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Analyzing the International Response to the 2020 July Border Clashes Between Armenia and Azerbaijan

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Keywords: Tavush region, July clashes, war, ceasefire agreement, military operations, international response, Nagorno-Karabakh, Artsakh, Armenian Armed Forces, hybrid war, international organizations, global and regional actors, conflict resolution.

The article analyzes the military operations launched by Azerbaijan along the internationally recognized border of Armenia's Tavush region from July 12-16, 2020. It presents the sequence of events that took place in both countries during the military clashes, and provides an assessment of the immediate responses to the border military operations by global, regional, and local actors, using content analysis methodology.

The article also examines the involvement of international organizations in the conflict resolution process, comparing the statements and actions made by these organizations.

The role of major powers and influential actors in conflict resolution is also discussed, comparing their diplomatic efforts and positions. The dynamics of military operations, diplomatic measures, and approaches taken by both Armenia and Azerbaijan after the clashes are studied.

Հայաստանի և Ադրբեյջանի միջև 2020 թվականի հուլիսան սահմանային բախումների վերաբերյալ
միջազգային արձագանքի վերլուծություն

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Ելենա Զոգրաբյան

ԵՊՀ Հայագիտական հետազոտությունների ինստիտուտի կիբեռանվտանգության և տվյալների
վերլուծության ամբիոնի վարիչ, կրտսեր գիտաշխատող

Լիլիթ Մուրադյան

ԵՊՀ Հայագիտական հետազոտությունների ինստիտուտի կիբեռանվտանգության և
տվյալների վերլուծության ամբիոնի կրտսեր գիտաշխատող

Հիմնարարեր՝ Տավուշի մարզ, հուլիսյան բախումներ, պատերազմ,
հրադարարի ռեժիմ, ռազմական գործողություններ, միջազգային արձագանք,
Լեռնային Ղարաբաղ, Արցախ, հայկական զինված ուժեր,
հիբրիդային պատերազմ, միջազգային կազմակերպություններ, գլոբալ և
տարաշածքանային դերակատարներ, հակամարտության կարգավորում:

Հոդվածում վերլուծության են ենթարկվում 2020 թ. հուլիսի 12-16-ն ընկած
ժամանակահատվածում Ադրբեյջանի կողմից ՀՀ Տավուշի մարզի միջազգայնորեն ճանաչված
սահմանի երկայնքով սանձազերծված ռազմական գործողությունները:

Ներկայացվում է ռազմական բախումներին ընթացքում երկու երկներում տեղի ունեցած
իրադարձությունների հաջորդականությունը, ինչպես նաև գնահատական է տրվում զորքալ,
տարածաշրջանային և տեղական դերակատարների կողմից սահմանային ռազմական
գործողությունների վերաբերյալ անմիջական արձագանքներին՝ օգտագործելով բովանդակության
վերլուծության մոտեցումը:

Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրության է ենթարկվել նաև միջազգային կազմակերպությունների
ներգրավվածությունը հակամարտության կարգավորման գործընթացում՝ համեմատական
վերլուծության ենթարկվելով նրանց կողմից արված հայտարարություններն ու գործողությունները:

Քննության է առնվել խոշոր տերությունների և ազդեցիկ դերակատարների դերը
կոնֆլիկտի կարգավորման գործում՝ համեմատելով նրանց դիվանագիտական ջանքերն ու
դիրքորոշումները:

Ուսումնասիրվել է բախումներից հետո և՝ Հայաստանի, և՝ Ադրբեյջանի կողմից ռազմական
գործողությունների, դիվանագիտական քայլերի, մոտեցումների դինամիկան:

Анализ международной реакции на пограничные столкновения между Арменией и Азербайджаном в июле 2020 года

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Ключевые слова: Тавушская область, июльские столкновения, война, соглашение о прекращении огня, военные действия, реакция международного сообщества, Нагорный Карабах, Арцах, Вооруженные силы Армении, гибридная война, международные организации, глобальные и региональные игроки, разрешение конфликта.

