

Baku's failure on the “Indian track”

ARVAK Center comment, 25.12.2024¹

On December 16, 2024, it became known that Baku was attempting to secure arms supply contracts with India through the mediation of a “*third country*”. This was first reported by the Indian periodical *The Print*. However, according to the newspaper, New Delhi ignored this initiative.

Following the dissemination of this newscast, pro-government Azerbaijani media rushed to refute it, claiming that Baku had long determined a circle of countries from which it purchases weapons in sufficient quantities. These countries supposedly include Turkey, Israel, Pakistan, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Serbia, which successfully cover all of Baku's requests for high-quality and high-tech weapons. Overall, *The Print's* publication was labeled by the Azerbaijani media as a “*disinformation, lacking any evidence*”.

However, a few days later, another well-known Indian publication, *Indian Defense Research Wing*, which specializes in military issues, citing its sources in the country's government and defense industry, not only confirmed this information but also named the type of the Indian weapon that Baku is primarily interested in. It concerns the *ATAG-S* artillery systems, which has already been delivered to Armenia.

In a comment given to the *Indian Defense Research Wing*, military analyst Ranesh Rajan reported that New Delhi did not respond favorably to Baku primarily because of Azerbaijan's alliance with Pakistan. According to the Indian expert, “*Azerbaijan must first distance itself from Pakistan and align itself with India's position on Kashmir before New Delhi will consider selling Indian weapons to Baku*”. The publication also noted that Baku's interest in Indian weapons could open a new chapter in India–Azerbaijan relations, but this path is full of diplomatic complexities. Defense trade in sensitive regions is closely intertwined with geopolitics, and if Azerbaijan “*realigns*” its foreign policy in line with India's expectations, it could signify a noticeable shift in the military balance in the South Caucasus, potentially affecting the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict as well.

Judging by the reaction of the pro-government Azerbaijani media, the development of the issue of Baku's failure on the “Indian track” has been a significant inconvenience for the Azerbaijani government. The Azerbaijani media once again published articles stating that their state does not actually need Indian weapons. Allegedly, firstly, it is not as high-quality as widely believed. Secondly, Azerbaijan has already ordered sufficient quantities of 155-mm towed artillery systems similar to India's *ATAG-S* from Serbia and Slovakia. These include the Slovak *DITAL-45* self-propelled artillery system (70 units) and the Serbian *NORA B-52 NG* (48 units). Additionally, Azerbaijani sources expressed the opinion that even if Baku was interested in any Indian weapons, the conditions set by India regarding Pakistan were unacceptable to Azerbaijan. For many years, Pakistan and Azerbaijan have built unprecedented, allied relations that Baku will not compromise under any circumstances. Therefore, India's demands for “*a realignment of Indo-Pakistani policy*” are inherently unfeasible for Azerbaijan.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 23.12.2024.

The lack of response from Azerbaijani officials to the publications in Indian media indirectly confirms that Baku's approach to New Delhi did indeed take place but was ignored. If it had been disinformation, Baku would have immediately refuted it through the publications of the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of Defense Industry. However, as of 22.12.2024, they have remained silent, which corroborates the reliability of the information from Indian sources. Meanwhile, Baku is striving to downplay its failure in the eyes of the Azerbaijani society, accustomed to the victories of Aliyev's initiatives. Additionally, the Azerbaijani authorities may be trying to avoid a harsh reaction from Islamabad, for which military-technical cooperation between an ally and its main enemy cannot be understood with sympathy. Islamabad tolerates the current level of political-economic cooperation between Azerbaijan and India, but it is unlikely to view positively a process initiated by Azerbaijan that could increase the rating and income of India's defense industry.

This raises a logical question: if partnership with Islamabad is so important for Baku, why did it seek contacts to conduct an arms deal with New Delhi, knowing that it would inevitably provoke a negative reaction from its Pakistani friends? After all, India's consent would test the strength of Azerbaijani-Pakistani relations.

