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AZERBAIJAN'S MILITARY RECONSTRUCTION: TRIUMPHS, RESILIENCE AND STRATEGIC VISION

Abstract

Azerbaijan's recent military victory in the 44-day Patriotic War marks a significant chapter in its defense history, underpinned by a deep-rooted national resilience dating back to 1993. This paper analyzes Azerbaijan's military transformation through its strategic developments, institutional reforms, and the pivotal 44-day conflict, highlighting the interplay between historical legacy, strategic foresight, and technological advancements in shaping its military prowess. It examines the strategic implications of the war, the role of Azerbaijan's foreign policy, and the influence of leaders Heydar and İlham Aliyev on military strategy and capabilities. The evolution of Azerbaijan's military underscores its adaptability and strategic vision, reinforcing its position as a key regional security actor in a complex geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, military evolution, strategic vision, Patriotic War, defense strategy, geopolitical strategy, military reform*

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Azərbaycanın hərbi yenidənqurulması: zəfərlər, dözümlülük və strateji baxış

Xülasə

Azərbaycanın 44 günlük Vətən Müharibəsindəki son hərbi qələbəsi 1993-cü ildən bəri köklü milli müqavimətlə dəstəklənən müdafiə tarixində mühüm səhifədir. Bu məqalədə strateji inkişaf, institusional islahatlar və əsaslı islahatlar vasitəsilə Azərbaycanın hərbi transformasiyası təhlil edilir. 44 günlük münaqişə; O, tarixi irs, strateji uzaqgörənlik və hərbi şücaəti formalaşdıran texnoloji irəliləyişlər arasındakı qarşılıqlı əlaqəni vurğulayır. Burada müharibənin strateji nəticələri, Azərbaycanın xarici siyasətinin rolu, liderlər Heydər və İlham Əliyevin hərbi strategiya və imkanlara təsiri araşdırılır. Azərbaycan ordusunun inkişafı onun mürəkkəb geosiyasi şəraitdə regional təhlükəsizliyin əsas aktoru kimi mövqeyini möhkəmləndirməklə onun uyğunlaşma qabiliyyətini və strateji baxışını önə çəkir.

Açar sözlər: *Azərbaycan, hərbi təkamül, strateji baxış, Vətən müharibəsi, müdafiə strategiyası, geosiyasi strategiya, hərbi islahatlar*

Introduction

Azerbaijan's triumph in the 44-day Patriotic War stands as a testament to its formidable military history, bolstered by the indomitable spirit of its people and a strategic military construction policy initiated since 1993. Within this brief period, Azerbaijan's diverse armed forces, alongside allied power structures and governmental bodies, functioned seamlessly under unified command, demonstrating remarkable efficacy in confronting the gravest of challenges. This victory, achieved amidst a complex and multi-threat geopolitical landscape, underscores the astuteness of Azerbaijan's long-term foreign policy and national security strategy, meticulously crafted to safeguard its interests on both domestic and international fronts.

The legacy of military construction laid by the visionary leader Heydar Aliyev found continuity and further enhancement under the stewardship of President İlham Aliyev, propelling Azerbaijan's armed forces to the forefront of modernity and excellence. This transformation was fueled by a deliberate and unwavering commitment to augmenting combat capabilities, modernizing equipment, nurturing personnel proficiency, and fortifying the social welfare of military personnel.

The successful realization of Azerbaijan's military objectives was further facilitated by astute economic reforms and the expansion of the nation's economic prowess. Notably, data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) illustrates the significant gap between Azerbaijan's military expenditures, amounting to 24 billion US dollars between 2009 and 2018, and Armenia's, which stood at merely 4 billion US dollars, a sixth of Azerbaijan's investment (1).

In 2013, Azerbaijan's military expenditures surpassed the entire state budget of Armenia, underscoring a significant divergence in budgetary priorities between the two nations. Analysis reveals that Armenia allocated a substantial portion of its public funds towards military endeavors. For instance, in 2018, Armenia directed 21% of its state expenditures towards military purposes, whereas Azerbaijan allocated a comparatively lower percentage, at 11%, for similar endeavors.

This financial disparity is further elucidated by research conducted by the Bonn International Center for Conversion, which identifies Armenia as one of the world's top three militarized nations in 2016 (2), as per the Global Militarization Index. Despite a change in leadership, Armenia retained its position in this index in 2019 (3). However, Azerbaijan's economic superiority enabled it to allocate military expenditures three times higher than Armenia's in 2019 (Zerkalo, 2021).