В статье анализируются военные действия 2020 года, развязанные Азербайджаном вдоль международно признанной границы Тавушской области РА в период с 12 по 16 июля 2020 года. Представлена последовательность событий, произошедших в двух странах во время военного конфликта, и оценены непосредственные реакции глобальных, региональных и местных игроков на приграничные военные действия с использованием подхода контент-анализа.

В статье также было изучено участие международных организаций в процессе разрешения конфликтов, подвергая их заявления и действия сравнительному анализу. Была рассмотрена роль крупных держав и влиятельных игроков в деле урегулирования конфликтов, сопоставлены их дипломатические усилия и позиции. Изучена динамика военных действий, дипломатические шаги и подходы после столкновений как Армении, так и Азербайджана.

* * *

Введение. The present territory of Tavush region of the Republic of Armenia includes territories of three historical provinces of Greater Armenia: the Northern part of the region (Noyemberyan area) corresponds to Gugark province, the southern part (Dilijan region) to Ayrarat province and the Eastern part (Berd region) to Utik province [Ruben Simonyan, Tavush region [Yerevan: Tigran Mets Publishing House, 2012, p. 33].

The Turkish-Persian conflict that began in the 16th-18th centuries in the region (also the South Caucasus), later escalated into a full-fledged war that spanned over a century. Starting in the early 19th century, the Russian Empire became actively engaged in the aforementioned conflict. Following the establishment of Russian rule, the Caucasian region from 1867 to 1917 was administratively divided between the following provinces: Kutaisi, Tiflis, Yerevan, Elizavetpol and Baku [V. Mikaelyan (ed.), Nagorno Karabakh in 1918-1923. Collection of Documents and Materials, [Yerevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1992, p. 12-13] Considering the national problems, the Tsarism often proved to be unjust and restrictive in their administrative approach towards national territories. These policies created significant challenges for the various national communities residing within the Russian Empire, including the Armenian people. In order to "restrain" Armenian independence aspirations, Tsarism pursued a policy that involved utilizing Turkic-Tatar elements. This policy aimed to expelling the Armenian and Christian heritage of the historical region of Aghvank, which led to the emergence of the Azerbaijani "ethnic" community, primarily comprised of Caucasian Tatars. This newly formed community began asserting

territorial claims over native Armenian lands, further escalating tensions in the region. Claims intensified in 1918-1920 by the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic formed in the Caucasus after the Russian revolutions [Arsen Melik-Shahnazarov, Nagorno-Karabakh: facts against lies: Informational-ideological aspects of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Moscow: Magic Lantern, 2009, p. 24]. They were specifically directed towards territories of Artsakh-Karabakh, Nakhichevan, Zangezur, and other regions within the Elizavetpol province which also include a number of territories of the current Republic of Armenia recognized by the United Nations, including the territories of Tavush region.

In the 1980s, tensions and minor ethnic clashes began between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In 1988, with the beginning of the Artsakh movement, the frozen Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict became active, the peak of which was the Artsakh war. Following a ceasefire agreement signed by the parties in 1994, various armed conflicts continued to take place in subsequent years. However, the clashes on July 12, 2020 in Tavush were of significant importance as they occurred along the internationally recognized border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and far from the de facto Artsakh Republic [Vardan Ghaplanian, "Armenia and Azerbaijan: High risk of cross-border violence in Nagorno-Karabakh despite ceasefire," Ten conflicts to worry about in 2021, ACLED 2021, p 24].

The attack, occurring on July 12, led to intense clashes near the Chinar and Movses villages, which were among the most significant confrontations since the four-day war in April 2016.

Promptly responding to the situation, Armenian forces issued warnings to the Azerbaijani military personnel, resulting in their withdrawal from the area, abandoning their vehicle [Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Armenia. *Press release*, last modified July 13, 2020]. Nevertheless, in the following days, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces made multiple attempts to seize control of Armenian border positions, accompanied by targeted attacks on the local civilian population and infrastructure. Notably, the villages of Aygepar, Karmiraghbyur, Chinari, Movses, and the city of Berd became primary targets of Azerbaijani aggression [Armenian Unified Infocenter, Facebook, last modified July 16, 2020].

