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**THE JULY 2020 CLASHES ON
THE ARMENIA -
AZERBAIJAN
BORDER AND
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE
OLD CONFLICT**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. INTRODUCTION 3
- II. THE JULY CLASHES..... 7
- III. REACTION OF EXTERNAL POWERS 12
- IV. NEW DIMENSIONS OF THE OLD CONFLICT 17
- V. CONCLUDING REMARKS..... 19

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I. INTRODUCTION

The South Caucasus is not only one of the most multi-ethnic regions on Europe's periphery but also, and probably because of this, one of the most conflict-inflicted territories in the world. Not only did the disintegration of the Soviet Union allow the three countries of the region – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – to recover their independent statehood, but also re-ignited the old hostilities between and inside them.

During its existence, for over seventy years, the Soviet Union was a major unifying factor in its territories, although not always peacefully, as it blocked nationalist sentiments and separatist initiatives. When it collapsed in the early 1990s, not only did the republics that once constituted the Union gain independence, but also autonomous entities within some of them strove to seize the opportunity and become independent. South Ossetia and Abkhazia warred against the central government in Tbilisi and, in the southern part of the region, another armed conflict broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan as the former waged a full-scale war to separate the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Azerbaijan.

While Georgia's conflict over its breakaway territories soon transformed into a matter of Russia – West rivalries and ended up with a largely stable deadlock with the 2008 war, Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region continues to cause violence and bloodshed between the two nations. As a result of the war of the early 1990s, 20 percent of the internationally-recognized territories of Azerbaijan – Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven adjacent districts – remain under the control of Armenia. The UN Security

Council resolutions of 1993 which demanded immediate withdrawal of the Armenian armed forces from the region have never been implemented.¹

The peace negotiations between the two countries that started with the establishment of the Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement in May 1994 have failed to yield a meaningful breakthrough. The negotiations are mediated by the OSCE's Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States. Established in the early 1990s, the Minsk Group has offered several proposals to resolve the conflict and help sides reach an agreement on the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, but have consistently been unable to offer settlement formulations acceptable to both sides.

It is important to note that there was notable optimism for peace talks after Armenia's so-called Velvet Revolution in mid-2018 which brought Nikol Pashinyan, a former journalist, to the premiership. With this, for the first time in the country's post-Soviet history, a leader without origins in Nagorno-Karabakh assumed political leadership. It was believed to be a game-changer, as Armenian leaders who were born in Nagorno-Karabakh or played leading roles in the war of the early 1990s demonstrated a more extremist stance in peace talks.

In late 2018, the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia agreed on the establishment of a telephone hotline between the military commanders for the first time, and in January 2019 they agreed to take concrete measures to "prepare populations for peace." These happened against the backdrop of a substantial decline in the number of casualty-causing incidents in

¹ US Department of State Archive, "1993 UN Security Council Resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh", available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/13508.htm>

2019. For example, while 39 military servicemen were killed in 2017, the year before Armenia's power change in 2018, casualties dropped to 8, including one civilian, in 2019.²

These positive dynamics, however, lasted not so long, as Azerbaijan was outraged by the moves of Prime Minister Pashinyan's government which they found rather provocative. Pashinyan attempted to change the format of the negotiations mediated by the Minsk Group by bringing in the representative of the Armenia-controlled political structure in the Nagorno-Karabakh region as a negotiation party in a status equal to that of Armenia and Azerbaijan. This suggestion was rejected by Azerbaijan, as Baku considers this region part of its internationally-recognized territories in line with the international law and the UN Security Council Resolutions and sees only Armenia as its opponent at the negotiating table. Pashinyan's attempt was rebuffed by the OSCE's Minsk Group, too.

The leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan found themselves on loggerheads on another issue related to the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. On August 5, 2019, Pashinyan called for unification between Armenia and Karabakh, declaring "Karabakh is Armenia, period." This was a new approach for the Armenian government as previous leaders denied any control of Armenia over the political establishment in Nagorno-Karabakh. Later in 2019, addressing the Valdai Discussion Club in Russia's Black Sea city of Sochi, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan retorted to Prime Minister Pashinyan by declaring "Karabakh is Azerbaijan, exclamation point!"