Furthermore, the socio-economic implications of this arms race on Armenia are palpable. With statistics from the Asian Development Bank indicating that 26% of the Armenian population lives below the poverty line, it becomes evident that the burden of military expenditure exacerbates socio-economic challenges within the country. This underscores the consequential impact of geopolitical tensions and military competition on the welfare of Armenian citizens.

Over the past 27 years since the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 1994, Azerbaijan has diligently pursued diplomatic channels to peacefully resolve the conflict and regain control of its occupied territories. Concurrently, Azerbaijan has employed a multifaceted strategy to exert sustained pressure on Armenia, including robust military preparedness and strategic exclusion from regional initiatives. This comprehensive approach has compelled Armenia into a position of perpetual military competition, thereby draining its economic and demographic reservoirs.

Termed by some analysts as a "war of attrition," Azerbaijan's strategy has been characterized by a deliberate and methodical effort to exhaust Armenia's resources and diminish its strategic leverage. This intricate policy has presented a formidable challenge to Armenia, prompting concerted efforts by pro-Armenian factions within various global political arenas to counteract Azerbaijan's initiatives. Despite these endeavors, Azerbaijan has effectively navigated international pressures and internal provocations, maintaining a steadfast course towards achieving its strategic objectives.

Through implemented reforms, the composition of the Azerbaijani army has undergone a significant transformation, with approximately 80% of personnel now serving under contract-based arrangements. This pivotal shift marks a decisive step towards establishing the Azerbaijan Armed Forces as a professionalized entity. The adoption of this model has facilitated the optimization of combat training by relieving personnel from ancillary responsibilities, such as domestic tasks. Additionally, the integration of around 21,000 civilian workers in auxiliary support roles has further enhanced operational efficiency.

Essentially, these reforms have enabled the Azerbaijani Armed Forces to streamline their focus on enhancing combat readiness, thereby aligning with their primary mandate. This strategic realignment has created an environment conducive to maximizing the effectiveness and preparedness of the military force, ensuring its capability to fulfill its primary objectives.

During the 1991-1994 military operations, Azerbaijan's armed forces faced significant challenges with outdated and insufficient equipment, resulting in substantial losses. Post-ceasefire

in 1994, Azerbaijan initiated efforts to refurbish its military capabilities, partially addressing equipment gaps by 2000. Subsequent investment of oil revenues accelerated this modernization, acquiring modern combat aircraft, helicopters, artillery, armored vehicles, communication systems, and drones from various international sources (5). These endeavors aimed to bolster Azerbaijan's defense and strategic position in the region.

In recent years, meeting the procurement requirements of Azerbaijan's armed forces has presented considerable challenges. Notably, major arms manufacturers and exporters, predominantly Western nations, have maintained a restrictive stance on arms sales to Azerbaijan, influenced in part by pressures from the Armenian lobby (Author, 2012). Despite claims of impartiality, Western countries persist in withholding arms sales to Azerbaijan, citing a policy of non-engagement with conflict zones. However, evidence reveals a discernible discrepancy in this approach, as military hardware from France, England, and Germany finds its way into the arsenal of the Armenian military. For instance, the presence of French-manufactured "Milan" tanks in the Armenian inventory, along with German-made optical devices and anti-missile systems, underscores this dual standard. Notably, Russia, though initially subject to an arms embargo on Azerbaijan from the early years of its post-Soviet restoration until 2003, has similarly provided military equipment to Armenia, including significant transfers such as "Scud" ballistic missiles in 1996, valued at approximately 1 billion dollars at the time.

One of the challenges faced by Azerbaijan's foreign policy in recent times has been the removal of embargoes and barriers directed towards our country, alongside the fulfillment of security needs through military-technical cooperation and the acquisition of advanced weaponry from various nations. Opting for an independent or separate security approach, unaffiliated with any bloc, Azerbaijan's armed forces have strategically developed amidst a global landscape where cooperation and intersecting interests with a diverse array of stakeholders prevail. Leveraging world-leading practices, Azerbaijan has capitalized on partnerships with nations such as Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Turkey, and Pakistan, as well as interaction with advanced countries like Israel and South Africa. This interaction has enabled Azerbaijan to expand its military capabilities within the framework of collaborative conditions and mutually beneficial arrangements.