The clashes also revealed the deployment of new weaponry by Azerbaijan highlighting the evolving nature of the conflict. According to official Armenian statements, the Azerbaijani armed forces deployed a variety of UAVs, including both strike and reconnaissance drones [Armenian Unified Infocenter, Facebook, last modified July 115, 2020]. The introduction of new weaponry by Azerbaijan during the clashes emphasized the need for continuous monitoring and adaptation in the region's security dynamics. It stressed the ongoing arms race between the two countries and the importance of maintaining a technological edge to secure military advantages. However, the successful interception of Azerbaijani UAVs [Zinuzh Media, "The shooting down of the Azerbaijani "Elbit Hermes 900 UAV", video, 0:54, July 14, 2020] instilled a sense of confidence among the Armenian military and the wider population, as it showcased their ability to withstand potential aerial threats in future conflicts too. Subsequently, during the course of the 44-day period, Armenia faced significant challenges in maintaining control as it was unable to prevent the Azerbaijani Armed Forces repeated attempts in Artsakh.

Moving on to the reactions from different actors, spanning global, regional, and local spheres, it is important to note that in both the April four-day war and the Tavush conflict, the international

community's response was largely limited to expressing concern and appealing to both sides to cease military operations and exercise restraint.

Starting with the global one, it is crucial to examine the statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry on July 13, which specifically stated that the ally Russia's Foreign Ministry is seriously concerned regarding the sharp escalation of the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. The statement further asserted that any further escalation posed a serious threat to regional security and called on both parties to demonstrate restraint and strictly adhere to the ceasefire regime. The statement concluded by emphasizing Russia's readiness to provide the necessary support to stabilize the situation in the region [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, July 13, 2020].

Based on the statement issued by Russia's Foreign Ministry, it can be observed that it maintains a neutral stance that addresses both parties without emphasizing or underlining any pre-aggressor state.

It should be noted that the Ria Novosti news agency provided extensive coverage of the military operations, particularly on July 12, where it published two news items that presented the official statements[“Armenia and Azerbaijan accused each other of shelling their positions,” Ria Novosti, last modified July 13, 2020] and mutual accusations [“Clashes occurred on the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia,” Ria Novosti, last modified July 13, 2020] of the Defense Ministries of both Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding the resumption of the conflict.

At the same time, US officials have used different rhetorics on this issue.

In the specific context of the ongoing conflict, Morgan Ortagus, the spokesperson of the US State Department [Morgan Ortagus (@statedeptspox), Twitter, July 13, 2020, 5:11 p.m.], called upon the parties involved to immediately cease the use of force and utilize existing direct communication channels to prevent further escalation. Ortagus emphasized the critical importance of strict adherence to the ceasefire agreement, highlighting the US State Department's commitment to promoting peace and de-escalation efforts.

On his Twitter account, Frank Fallon, Co-Chairman of the US Congress Committee on Armenian Affairs [Rep. Frank Pallone (@FrankPallone), Twitter, July 14, 2020, 4:27 a.m.] voiced their support for Armenia while condemning what they perceive as provocative actions by Azerbaijan. This public show of solidarity demonstrates the individuals' stance on the conflict and their alignment with Armenia's interests.

The US Congress Committee on Armenian Affairs released a statement denouncing the violence that has unfolded along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, specifically highlighting incidents in the border villages of the Tavush region. The committee urged the administration of US President Donald Trump to hold Azerbaijan accountable for its actions, indicating their expectation for a response from the US government.

