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The 'Four-Day War' of April 2016 is considered as an important victory in Azerbaijan

Territorial gains, military and moral victory should bring Azerbaijan additional advantages on the negotiation table, Azerbaijani experts and ordinary people think. How the April clash will influence the future Karabakh talks and to what extent Azerbaijani diplomats will be able to utilize its benefits are open questions.

The fighting that broke out in the Karabakh conflict zone in early April 2016 was the heaviest since the 1994 ceasefire agreement between the belligerent sides, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Part of the long-lasting Karabakh war, the recent clashes, in which the warring parties used heavy weapons took the lives of hundreds of combatants and civilians. The conflict continued for four days and ended with ceasefire.

Ethnic clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous province inside the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan, arose in 1988, toward the end of Soviet rule. The conflict, which started on a local scale developed into a full-fledged bloody war between newly independent Armenia and Azerbaijan after the collapse of the Soviet Union: Azerbaijan tried to maintain its control over the region, while Armenia backed the separatist movement of the ethnic Armenians.

Although Azerbaijan was admitted to the United Nations with its Soviet-era territory that included Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian side managed to occupy both the province and the adjacent districts and proclaimed the so-called Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. As a result of the conflict, which cost the both sides more than 30,000 lives, nearly one million Azerbaijanis were expelled from

their homes in the occupied territories and since then have dwelled as refugees in their own country.

The Russia-brokered negotiations secured a truce in 1994 and ceased the hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but failed to ensure sustainable progress. Controlled by the Armenian separatists, Nagorno-Karabakh has maintained de facto autonomy ever since, while the region is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.

Official mediators of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia, the USA and France, initiated several proposals and organized direct meetings of Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents. Yet any attempts to finally resolve the conflict have failed: Baku has repeatedly offered a wide autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, while the Armenian side demands independence for the breakaway region.

Although border shootouts and skirmishes were not unusual all along the Armenian-Azerbaijani frontline in Nagorno-Karabakh since 1994 and claimed dozens lives every year, the April clashes of 2016 labeled as 'Four-Day War' marked a new chapter in the history of the conflict. Along with the tangible results they brought, the clashes and the events around them were accepted as a victory in

Azerbaijan for the following outcomes.

The most tangible result of the four-day battles was the liberation of several territories by Azerbaijani armed forces that managed to re-capture a few strategically important heights - the first change in the frontline since the inconclusive ceasefire 22 years ago. Responding to Armenian statements on the loss of 800 hectares of territory, the officials from Baku reported that the Azerbaijani military took control of 2000 hectares of territory. However, strategic positions inside Karabakh, which the Azerbaijani troops seized allow them to control more territories now, are considered the major gains of the Azerbaijani side.

The blitzkrieg also became an opportunity for Azerbaijani military to display its capability and hardware. Azerbaijan's forces have been heavily modernized in the past 10 years since the beginning of the oil boom in the 2000s. Relying on weighty military investments and boasting with their military budget, which was equal to or more than the entire national budget of Armenia, the Azerbaijani authorities would regularly utilize bellicose rhetoric and threaten to unfreeze the conflict. In April, the Azerbaijani troops finally obtained a chance to exhibit the expensive, exclusive and state-of-the-art weaponry they have been affording from various sources.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan finally overcame the syndrome of the defeated: the active phase of Karabakh war (1988-1994) ended with the victory of Armenia that occupied 20 per cent of Azerbaijani territories. The defeat and loss of territories to the neighboring country, which is much smaller in terms of territory, population and natural resources, has been perceived in Azerbaijani society as a disgrace for years, while the local society would always try to explain the failure by different arguments (such as domestic chaos and anarchy, Russia's military aid to Armenia). The feelings of humiliation that lasted 20 years were finally downplayed and replaced by self-confidence in the aftermath of the April victory.

The Azerbaijani party could also demonstrate that it still considers Karabakh as an integral part and has no plans to abandon the hopes and opportunity to reclaim the territory. That was a message to both domestic and international community that the conflict is not 'frozen' as claimed, and can unravel at any time again. Although a new generation has grown up during the 20 years since Karabakh was occupied, the memory and knowledge of what belongs to Azerbaijan is still strong in society: this was proved by the active participation of young soldiers in the offensive and eagerness of thousands of more to enlist in the army.

Another important nuance related to the conflict could be the parity Azerbaijan managed to attain in informational conflict. Possessing strong diaspora across the world and actively lobbying in many countries, including France, Russia and the United States, which are the official mediators of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Armenian organizations, political groups and media organs have been promoting the Armenian viewpoints and propagating against Azerbaijan. Their activities used to be hundred times more effective than Azerbaijan's. At present, media war could be estimated more or less equal. The access of Azerbaijani politicians and journalists to foreign media and their opportunity to address to wider audience has become greater and greater; these opportunities were utilized maximally throughout the four-day conflict. Moreover, during many international events held during and/or after the conflict Azerbaijan's position was openly and clearly expressed.

Azerbaijan managed to attain superiority in foreign policy as well. Turkey and Pakistan backed Azerbaijan 'to the end' against Armenia, while Ukrainian and Georgian authorities expressed support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Furthermore, Israeli Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman blamed Armenia for provoking the clashes and said 'Azerbaijan's position in the conflict is justified.' Pedro Agramunt, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, called for "the withdrawal of all Armenian armed troops from occupied Azerbaijani territories in compliance with UN Security Council resolutions". The Organization of Islamic Cooperation also supported Azerbaijan and made a similar statement on "the withdrawal of Armenian troops".

Meanwhile Armenia found itself abandoned even by its formal allies: Belarus and Kazakhstan - Armenia's close partners within Eurasian structures (Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organization) - stated their respect to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. The Belarusian ambassador was therefore summoned to Armenia's Foreign Ministry to be informed that Yerevan was "deeply bewildered" by Minsk's statement. A planned summit of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in Yerevan got cancelled after Kazakhstan, one of the bloc's member-states, refused to attend it in an apparent show of support for Azerbaijan. Although the Russian authorities formally called on parties to end hostilities, the Armenian people feel dissatisfied with Russia's attitude and sales of arms to Azerbaijan. As anti-Kremlin sentiment grew in Armenia, mass rallies were organized in Yerevan against Russia.

Territorial gains, military and moral victory should bring Azerbaijan additional advantages on the negotiation table, experts and ordinary people think, especially on the

Azerbaijani side. Baku made it obvious that it would no longer tolerate endless negotiations with no results. Rich military budget, state-of-the-art weaponry and international support put Azerbaijan in a much advantageous situation, which should be taken into account in Yere-

van. How the April clash will influence the future Karabakh talks and to what extent Azerbaijani diplomats will be able to utilize its benefits are open questions, which will find their answers in the upcoming months.

About the author:

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