Disputing the whole essence of the negotiations, Armenia's Foreign Minister declared in April 2020 that there was no document on the negotiating table. This statement was made

² International Crisis Group, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer", available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer>, July 2020.

in response to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who previously expressed support to the existing “firmly established format of negotiations” and described the draft documents on the agenda to be a “very important step in implementing the [United Nations] Security Council resolutions.” The erosion of the negotiating process was admitted by President Aliyev on July 6, 2020, as he criticized the international mediators in the negotiations declaring that the peace process has become “meaningless”.

Against the backdrop of these strained tensions in the region, a sudden breakout of a military confrontation was long expected between the two rivals. After the so-called Four-Day War on April 2-5, 2016, the first major military confrontation after the ceasefire agreement of 1994 which cost hundreds of lives on both sides, each side had been preparing for a sudden resumption of clashes and thus invested on the military-build up by acquiring modern military technologies as many as possible.³ These circumstances led the sides to a sudden flare-up on July 12, on the border between the two countries, in a geographical location far from the Nagorno-Karabakh region and surrounding districts. Although the deadly fighting remained local and the shooting started to calm from July 15, the recent clashes have brought a series of new dynamics to the old conflict which has the potential to further aggravate the enmity between two peoples of the South Caucasus.

³ Laurence Broers, “The Nagorny Karabakh Conflict Defaulting to War”, Chatham House, available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/NK%20paper%2024082016%20WEB.pdf>, July 2016.

II. THE JULY CLASHES

In early July of 2020, hardly anyone in the South Caucasus would have expected a military escalation in the region. The pandemic-related situation had generated rather difficult economic challenges for both Armenia and Azerbaijan. In late June, it was reported that Armenia's Economic Activity Index (EAI) decreased by 12.8% in May of this year, compared to the same month in 2019.⁴ The decline was recorded in almost spheres of the economy, as compared to the same period of the last year, the volume of construction decreased by 23.4%, the volume of services by 19.4%, the domestic trade turnover by 18.4%, etc.⁵

Despite all the countermeasures, the global pandemic hit the economy of the oil-rich Azerbaijan, as well. Due to the sharp fall of the prices in the global energy market and the decline in the global economic activity, Azerbaijan's economic growth started to decrease from the end of March. In the months preceding the July clashes, this decline in the economic growth intensified. The official statistics report a 2.9% decline in the oil sector and 47.9% in the tourism sector that suffered worst of all from the pandemic.⁶ However, holding \$51.53 billion in strategic currency reserves, Azerbaijan is more optimistic to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Along with the economic downturn, the two countries were also struggling with the challenges the pandemic posed to their health sector. The number of total infections on July

⁴ Hetq.am, "Armenia: Economic Activity Index Shrinks 12.8% in May: Construction Nosedives", available at: <https://hetq.am/en/article/118707>, 25 June 2020.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ APA.AZ, "Economic growth started to subside in Azerbaijan from end of March in connection with pandemic", available at: <https://apa.az/en/finance-news/Economic-growth-started-to-subside-in-Azerbaijan-from-end-of-March-in-connection-with-pandemic-327225>, 4 August 2020.

11 was over 30,000 with a death toll of over 400 in both countries that had overburdened public health systems.

Against the backdrop of these economic and humanitarian challenges, a flare-up was reported on July 12 along the state border straddling Azerbaijan's Tovuz and Armenia's Tavush regions. The two sides blamed each other on the start of the clashes and it has not been possible to get an objective understanding of what triggered the sudden escalation.⁷

The Armenian Ministry of Defense asserted that the clashes had started with a provocation by the Azerbaijani side on July 12. A spokesperson for the ministry, Shushan Stepanyan, reported on her Facebook page that "[a]n Azerbaijani jeep, for reasons unknown to us, attempted to violate the state border of Armenia in the area of Tavush," adding, "After a warning by the Armenian side, the enemy soldiers left the vehicle and returned to their position. Stepanyan claimed that, around an hour later, "Azerbaijani soldiers, using artillery fire, attempted to seize our outpost but were pushed back, taking casualties".

This scenario was utterly rejected by the Azerbaijani side. The assistant to the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan on foreign policy, Hikmet Hajiyev, accused Armenia of suddenly launching an initial attack on the positions of Azerbaijani forces, declaring, "The armed forces of Armenia had flagrantly violated the ceasefire regime and used artillery mounts to fire on the positions of Azerbaijan's armed forces in the direction of Tovuz district".