Furthermore, Frank Fallon, Co-Chairman of the US Congress Committee on Armenian Affairs, along with Congresspersons Jackie Speier, Gus Bilirakis, and Adam Schiff, co-authored a letter addressed to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Minister Mark Esper. The letter urged the US to put pressure on Azerbaijan, advocating for the acceptance of international observers and the withdrawal of snipers, heavy weapons, and new types of assault weapons from the Armenian-Azerbaijani and Artsakh-

Azerbaijani border. Notably, the letter stated concerns about the recent surge in violence along the Armenian-Azerbaijani international border near the village of Tavush. It posited that the recent outbreak of violence appeared to be part of a deliberate campaign of incitement, pointing to the consistent barrage of combative rhetoric and provocative actions by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as evidence[Frank Pallone, Jr., “Armenian Caucus Co-Chairs Condemn Azeri Violence,” July 15, 2020].

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued his comments on the matter three days after the occurrence, during a press conference[Department of State (@StateDept), Twitter, July 15, 2020, 6:16 p.m..]. Had the United States promptly intervened with proactive measures, characterized by decisive actions, any further escalation would have been prevented altogether.

When considering the responses of regional actors, particularly Iran, it is noteworthy that Seyed Abbas Mousavi, a representative of Iran's Foreign Ministry, called for political dialogue and restraint from both parties amidst the rising tensions on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border [“We call on the parties of the Artsakh conflict to take actions aimed at reducing tension” MFA spokesman,” Alikonline.ir, July 13, 2020]. In Iran's official announcements and reactions, no bias towards either party involved in the conflict was displayed.

Furthermore, on July 14, Mahmoud Vaezi, the head of Iran's president's office and chief of staff, reiterated the significance of a political settlement, emphasizing the need to consider the interests and territorial integrity of both parties. This statement further reflects Iran's stance on the conflict, advocating for a resolution that takes into account the concerns and rights of all parties involved[Mahmoud Vaezi (@Dr_Vaezi) Twitter, July 14, 2020, 9:16 p.m.].

In general, Iran's stance regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Tavush clashes displayed both shared similarities and differences.

Similarities:

- Support for Peaceful Resolution: In both cases, Iran expressed its support for a peaceful resolution to the conflicts. Iran consistently advocated for diplomatic negotiations and political dialogue to address the disputes rather than resorting to violence.
- Emphasis on Restraint and Dialogue: Iran called for restraint from both parties involved in both the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Tavush clashes. Iranian officials stressed the importance of avoiding further escalation of tensions and urged all parties to engage in dialogue to find a peaceful solution.

Differences:

- Direct Involvement: In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran has a direct border with the region and a substantial ethnic Armenian population, which influences its stance. Iran has been cautious in navigating its relationship with both Armenia and Azerbaijan due to these factors, aiming to maintain stability along its borders and protect the rights of its citizens.
- Neutrality and Non-Bias: While Iran maintained a neutral position in both conflicts, it is worth noting that its proximity to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its historical ties with the

Armenian population might have had a more nuanced impact on its stance. In the Tavush clashes, Iran's official announcements and reactions did not show any bias towards either Armenia or Azerbaijan, demonstrating a consistent neutral position.

While Iran's general position emphasized peaceful resolution and dialogue in both conflicts, the specific factors and dynamics associated with each conflict influenced the nuances of Iran's position and its concerns. The direct involvement and regional implications of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, combined with Iran's border proximity and historical ties, set it apart from the Tavush clashes, where Iran's primary concerns were related to its border regions.

On July 15, the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs released a statement condemning the armed clashes that erupted on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border on Sunday, resulting in several casualties. The statement calls on both sides to uphold the ceasefire and resume dialogue in order to prevent further escalation. As a co-chair of the Minsk Group, France, along with its Russian and American partners, reiterates its dedication to achieving a lasting negotiated settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict consistent with international law [France Diplomacy. Armenia/Azerbaijan – Border clashes between the two countries, July 15, 2020].

As the clashes in Tavush were taking place on the internationally recognized border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenia was expecting an urgent response and action from the co-chairs of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Minsk Group.

