited to participate in the forum. Among those invited were Nato Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, Eurasian Centre Director John Herbst, Atlantic Council Executive Vice President Damon Wilson, and other experts in security issues. The Azerbaijani delegation did not participate in the forum. However, Azerbaijani Ambassador to Ukraine Azer Xudiyev made a statement on a project of regional agreement of Azerbaijan with Turkey and Ukraine.

Russia and Armenia are concerned

Attempts by Nato and Turkey (that apparently has its own interests in the region, which differ from those of Nato) to gain a foothold in the former Soviet countries cannot fail to arouse Moscow's and Yerevan's concern. So far, no objections have been voiced from these capitals. However, Russian and Armenian experts actively comment on the aforementioned agreement and the process of developing military cooperation between Baku, Tbilisi, and Ankara, which shows that the process should not remain unaddressed.

Discussing the given agreement, Russian experts emphasise that "there are minimal chances that it will turn into a full-fledged regional military and political organisation or at least into a monolithic strategic alliance sharing long-term objectives and goals." The thing is that the sides' long-term interests differ. Thus, Georgia is heading to Europe, while Turkey is trying to pursue in the region the policy of "neo-Ottomanism", and Azerbaijan, which has become hostage of the Karabakh problem, is trying to pursue a neutral or even friendly policy regarding Russia.

Apart from this, Russian expert Nikolai Silayev believe that "if the Karabakh conflict unfreezes, Turkey will not go to the length of showing military support for Azerbaijan, [as] this is sure to be followed by Russia's response and no chances of support from Nato.

It is being noted that Turkey significantly outstrips its partners in all spheres and that imbalance of the kind is sure to become a destabilising factor in the future. However, Russian experts agree that it would be wrong to underestimate the tripartite regional alliance supported by Nato, as this cannot fail to undermine Russia's interests. (In this case, they probably imply military domination over the whole post-Soviet area). "Thus, despite all weaknesses and drawbacks," pundit Ivan Sidorov said, "military and political alliance between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey is a

significant factor in the system of international relations in the South Caucasus, posing quite a few dangers to the stability in the region, which claims rapt attention on the part of regional players, particularly Russia." <http://bit.ly/2FOK8KF>

Even more decomposed are comments on the aforementioned bilateral and tripartite military cooperation by experts from Armenia - the country which is the main source of tensions in the South Caucasus. For example, the well-known Internet website Rosbalt published an article headlined "Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are setting up a military triumvirate. Losing allies, [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan wants to bring at least the South Caucasus under its umbrella!"

"Military cooperation between Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey undermines Armenia's security," [the expert said]. According to him, "being aimed to isolate Armenia, this format represents a suitable platform for Ankara's expansionist aspirations, pushing forwards its interests in the South Caucasus," orientalist Ruben Safrastyan emphasised.

"The fact of conducting military exercises of the kind should put us on the guard," the expert said. "Look at the map and it will become clear that the exercises are directed against Armenia," [he said].

"With time, tripartite cooperation between Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan will show more clearly that it is directed against Armenia," expert Roman Karapetyan believes, pointing to the way out of the situation dangerous for Armenia. "On the path of reducing the impact of this cooperation and alternatives, it is necessary to counteract to this cooperation at the regional level in the Russia-Armenia-Iran format," [he said].

On the whole, Russian and Armenian experts' opinion on prospects for the aforementioned military cooperation is as follows: Ankara will choose not to have a quarrel with Moscow over the South Caucasus; but it would be a big mistake to lose sight of the developments to unfold in this direction...

At the given stage, it is difficult not to agree with the opinion. However, continued importance of the South Caucasus, the West's and Turkey's persistent strive to gain a foothold in the region, and all sorts of growing crises in Russia suggest that in a decade, the situation in the region might change dramatically and at that point of time, the aforementioned military cooperation might play a positive role in establishing peace and ensuring development in the region.

This article is translated from Russian by groong.edu

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