The clashes, involving heavy artillery as well as aerial drones, resulted in the deaths of up to 20 military personnel on both sides and a 76-year-old Azerbaijani civilian along with the

⁷ Jam-news, "Incident on Armenia-Azerbaijan border. Defense ministries report conflicting information", available at: <https://jam-news.net/incident-on-the-border-of-armenia-and-azerbaijan-conflicting-information/>, 12 July 2020.

destruction of infrastructure in the border region. Amongst the losses, there were high ranking military servicemen, including a major general from the Azerbaijani side. On July 13, it was reported that the two sides also fought along the border in Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan exclave, which is nestled between Turkey, Iran, and Armenia. Many local and international observers, therefore, alarmed a possible escalation of the clashes into full-scale war.

The border clashes, however, remained local and did not spiral into a wider confrontation, but attracted extensive international attention due to a number of reasons. First and foremost, the sides exchanged fire not on the "Line of Contact" surrounding the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, but on the state border between the two countries. This was an important detail, as unlike the former, the latter falls into the jurisdiction of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Moscow-led military alliance of Russia's regional post-Soviet allies including Armenia. Article 4 of the CSTO, akin to NATO's Article 5, includes the principle of "an attack against one is considered an attack against all".

The CSTO's involvement would dramatically escalate the conflict and cause massive consequences for the region. Armenians hoped that the CSTO would stand by Armenia and support its war against Azerbaijan. Towards this end, Armenia quickly albeit unsuccessfully attempted to push for a special session of the CSTO which was apparently not supported by other members as it was later postponed indefinitely for unknown reasons. Although the Armenian government declared that they did not attempt to invoke Article 4, this threat was there in the beginning and caused widespread anxiety.

Another factor of particular importance was related to the energy pipelines and transportation routes passing through the Tovuz region of Azerbaijan where clashes

occurred. Importantly, the region hosts major energy pipelines (the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and the Southern Gas Corridor) and transportation routes (the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the East-West Transport Corridor) connecting Azerbaijan with Europe through Georgia and Turkey.

This transportation route, named also the Middle Corridor, connecting Europe to Asia via Georgia, Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea, has gained more importance against the backdrop of pandemic-related halts on other routes.⁸ Any instability in this part of Azerbaijan would deal a serious blow to its connection with its Western partners, with overarching consequences for both sides. Therefore, the potential role of some third parties, who oppose the rise of Western influence into the South Caucasus, in the escalation on the border has been emphasized by some experts.

The clashes stopped before reaching perilous stages. Starting from July 15, the sides reported “relative calm” on the border while both sides continued to claim to have downed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) of the opposite side. Tellingly, both Armenia and Azerbaijan have started using UAVs extensively for surveillance and reconnaissance missions, as well as for use in ground attacks. These aerial vehicles were first mobilized by the sides during the Four-Day War of 2016, which, for some observers, might be “the first-ever inter-state armed conflict in which drones [had] been deployed on specifically combat missions” and “the first-ever known combat use of a ‘kamikaze drone’”.⁹

⁸ Cavid Veliyev, COVID-19 Increases Importance of Middle Corridor, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 57, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/covid-19-increases-importance-of-middle-corridor/>, 27 April 2020.

⁹ Azad Garibov, “Karabakh: A New Theater for Drone Warfare?”, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 13 Issue: 92, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/karabakh-a-new-theater-for-drone-warfare/>, 11 May 2016.

In the wake of the July clashes, the Armenian Defense Ministry claimed that 13 Azerbaijani drones had been downed during the border fighting which was rejected by the Azerbaijani side. Earlier Azerbaijan had also claimed to have shot down up to five UAVs of Armenia. As of August 6, 2020, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan reported to have downed the third Armenian drone since the end of clashes. Thus, already there is a lull on the border for the moment, but apparently shootings continue, though at a limited level, and, therefore, the threat of sudden escalation is still possible.

III. REACTION OF EXTERNAL POWERS

Following the outbreak of the fighting on the Armenian – Azerbaijani border, multiple states and international organizations called on the two warring sides to exercise restraint and observe the ceasefire regime established in 1994. For example, the co-chairs of the OSCE’s Minsk Group issued a statement lamenting the breach of the ceasefire and calling the conflicting sides to re-engage in substantive negotiations. This message was replicated by most states including the United States whose engagement with the South Caucasus under President Donald Trump has arguably reached its record low in the post-Soviet era.