One day after the outbreak of hostilities, on July 13, an announcement was made that the CSTO was convening a meeting in response to the escalation of the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. However, shortly after the announcement, it was removed from the website. Later, the organization's spokesperson announced that the session had been postponed to an unknown date. On July 14, the secretariat of the CSTO issued an official statement expressing concern over the escalation of the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, which erupted after an armed conflict between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan on July 12, including the use of heavy equipment that resulted in casualties and injuries. The statement also noted that the military situation created does not contribute to the settlement of the situation on the border between the two neighboring states, one of which is the Republic of Armenia, a member state of the CSTO [CSTO. Commentary by the CSTO Secretariat on the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border launched July 12, 2020, posted July 14, 2020].

Therefore, the statement issued by the partner organization was aimed at both sides equally. However, it is important to note that the Treaty, signed in 1992, contains a key provision stating that in the event of aggression against any member state, the other member states are obligated to provide necessary assistance, including military support, as well as support through available means, upon the request of the affected member state [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. Collective Security Treaty Organization].

The OSCE Minsk Group, a key international mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, issued a statement acknowledging a serious violation of the ceasefire regime on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border on July 12-13, resulting in casualties. The statement emphasized that both sides employed artillery of different calibers during the clashes. It condemned the violations and called on the parties to take all necessary measures to prevent further escalation, highlighting the importance of utilizing existing direct

Գաղտնություն/ History

Analyzing the International Response to the 2020 July Border Clashes Between Armenia and Azerbaijan Հայաստանի և Ադրբեյջանի միջև 2020 թվականի հուլիսյան սահմանային բախումների վերաբերյալ Միջազգային արձագանքի վերլուծություն

communication channels between them [OSCE. Press Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, July 13, 2020].

On July 24, the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs released another statement, primarily directed towards Azerbaijan. In response to a statement made by Vagif Dargyahli, a representative of Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense, in which he mentioned the capability of Azerbaijan's latest missiles to target the Metsamor nuclear power plant in Armenia ["Azerbaijan threatens Armenia with missile attack on nuclear power plant," Ria Novosti, last modified July 17, 2020] the Co-Chairs urged both sides to refrain from making threats towards civilian populations or infrastructure.

The situation described in the statement from the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs and the comments made by Vagif Dargyahli regarding the Metsamor nuclear power plant can be compared to the Russian-Ukrainian war situation in terms of nuclear threats in several ways:

Nature of the Threat: in both situations, there is a mention of nuclear threats. Vagif Dargyahli's statement suggests that Azerbaijan possesses missiles capable of hitting the Metsamor nuclear power plant in Armenia, potentially causing a significant disaster. In the Russian-Ukrainian war situation, there have been concerns and discussions about the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons, although no official statements have been made confirming their deployment.

International Concerns: nuclear threats, whether explicit or implied, raise significant international concerns due to the potential for catastrophic consequences. In both situations, the statements and comments about nuclear capabilities have the potential to escalate tensions and destabilize the region. These actions undermine efforts to promote peaceful resolutions and may lead to further militarization and increased risk of conflict.

Diplomatic Response: the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs' statement can be seen as a diplomatic effort to de-escalate the situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. By urging both sides to avoid threats towards civilian populations or infrastructure, they emphasize the importance of peaceful dialogue and respect for international norms. Similarly, in the Russian-Ukrainian war situation, various diplomatic channels, including international organizations and mediators, have been involved in seeking a peaceful resolution and discouraging the use of nuclear weapons.

The Co-Chairs also noted that recent public statements criticizing the joint efforts of the co-chairing countries, and/or seeking unilaterally to establish new "conditions" or changes to the settlement process format are not conducive to resuming a constructive dialogue. . "The Co-Chairs reiterate that political will to achieve a lasting peaceful settlement is best demonstrated by refraining from maximalist positions, adhering strictly to the ceasefire, and abstaining from provocative statements and actions," [OSCE. Press Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group and Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, July 24, 2020] the statement said.

