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AZERBAIJAN-TÜRKİYE MILITARY RELATIONS IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEGOTIATIONS WITH ARMENIA

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One of the most important dimensions of Türkiye–Azerbaijan relations is the two countries’ military relationship. Over the course of 30 years, many agreements and protocols have been signed between the two countries, which have contributed to the development of their military relations. The founding principle of this military relationship was to meet the officer training needs of the Azerbaijani army. In subsequent years, this cooperation expanded to include joint military exercises and cooperation in the defense sector. The pinnacle of military cooperation between the two countries was the Shusha Declaration on allied relations signed on June 15, 2021.

This cooperation supported the existence of a strong Azerbaijani army that had a decisive impact not only on the outcome of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (hereafter: “Second Karabakh War”), but also on the diplomatic negotiations that continued thereafter. Even after the Second Karabakh War, effective measures were taken against Armenia’s ongoing provocations. Therefore, achievements in the military field and the shift in the balance of power also affected the outcome of diplomatic negotiations.

Basic agreements regarding Azerbaijan–Türkiye military relations

Four basic agreements were signed between Azerbaijan and Turkey that form the basis of their military cooperation and determine the direction of the relationship: (1) the 1992 Military Training Cooperation Agreement; (2) the agreement on military education, technical, and scientific cooperation signed between the parties on June 10, 1996; (3) the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance on August 16, 2010; and (4) the Shusha Declaration on allied relations on June 15, 2021.

The Military Training Cooperation Agreement, which was signed on August 11, 1992, in Ankara,¹ envisaged meeting the officer training needs of the Azerbaijani army. It remains in force today. Through the agreement, Azerbaijani officers received training in military schools in Türkiye, and

Turkish commanders supported the establishment of military schools in Azerbaijan and provided consultancy to the army. According to Hulusi Akar, the former Chief of the General Staff of the Republic of Türkiye, more than 7,000 Azerbaijani Army personnel have received training in Turkish military schools. This agreement was subsequently supplemented by additional agreements and protocols signed between other army units and law enforcement agencies.² Between 1997 and 2013, more than 400 gendarmes were sent to Türkiye for training courses.³

It has been observed that Türkiye's support⁴ for the transition of the Azerbaijani army to NATO standards increased after the agreement on military education, technical, and scientific cooperation was signed between the parties on June 10, 1996. Following this agreement, and with the support and participation of the Turkish Armed Forces, the Azerbaijan Military Academy, the Azerbaijan Military Air Force School and the Azerbaijan Military Maritime School were restructured and brought up to NATO standards. As part of this process, the Military Academy of the Azerbaijan Armed Forces was established with the support of the Turkish Armed Forces.⁵ Officers from Türkiye provided training in these schools and President Haydar Aliyev, who made a speech at the first graduation ceremony in 2001, recommended to the graduates of the Military Academy that they take the Turkish Armed Forces as an example.⁶ A further agreement was signed between the two countries' defense ministries in Baku on March 14, 2008, to ensure that the Azerbaijan Air Force Academy has a structure similar to that of the Turkish Air Force Academy and to determine the duties, authority, and responsibilities of the personnel assigned from the Turkish Air Force in this context. For this purpose, two Turkish officers are assigned to the school: one as the advisor to the school commander, and the other as the head of faculty and student battalion commander.⁷

The Agreement on Strategic Cooperation and Mutual Assistance was signed by Azerbaijan and Türkiye on August 16, 2010. This agreement envisaged cooperation between the parties on four issues, two of which were in the military field. The first topic involved alignment on military-political and security issues; the second was regarding military and military-technological cooperation.

The parties have agreed that they will provide mutual assistance to each other under Article 51 of the UN Charter in the case of being subject to armed intervention or attack by a third state or states. Under Article 8 of the agreement, it was decided to make all necessary national arrangements for the development of military infrastructure, the preparation of the armed forces, and their supply with the necessary weapons and military technology for the purpose of carrying out joint military operations. Article 9 concerns defense industry products and technological guarantees to facilitate expanded cooperation in the field of defense; the production and creation of defensive products; carrying out joint military exercises and defensive activities; preparation of personnel for the armed forces; and military medicine and medical personnel. It was decided to determine other areas of cooperation through further discussions.

In the period that followed, cooperation between the two countries, especially in the military field, developed rapidly. First, the number of military exercises increased. Second, cooperation in the field of the defense industry has developed following Türkiye's successful development of a globally competitive defense industry.

Karabakh Victory and Shusha

As a result of the Armenian army's violation of the ceasefire at the front and attacking civilian settlements on September 27, 2020, the Azerbaijani army counterattacked and liberated its lands from occupation in just 44 days. The military cooperation it had established with Türkiye over the preceding 30 years had a significant impact on the success of the Azerbaijani army, which carried out the most successful military campaign of the modern era. Notably, the Turkish army did not

directly participate in this conflict but rather prepared the Azerbaijani army for any type of defensive war.