The reaction of two states, however, extended beyond mere declarations. These are Russia and Turkey, the two states who have special interests in the South Caucasus region. Considering this area as part of its “privileged sphere of interests”, Russia does not shy away from declaring that it would not refrain from using even nuclear weapons against any moves in the region jeopardizing its national interests. Russia has already proved on several occasions that it is ready to mobilize military forces for this purpose. The 2008 war between Georgia and Russia is a revealing example in this context.

Tellingly, as opposed to the expectations and to some extent disillusionment of most Armenians, Russia did not take a clear declarative stance. In its statement, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed “serious” concern about the recent developments and underscored the “the inadmissibility of a further escalation of the conflict, which poses a threat to the security of the region”. For some people, Russia took a seemingly neutral position due to Prime Minister Pashinyan’s anti-Russian moves in domestic politics (e.g. disobeying the Kremlin’s calls for the release of Russia-friendly Armenian politicians who

were arrested after Pashinyan came to power; taking measures against Russian TV Channels; Appointing pro-Western and anti-Russian people to highest positions, etc.). Indeed, as mentioned above, the Russia-led CSTO even refused to convene a special meeting of the Alliance.

However, there were some developments in the days following the start of border shootings which demonstrated Russia's tangible military assistance to Armenia despite declarative neutrality. On the heels of the clashes between the two South Caucasian country, on July 17 – 22, Russia held a snap combat readiness check of the troops of the Southern and Western Military Districts, marine infantry of the Northern and Pacific Fleets, some units of central subordination and the Airborne Force. The exercises that involved 150,000 troops, around 400 aircraft, over 26,000 items of armament, military and special hardware, and over 100 warships and support vessels were officially declared to be a “major part of preparations for the Kavkaz-2020 (Caucasus-2020) strategic command and staff exercise”.¹⁰ Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin rejected any connection between Russian combat training activities and the outbreak of Armenia – Azerbaijani fighting. Some experts, however, argue that the latter may indeed have affected the timing of the snap military exercises of Russia, as Moscow may see this as a threat to its regional interests.¹¹

The day after Russia's military drills ended, on July 23, Armenia Defense Ministry reported to hold military exercises together with Russia that involved the commanders of a Russian-Armenian air-defense system and the Armenian army's separate anti-aircraft units as well

¹⁰ TASS, “Defense Ministry rejects link between Russian drills and Azeri-Armenian escalation”, available at: <https://tass.com/russia/1180067>, 18 July 2020.

¹¹ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Russia Tests Combat Readiness Despite Pandemic”, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 108, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-tests-combat-readiness-despite-pandemic/>, 23 July 2020.

as air force officers from the two states. According to the Ministry, the particular objective of the exercises was to develop new ways of fighting against UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) that had been intensely used both in the April War of 2016 and July clashes of this year.¹² The two allies have developed intense military partnership reinforced by the stationing of the Russian military base in Armenia and the establishment of a joint air-defense system in the 1990s.

Apart from military exercises, Russia and its Eastern European ally Serbia supplied Armenia with arms, prior to and following the clashes, strengthening the defensive and offensive capabilities of the South Caucasian country. The Azerbaijani media reported that Russia sent seven aircrafts of weapons to Armenia between July 17 – August 4.¹³ Armenia's purchase of ammunition for rifles and pistols from Serbia in May and June of 2020 was interpreted by some observers as preparation for the escalation on the border.¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan declared that "Investigations in the area of the Azerbaijani-Armenian border have shown that the weapons from which civilians and the Azerbaijani army were fired upon are of Serbian origin". Although the sale of weapons was initially defended by the Serbian officials as legal, President Aleksander Vucic of Serbia described the deal as a "wrong decision" on the phone talk with his Azerbaijani counterpart.

Russia's support for Armenia is not a novelty in the context of Armenia – Azerbaijan conflict. It has been long observed that Russia utilizes the conflict as an instrument to preserve its

¹² Asbarez, "Armenian, Russian Troops Train for Drone Warfare", available at: <http://asbarez.com/195670/armenian-russian-troops-train-for-drone-warfare/>, 24 July 2020.

¹³ Minval.az, "Российское оружие для Армении: сенсационные подробности", available at: <https://minval.az/news/124018159>, 7 August 2020.