There are two versions:

1. Despite the propaganda thesis about the abundance of its arsenals, Azerbaijan urgently needs certain types of weapons, the acquisition of which has become problematic. In the context of the escalation between the West on one side, and Russia and Iran on the other, the arms market is experiencing certain difficulties. The active large-scale hostilities in Ukraine are already consuming colossal quantities of weapons and ammunition. Meanwhile, the countries that traditionally supplied weapons to Baku are currently focused on replenishing their own arsenals. According to some reports, Azerbaijan has not purchased any military systems from Russia for 3 years because the types of weapons requested by Baku are being intensively used by Moscow in its *Special Military Operation* [in Ukraine – *translator*], while the Russian export nomenclature offered, in turn, does not suit the South Caucasus republic. On the other hand, Baku's European partners (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria) are overwhelmed with NATO defense contracts intended for Ukraine and their own defense capabilities amid alarming reports of a high likelihood of direct NATO confrontation with Russia. Azerbaijan has placed orders in Europe, but the possibility of their fulfillment within acceptable time limits is unclear. This may include the aforementioned batch of Serbian *NORA* self-propelled artillery systems, the deal for which was concluded at the beginning of 2024, but which Baku has yet to receive them despite statements to the contrary.

Finally, Baku's main arms partners – Ankara and Tel Aviv – are on the brink of a major war in the Middle East, making it extremely difficult to ensure that Azerbaijan receives the entire required range of supplies. Turkey is currently focused on the Syrian issue and, according to international sources, is intensively arming its allied HTS and SNA, especially after the arsenals left behind by Assad's army were destroyed by the Israeli Air Force strikes. On the other hand, Israel, which has invested significant efforts in military campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon, in anticipation of the full-scale war predicted by analysts in the region, is also interested in fully utilizing its defense industry capacities to meet its own needs.

According to some Armenian experts, the recent military transport flights along the Baku–Ovda route do not necessarily indicate new Israeli supplies to Azerbaijan. It is possible that Tel Aviv is actually bringing back its arsenals from Azerbaijan, which it has been building up intensively over many years.

So, Baku may have attempted to enter the Indian arms market due to certain difficulties in supplies from its traditional partners.

2. It is also possible that Baku needed access to the Indian arms market in order to create obstacles for the close Armenian-Indian defense cooperation. Considering Azerbaijan's methods of involving partner countries and international organizations in its multi-level anti-Armenian campaign, it can be assumed that something similar was planned concerning India. Possibly, Baku aimed to establish strong personal contacts with the most influential officials of India's defense industry and its private partners in order to later use various tried-and-tested tools, including manipulation and “interception” of Armenian contracts, to disrupt the harmoniously developing Armenian-Indian cooperation. This cooperation increasingly irritates Baku every month, as Yerevan has already gained the status of New Delhi's exclusive partner with access to a wide range of modern Indian high-tech combat systems at affordable prices and payment schedules.

However, Baku obviously did not consider that the dependency hierarchy of India's defense sector on the political power in the country is one of the most robust in the world. It is practically impossible to circumvent the protective barriers that the country's political leadership has erected in front of the defense industry to limit its excessive independence. Political expediency and technological secrecy require New Delhi to deny access to its defense sector to countries allied with hostile Pakistan, such as Azerbaijan. Conversely, it promotes close cooperation with international entities, such as Armenia, whose policies align with India's strategic interests.

It should also be noted that India's main partner in the defense industry is currently France, which has multi-billion-dollar contracts with New Delhi for the joint development and production of the latest artillery, missile, and electronic systems, as well as helicopter aviation and submarines. Paris's influence on New Delhi's defense industrial policy is significant, and this has clearly become another reason why the Indian side has refused to let Baku into its arms market. Like New Delhi, Paris also makes certain efforts to restore the disrupted balance of power in the South Caucasus after 2020 and to prevent the growing influence of the Turkey–Azerbaijan alliance in the region.

In this light, it becomes clear why Baku approached India's defense industry through a “*third country*”, which apparently also has close ties with New Delhi. Azerbaijan likely hoped that this would make its inherently challenging task easier. It can be assumed that the “*third country*” playing the role of mediator could have been either Russia or Israel. Both of these states are practically allied with Azerbaijan and, in turn, cooperate closely with India in the joint development and production of weapons.

However, as it turned out, the Indian side's principled stance (and possibly Paris's influence) outweighed Baku's lobbying potential in the Indian arms market. Azerbaijan is dismayed by this reality, no matter how much it tries to hide it.