During the same period, Turkey distinguished itself from neighboring countries in the region through its explicit support for Azerbaijan, a position that contrasts with the more neutral stance adopted by other regional actors. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey issued a statement condemning Armenia for the attack and expressed condolences to the "friendly and brotherly people of Azerbaijan and

the Government for the martyrs of Azerbaijani who lost their lives" [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkiye. No: 149, 12 July 2020, Press Release Regarding the Armenian Attack on Azerbaijan, July 12, 2020]. This statement highlights Turkey's pro-Azerbaijani stance and its readiness to openly back its strategic ally in the ongoing conflict.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced on his Twitter page [Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu (@MevlutCavusoglu), Twitter, July 13, 2020, 9:13 p.m.] that Turkey is ready to give their lives for Azerbaijan. Tweets with the hashtag "We are with you, Azerbaijan/#SeninleyizAzerbaycan" have been spreading rapidly on Turkish Twitter since July 13, showing the strong support of Turkey towards Azerbaijan.

In response to the statements made by not only the Turkish President and Defense Minister but also the Foreign Minister, the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs promptly reacted in the subsequent days. The statement issued by the Armenian Foreign Ministry asserted that Turkey's provocative and biased stance significantly undermines the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It proved that Turkey cannot be involved in any international processes related to the conflict and first and foremost within the OSCE framework and with its approaches, Turkey is a security threat for Armenia and the region, and broad regional and international cooperation is needed to counter it [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. Statement by the Foreign Ministry of Armenia on the recent statements by Turkey, July 15, 2020].

Turkey's overt support for Azerbaijan, as demonstrated by official statements and social media activity, shows its strategic alignment and allegiance to its regional partner. In contrast, Armenia's response condemns Turkey's biased stance, presenting it as an obstacle to peace and a security concern for the region.

In the context of local actors' responses, the press service of the office of the President of Georgia, headed by Salome Zurabishvili, issued a statement [President of Georgia. Statement of the President of Georgia, July 13, 2020] regarding the military operations in the Tavush section of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. The President expressed regret over the events that took place on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, while also emphasizing the crucial importance of peace in the region for the development and prosperity of not only Georgia but also Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It is worth noting that Azerbaijan holds a strategic partnership status with Georgia, signifying the significance of their bilateral relations. On the other hand, Armenia is considered a partner of Georgia. While the partnership between Georgia and Armenia may not carry the same strategic designation as that with Azerbaijan, it still signifies a cooperative relationship aimed at promoting regional stability, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges.

These partnership statuses highlight the nuanced nature of Georgia's relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Georgia seeks to maintain balanced and constructive relationships with both countries, taking into account their respective interests and regional dynamics. By nurturing partnerships with both Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgia aims to contribute to regional stability and promote collaboration among its neighboring nations.

Azerbaijan, as a key actor in the 2020 July clashes in the Tavush region, demonstrated a proactive and assertive response to the situation. The Azerbaijani government and officials conveyed their position through various channels, including official statements, diplomatic engagements, and media interactions.

The July 12 clashes came days after Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev raised the possibility of a new war with Armenia and denounced stalled peace talks. Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev in his interview with local television on July 6 sharply criticized the international mediators of his country's negotiations with Armenia, saying that the peace process has become "meaningless." ["Azerbaijani president calls into question negotiations with Armenia," Eurasianet, July 7, 2020]. He also threatened to withdraw from negotiations "if they yield no results." ["Azerbaijan, Armenia Trade Accusations Over Deadly Border Fighting," Rferl, July 12, 2020]. The last time Aliyev so directly criticized the diplomats was in March of 2016 ["Aliyev Again Lambastes 'Pro-Armenian' Mediators," Rferl, March 21, 2016] before the April War.