¹⁴ Anadoly Agency, "Serbia confirms controversial arms shipments to Armenia", available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/serbia-confirms-controversial-arms-shipments-to-armenia/1921497>, 24 July 2002.

influence over the conflicting parties. Turkey, in contrast to and also probably because of Russia, does not have a military presence in the South Caucasus. Unlike Russia, nor can Turkey play intricate geopolitical games here. Immediately after the start of the border escalation, Ankara took an unambiguous position in both words and deeds. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey and many high-ranking officials in Ankara declared strong support to Azerbaijan and accused Armenia of aggressive provocation. In particular, the foreign ministry statement pointed out that “Armenia’s recent attacks sought to draw the attention of the international community to other places than the illegally occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions [in order] to add new dimensions to the conflict”.¹⁵

On July 29 – August 10, Azerbaijan and Turkey started joint military exercises with the participation of ground and air forces of the two countries. The exercises were held within the legal frame established by the 2010 Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support (ASPMS) between Turkey and Azerbaijan. This agreement includes, among others, the *casus foederis* principle which obligates the parties, in line with Article 51 of the UN Charter, to cooperate when either country faces aggression by the third state or a group of states. The 13-day military exercises, involving military personnel, armored vehicles, artillery mounts, and mortars, as well as military aviation and air defense equipment, are the largest of its kind in the recent history of military cooperation between the two countries.

The military drills between Russia and Armenia, on the one hand, Azerbaijan and Turkey, on the other hand, further proliferate the militarization of the conflict and manifest dangerous signs for its future. The failure of negotiations brokered by the Minsk Group of

¹⁵ Anadolu Agency, “Türkiye’den Ermenistan’ın Azerbaycan’a yönelik saldırısına tepki”, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/turkiyeden-ermenistanin-azerbaycan-a-yonelik-saldirisina-tepki/1908242>, 13 July 2020.

the OSCE co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States is widely perceived as an indication for the further intensification of the conflict. As an attempt to revitalize the negotiations and confront the dangerous dynamics in the conflict, Azerbaijan called for the meeting of the Minsk Group in an extended format which would include not only the Co-Chairs but also other members (e.g. Germany, Finland, Turkey, etc.) of the 11-state institution. Armenia in its turn put forward seven requirements for future negotiations which further complicate the process.¹⁶ The prospect of the future peace negotiations, therefore, at this point looks rather gloomy.

¹⁶ Lragir.am, “Наши позиции укрепились: Никол Пашинян выдвинул 7 условий”, available at: <https://www.lragir.am/ru/2020/07/23/179711/>, 23 July, 2020

IV. NEW DIMENSIONS OF THE OLD CONFLICT

The brief military escalation on July 14-15 created new dimensions in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan signifying a more unstable and dangerous future for the South Caucasus and potentially beyond. Besides the occurrence of the clashes on the state border between the conflicting states and Turkey's more committed involvement in the process, the clashes caused more confrontational information warfare between the two sides and spilled over the diasporas in the third countries.

The sides dragged their war into the social networks and international media blaming each other on the causes of the recent escalation and origins of the conflict in general. One of the most prominent elements in this context was Armenia's accusation of Azerbaijan on the intention to strike Armenia's Metsamor nuclear power plant. It was claimed in various platforms that "Having so many casualties without territorial gains, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan threatened to launch a missile strike" on this nuclear plant. This naturally drew extensive international attention as such an attack would incur catastrophic consequences not only for Armenia but also for Azerbaijan's ally Turkey's eastern regions and Azerbaijan's exclave Nakhchivan. However, as typical for most fake news spreading on the internet, few people did actually explore the background of this claim.

This particular threat had, in fact, been made by the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan. However, there are two nuances that must be mentioned to get a clear understanding of the context and motives. First, the statement by the official of the Ministry of Defense was made in response to a question by a journalist who asked how Azerbaijan would reply if Armenia were to strike the Mingachevir Dam, the biggest dam in the entire Caucasus that would

cause catastrophic humanitarian consequences to Azerbaijan if destroyed in a military attack. Contrary to the claims quoted above, therefore, this pronouncement was not made because of “so many casualties without territorial gains.” Second, the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan refuted the claim that Azerbaijan has plans to strike Armenia’s nuclear plant and emphasized that this threat was made by a low-ranking official and does not represent the official policy of Azerbaijan.

Another new element caused by the July clashes was the fierce face-off between the members of Azerbaijani and the Armenian diaspora settled in various countries including the United States, the European Union and Russia. The confrontations between these people were frequently accompanied by violence and bloodshed of which videos widely shared on social media agitating more people, provoking them into more violence and thus further radicalizing the situation.