First, the Azerbaijani army made active use of Turkish-made Bayraktar TB-2 drones, thereby minimizing the loss of troops and enabling it to easily cross the Armenian-held front lines. Second, as in the five-day war of 2016, officers trained in Türkiye demonstrated notable success in this conflict. Third, the Turkish army did not recall the F-16s it had brought to Azerbaijan for an exercise in August, sending a serious message to other countries in the region that would support Armenian occupation. Thus, on the one hand, Azerbaijan–Türkiye military cooperation contributed to the development of the Azerbaijani army, which liberated the occupied Azerbaijani lands; on the other hand, the stance of Türkiye deterred other regional states from intervening in the war itself. President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly stated that Türkiye sent a message to the whole world: do not interfere.⁸

The Second Karabakh War resulted in a Tripartite Declaration⁹ signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia with the mediation of Russia on November 10, 2020. This declaration, which imposes important responsibilities on Armenia, has been evaluated as an act of capitulation by Yerevan. This declaration also brought into existence the Turkish–Russian monitoring center¹⁰ in Aghdam, and Russia had to accept an agreement that paved the way for the Turkish army to enter the South Caucasus.

After the war ended, a new normalization process was started between the parties in the region. The priority for this normalization was the fulfillment of the conditions of the November 10 Tripartite Declaration of the parties. Although some conditions of this article have been finalized, some articles remain unfulfilled by Armenia. According to Article 4 of the Tripartite Declaration,¹¹ Armenian armed forces were obliged to leave the region in parallel with Russian peacekeeping troops entering Karabakh. But Armenian gunmen did not comply, and these gunmen continued to threaten peace in the region.¹² At the same time, the Armenian side used these illegal forces as a tool to support its demands in the ongoing diplomatic negotiations.

After the Second Karabakh War was over, Azerbaijan presented the Armenian side with a five-item proposal¹³ as the foundation for signing a peace agreement. The proposed peace agreement would be based on mutual recognition of territorial integrity. The Armenian side accepted the need for a peace agreement but delayed its signing by putting forward various preconditions.¹⁴ According to the Armenian side, the existing geopolitical reality in the region is against them, and changing this requires time.

Beyond these issues, an irredentist group emerged in Armenia and threatened to invade Azerbaijani lands again.¹⁵ They did not accept the post-war situation, they saw Nikol Pashinyan as a problem.¹⁶ And they advocated for a change of power in Armenia and for retaking the lands they had lost by starting the war again.

This group began to receive support from outside Armenia. Some regional and non-regional states wanted to change the new geopolitical reality that had emerged after the Karabakh Victory. To this purpose, they did not hesitate in giving military support to Armenia. While France was discussing giving military aid to Armenia,¹⁷ arms were sent from India.¹⁸ Arming Armenia negatively affected the ongoing peace negotiations between the parties. As a result of the support given from the outside, ceasefire violations began to increase on the Armenia–Azerbaijan border. In short, the possibility of further conflict after the Second Karabakh War had still not been eliminated.

It was in such an environment that the Shusha Declaration on an alliance between Azerbaijan and Türkiye was signed on June 15, 2021.¹⁹ The Shusha Declaration, unlike previous agreements,

brought the relations between the two countries to the level of an alliance. This declaration was approved by the parliaments of both countries and was turned into an international bilateral agreement. After the Karabakh Victory, the Azerbaijani army was restructured according to Türkiye's military model.²⁰ Land forces, commando units, and a National Defense University (NDU) were established in the Azerbaijani Armed Forces. The aim of the NDU is to develop the command level in the military training domain in order to implement measures to help adapt the Azerbaijani army to the standards of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK). A command-and-control center was also established to lead the newly formed land forces, ensure their coordination with other army units, evaluate information correctly, and relay it up the command chain.

After the Second Karabakh War, the number of Azerbaijani Army special units was increased. Later, mountain commando units were formed and received their first training in Türkiye²¹ before they were deployed in Azerbaijan. The first of these commando units was formed in the strategically important town of Hadrut and the second commando brigade was established in Kelbajar after its liberation from Armenian occupation. Both were inaugurated by President Aliyev.²²

Conclusion

The armed aggression of Armenia against Azerbaijan since 1991 and consideration of the balance of military power in the South Caucasus led to the development of military relations between Azerbaijan and Türkiye in the post-Cold War period. Between 1992 and 2020, that is, up to the Second Karabakh War, military cooperation between the two countries developed in three directions: (1) military training, in particular, the training of Azerbaijani army officers; (2) military exercises, including increasing the war preparedness of the Azerbaijani army and preparing for the joint action of the two armies in a possible conflict; and (3) cooperation in the field of weapons technology. Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye has developed continuously over the last 30 years and has produced the following results: first, Azerbaijan has an army with a high combat capability; and second, the Azerbaijani army liberated Karabakh from occupation. Moreover, third, following the Second Karabakh War, the balance of military power in the region changed in favor of Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

After the Second Karabakh War, the Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations, signed between the two countries on June 15, 2021, raised the relationship from a strategic partnership to the level of an alliance. Although this declaration did not cover only the military dimension of the relationship, that aspect was by far the most significant. It was an important statement to protect the new geopolitical reality created in the region after the Karabakh Victory. Today, both militaries have accelerated their efforts to act as a single army, both operationally and in the military-technical realm.

In the post-war situation, Azerbaijan is undergoing a transition to the Turkish Army model.²³ It plans to reach the military-technological level of Türkiye and to continue the training of command and special forces. The common goal of the two armies is to achieve the ability to fight towards common goals in the future.

These developments are also closely related to the Azerbaijan-Armenia normalization process. When we consider that a peace agreement has not been signed between the parties after the war and that revisionist forces in Armenia remain, military power continues to be important for stability in the region.

The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors' alone.

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Notes

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