In his public statements, he accused Armenia of provoking the conflict and portraying it as a deliberate act of aggression. He reiterated Azerbaijan's position on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, asserting that the conflict must be resolved based on the principles of territorial integrity and the United Nations Security Council resolutions. President Aliyev's remarks reinforced Azerbaijan's determination to defend its interests and reclaim the disputed territories.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev fired his long-serving foreign minister, Elmar Mammadyarov, after denouncing his performance, accusing him of "meaningless negotiations" ["Azeri minister sacked for 'meaningless' efforts over conflict with Armenia," Reuters, last modified 3 years ago] with Armenia. He was replaced by the education minister, Jeyhun Bayramov "Azerbaijani President Replaces Longtime Foreign Minister Amid Conflict Escalation With Armenia," Rferl, July 16, 2020].

Azerbaijani media outlets played an active role in shaping public opinion by providing extensive coverage of the clashes and highlighting the alleged aggression from the Armenian side. They reported on military operations, showcased the Azerbaijani military's capabilities, and interviewed officials who condemned Armenia's actions.

Overall, the country presented itself as a victim of aggression, sought international recognition of its position, and emphasized its commitment to protecting its territorial integrity and national interests.

Following the July clashes, Azerbaijani diplomats on various international platforms, during meetings with leaders and officials of other countries, spared no effort to present what they claimed were the "non-constructive approaches" of the Armenian side, accusing Armenia of avoiding negotiations, straining the situation on the front line, resorting to provocations and other similar actions.

Pro-Azerbaijani experts in various countries have consistently spread the idea that Armenia's occupation of the new heights allows it to gain control over strategic communication, oil and gas pipelines, as well as railways, thereby threatening not only Azerbaijan's energy security but also that of Turkey and Europe. According to this view, Azerbaijan has no other option than to resort to war, since otherwise Armenia could always threaten Azerbaijan's economic security by damaging its energy infrastructure at any time.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned reactions and responses from different actors, it can be concluded that

1. The prevention of further escalation in the region could have been significantly enhanced through prompt measures taken by the United States. One effective measure would have been to impose sanctions on Azerbaijan, considering their leaders' statements and interviews that indicated a predisposition towards initiating a war with Armenia. Such targeted sanctions would have served as a deterrent, potentially preventing the outbreak of hostilities and subsequent escalation. In addition to imposing sanctions on Azerbaijan based on President Aliyev's statements and interviews, another crucial step would have been to deploy international observers to the region. By sending impartial observers, the United States could have actively contributed to de-escalation efforts, providing a neutral presence that could help monitor and mediate any potential conflicts. This would have not only signaled a commitment to maintaining peace but also created a transparent environment that discourages aggression and fosters diplomatic negotiations.
2. The member countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) had the capacity to take direct and swift action in response to the situation that unfolded in the Tavush region since they possessed the means to intervene and contribute to conflict resolution. This could have included diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions, mediation between the conflicting parties, or even the deployment of peacekeeping forces if deemed necessary and agreed upon by the CSTO members.
3. The neutral position adopted by the international community can be influenced by Azerbaijan's considerable reserves of energy and economic resources. The availability of such resources in Azerbaijan can thus impact the degree of neutrality exhibited by international actors, as they seek to maintain a delicate balance between political considerations and economic imperatives.
4. The clashes in July 2020 were not an isolated incident but rather part of a more extensive and multifaceted campaign initiated and conducted by Azerbaijan against Armenia. This hybrid warfare approach involved a combination of conventional military tactics and non-traditional methods, leveraging technological advancements and asymmetrical strategies. Moreover, the integration of cyber warfare into the conflict added another dimension: cyber operations targeting communication networks, critical infrastructure, and information systems. These cyberattacks aimed to disrupt the adversary's capabilities, gain intelligence, and propagate disinformation.

The hybrid nature of the conflict highlights the evolving nature of warfare, where traditional military operations are complemented by non-kinetic means to achieve strategic objectives. These were the beginning of a larger hybrid war initiated and carried out by Azerbaijan against Armenia and Artsakh. Subsequently, this escalated into a more extensive armed conflict, which continues to unfold, giving rise to an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in the region and the displacement of more than three quarters of Nagorno Karabakh's population [International Crisis Group, Report №264. *Post-war Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh, Humanitarian Crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh*, Jun. 9, 2021, p.18].

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