One of such videos originally posted online by an Armenian living in Brussels depicted a group of Armenians brutally beating an Azerbaijani young man. The video was shared by thousands of Azerbaijani social media users some of whom called for retaliation against Armenians. Similar incidents continue to be reported in many other parts of the world, including Russia where Azerbaijani and Armenian people have settled in large numbers. It is important to note that there were even-tempered people from both sides recommending their compatriots to calm down and refrain from violence. However, when tensions soar this high, it runs the risk of spiraling out of control as it is mostly impossible to regulate the process when it is dominated by nationalism and demands for revenge.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The border clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the subsequent developments brought new dynamics to the old conflict between the two peoples of the South Caucasus and may have several implications for the situation in the region. First and foremost, after the Four-Day War of 2016, with the flare-up of July 2020, occasional deadly escalations tend to become a new normal of the conflict. The July escalation put an end to a relatively peaceful period started after Nikol Pashinyan came to power. The failure of negotiations since then is an imminent danger for more clashes between the armed forces of the two countries with the loss of military servicemen and civilians.

Second, Turkey's decision to demonstrate more active engagement with the region and its committed support to Azerbaijan adds new elements to the geopolitical extension of the conflict. Strongly supporting Azerbaijan's position and holding large-scale military exercises in the wake of the July clashes, Turkish leaders stated that "No matter where the threat comes from, Turkey will stand by Azerbaijan till the end". This was perceived as a signal not only to Armenia but also to its ally Russia. For some observers, Turkey's growing role in the conflict may challenge Russia's predominance over the region in the future. This confrontation between the two external powers bears the potential to change the dynamics of the Armenia - Azerbaijan conflict, but probably not towards a peaceful end.

Third, the July clashes have demonstrated that the resumption of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan would not remain limited to the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, but would spill over the entire border zone between the two countries. This disapproved the analyses which had predicted a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan to remain limited to the

occupied territories of Azerbaijan. The extension of the conflict along the state borders would devastate the lives of many more people on both sides.

Fourth, the reserved reaction of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to the calls of Armenia demonstrated that the alliance is not willing to be drawn into Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan. It is important to underscore that the lack of the CSTO's support to Armenia is, to some extent, related to the fact that the majority of the Alliance, particularly Belarus and Kazakhstan, hold friendly ties with Azerbaijan and refrain from risking these ties.

Fifth, for the first time in recent years, the diasporas of the Armenia and Azerbaijan faced off in the third countries where they have settled. Although the ceasefire between the armed forces of the two countries looks to have been restored at the moment, this is broken almost on a daily basis. After the recent confrontations between the diasporas, it seems that the representatives of the two nations might also continue to face off in the third countries where they live. Considering that millions of Armenian and Azerbaijanis live abroad, especially in the United States and Russia, this is a risk merits particular attention.

Sixth, information warfare gained strong momentum in the conflict as the two sides made extensive use of social networks and other international media platforms to blame each other on the causes of the sudden outbreak of the clashes, on the origins of the conflict and its implications. In line with the global trends in information warfare, the spread of fake news established itself as an integral part of the Armenia – Azerbaijan conflict. Although fake news is not entirely a novelty in this conflict, the recent clashes showed its increasingly extensive use and potential consequences.

Last but not least, the conduct of the internationally-mediated negotiations in its existing format proved itself utterly pointless after the July clashes. The ultimate failure of the positive developments started following the governmental change of 2018 in Armenia demonstrated that it would not be possible to reach a breakthrough unless the sides agree on a compromise or involved external great powers take a principled position. These two conditions are inherently inter-related. The experience of the last thirty years shows that the international law and international documents adopted at the highest levels, including at the United Nations Security Council, bear no practical significance without tangible international backing on their implementation. The above-discussed dangerous trends in the conflict, in particular the militarization of the region and radicalization of the diasporas, should serve as a wake-up call for the international community, including the European Union, which has apparently given in to its geopolitical rivals in the South Caucasus¹⁷ and refused to play a role in the resolution process of the Armenia – Azerbaijan conflict equivalent to its aspired geopolitical weight.¹⁸

¹⁷ TASS, “Merkel points to Russia’s role in resolving Nagorno-Karabakh conflict”, available at: <https://tass.com/world/880534>, 7 June 2016.

¹⁸ Vasif Huseynov, “European Union Should Play Stronger Role in the Armenia – Azerbaijan Conflict”, The London Post, available at: <http://thelondonpost.net/european-union-play-stronger-role-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict/>, 19 July 2020.