

On the security of Syunik and the expected anti-Iranian campaign

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The dynamics of the events around Iran once again updates the security problems of the Syunik region and the entire Armenia. In fact, the threat to the “southern gate” of the Republic of Armenia has been permanent over the past 5 years; however, according to the majority of experts, Azerbaijan’s plans to capture the so-called “*Zangezur Corridor*” can become a reality only in the event of a large-scale attack by the US-Israeli coalition on the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is precisely this circumstance that will provide the necessary consensus for Baku and the equally interested Ankara of the main extra-regional actors on the issue of ensuring direct land communication between Azerbaijan and its exclave – the Nakhijevan (now-Nakhichevan) Autonomous Republic (NAR) and, accordingly, with Turkey.

Judging by the recent developments, the threat of a full-scale anti-Iranian operation is currently very high. This is evidenced by the ultimatum statements from Washington and Tel Aviv, as well as by the incoming information about the intensive concentration of the U.S. Navy and Air Force strike groups in the region. An objective analysis allows us to conclude that Azerbaijan is included in the strategic plans for the anti-Iranian campaign. This is also directly stated in Iran, pointing out that over the past 10-15 years Israel has consistently built its intelligence infrastructure in this South Caucasian republic and contributed to the militarization of AzR, which poses a direct threat to the security of Tehran, taking into account the latter’s so-called “*Iranian Azerbaijanis*” separatism problem, which is being promoted from outside.

The degree of Azerbaijan’s involvement in the anti-Iranian campaign may vary, depending on the goals and scale of the coalition’s actions. The campaign itself may include: 1) destruction of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure and stopping the actions at this stage; 2) disabling Iran’s most significant military facilities, its industrial and raw materials base, as well as the liquidation of the IRI’s military-political leadership; 3) in addition to the above points – organization of anti-government protests in Iran on the basis of ethnic separatism, with the involvement of proxy forces and limited ground actions by the SOF (Special Operation Forces) of the coalition itself. The range of possible actions by the American-Israeli tandem can be very broad, but in any scenario, the territory of Azerbaijan is a key asset of the coalition. This means that even limited air strikes against Iran could at least involve electronic reconnaissance assets and other Israeli intelligence and military infrastructure stationed in Azerbaijan.

It is unlikely that in the current situation Baku will miss the chance to achieve consensus among members of the anti-Iranian coalition on the “*Zangezur Corridor*” issue. This may be the price Azerbaijan asks for its direct or indirect participation in the anti-Iranian campaign, which is dangerous for it. Baku will most likely argue for the need to control the Armenian region or part of it by referring to the isolation that threatens the NAR and the danger of being attacked by neighboring Iran. This threat is quite realistic, and Tehran itself has repeatedly hinted at the possibility of including Azerbaijan in the range of its response actions in the event of an attack by the American-Israeli coalition. At the same time, the NAR

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could become a potential target for Iran, regardless of the degree of Iranian retaliatory actions. Baku will strive to legitimize the “Zangezur occupation” on international platforms as a forced measure meant to protect the security and territorial integrity of the country from the encroachments by the “*radical Islamic regime*”.

In turn, Azerbaijan’s hypothetical strike on Syunik and Iran’s opposition to this step will only contribute to the plans of the American-Israeli coalition to worsen Tehran’s situation, since it will create the preconditions for Turkey’s direct intervention in the conflict. The provisions of the “*Shushi Declaration on Mutual Assistance*” dated by June 15, 2021 provide Ankara with the necessary political and legal basis for involvement in a military campaign in order to receive dividends both in the Iranian case and in relations with the U.S. and in terms of the final strengthening of its positions in Azerbaijan. As a result, we can talk about the implementation of a long nurtured Turkish program to create a land “*Turanian Corridor*”, which will provide direct access to the economic resources of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia as well as ensure political dominance in these regions.

It should be borne in mind that in the event of such a scenario, Armenia may face the threat of much more tangible territorial losses than the actual section of the Armenian-Iranian border. In the case of an appropriate geopolitical situation, the Azerbaijani-Turkish plans may go as far as taking control of the entire Syunik Region, and possibly Vayots Dzor. Baku may consider it extremely profitable to break the “*Armenian wedge*” in the areas maximally remote from Meghri, thus presenting objective difficulties for Iran’s possible military countermeasures. The remoteness, the difficult mountainous terrain and the lack of the necessary reliable logistics will take time and will minimize the effect of Iranian assistance to the Republic of Armenia, if Tehran nevertheless decides to provide it, as Iranian officials have repeatedly insisted. In addition, the choice of breakthrough sites north of Syunik will allow Azerbaijan, if successful, to split the Armenian army in two, actually taking tens of thousands of Syunik residents hostage and completely demoralizing Yerevan.

Hypothetically, such a plan is quite possible and most beneficial from the point of view of Baku and Ankara. From the standpoint of the American-Israeli coalition, its implementation can be considered a major geopolitical adventure, but in the case of its “*favorable outcome*” the result may be the formation of an “*anti-Iranian northern front*” consisting of Azerbaijan and Turkey, which in any case will block the Islamic Republic’s strategic access to Europe and Russia.

The threat of involvement of the South Caucasus in an Iranian war is extremely high. Tehran understands that this is precisely the direction in which the coalition may seek to push Iran not only to purely defensive deterrence measures, but also to the proactive full-scale use of ground forces and assets, which is fraught with unpredictable consequences for the situation in the Northern provinces of Iran. That is why in recent days, representatives of the highest political authorities of the IRI have made frequent visits to Armenia and Azerbaijan. Obviously, in Yerevan they are trying to reconcile positions and consult their Armenian colleagues, while in the case of Baku they are delegated to convey the “final warning” about the dire consequences of Azerbaijan’s fatal choice in favor of the interests of the anti-Iranian coalition.