In the development of the Armed Forces of independent Azerbaijan, cooperation with the fraternal Republic of Turkey has played a significant role, grounded in the principle of "one nation, two states." From the early stages of Azerbaijan's independence, this partnership has been instrumental in shaping the current level of proficiency. Over time, a substantial number of Azerbaijani individuals have participated in the Turkish military, contributing to their education and training across various military specialties. This collaboration has enriched the expertise and capabilities of military personnel through diverse training programs and courses.

The multifaceted military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey is evidenced by the signing of numerous contracts and the regular conduct of joint military exercises in recent years. Furthermore, both countries have established a high level of cooperation in the defense industry domain. The emphasis on reforms within Azerbaijan's armed forces, particularly articulated in the post-Patriotic War period by President and Commander-in-Chief Ilham Aliyev, reflects a commitment to incorporating elements of the Turkish Army into Azerbaijan's military structure. Practical measures toward this objective have already been initiated, marking significant progress toward further alignment and enhancement of military capabilities between the two nations.

The depth and strategic significance of military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey are underscored by various indicators, prominently exemplified by the participation of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the Victory Parade at Baku's Azadlig Square on December 10, 2020, and his accompanying address. This event serves as a tangible demonstration of the strong bond between the two nations and their peoples.

In practical terms, the utilization of Turkish military industry products within the arsenal of the Azerbaijan Armed Forces further underscores the depth of cooperation. Notably, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) manufactured by the "Baykar" company have significantly bolstered Azerbaijan's

military capabilities. The effective deployment of these UAVs during the 44-day Patriotic War resulted in substantial losses for the adversary, inflicting significant damage on their personnel and military assets (Author, 2021).

During the preceding period, the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan diligently met their operational requirements through strategic military and technical collaborations with various nations. Between 2003 and 2011, Azerbaijan procured essential military assets from Ukraine, enhancing its capabilities significantly. These acquisitions included 12 "Smerch" rocket launchers, D-30 cannons, MT-12 anti-tank guns, PM-38 heavy mortars, over 40 T-72 tanks, "Gvozdika" and "Akasia" self-propelled howitzers, and advanced radar systems. These acquisitions played a pivotal role in modernizing Azerbaijan's rocket-artillery arsenal. Furthermore, Azerbaijan, recognizing Ukraine as a key partner in the military-technical realm until 2011, acquired 12 L-39 training aircraft and bolstered its air combat capabilities with the procurement of 16 MiG-29 fighter jets. The MiG-29 fleet now stands as the backbone of the Azerbaijani Air Force, underscoring its formidable striking power.

In addition to aircraft, Azerbaijan secured vital ground assets from Ukraine, including BTR-70, BTR-80, and BTR3-E armored personnel carriers, along with BTS5B armored technical support vehicles. These acquisitions not only diversified Azerbaijan's military capabilities but also reinforced its operational readiness on land.

During this period, Azerbaijan's procurement from Ukraine amounted to approximately \$2 billion, reflecting the depth of their strategic partnership and the commitment to enhancing national defense capabilities.

In the realm of military cooperation, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel, initiated in the early 2000s, has been pivotal in fortifying Azerbaijan's armament capabilities and spearheading its modernization efforts. Initially, Azerbaijan procured "Aerostar" tactical drones and "Orbiter-2" mini drones from Israel. Subsequently, a range of armaments, including jet firing systems, anti-tank missile complexes, drones, communications and optical equipment, firearms, and ships, were acquired. Noteworthy acquisitions encompass the "Lynx LAR-160" YARS complex, "Extra" long-range missile complexes, "Cardom" and "Spear Mk.2" mortars, "Tavor TAR-21" and "Negev" machine guns, various UAV models, and vessels such as the "Shaldag" and "Saar-62."

In 2008, Azerbaijan and Israel's collaboration further deepened with the signing of a contract with the "Elbit Systems" company for the upgrade of T-72 tanks to the SIM-1 "Aslan" level, marking a significant milestone in their partnership.

During the April 2016 battles, the Armenian forces misidentified Azerbaijani T-72 tanks as T-90 tanks due to their extensive modernization. The acquisition of "Hermes-900" tactical and "Harop" attack UAVs from Israel significantly impacted the Armenian army, proving to be formidable assets in both the April clashes and the subsequent 44-day Patriotic War. Notably, Azerbaijan effectively neutralized over 30 enemy vehicles in a brief timeframe using "Spike" anti-tank guided missiles during the April battles. Furthermore, the electro-optical surveillance system, exclusive to the armies of Israel, the USA, and Azerbaijan, further enhanced Azerbaijan's tactical capabilities during these conflicts.

In 2003, Azerbaijan and Russia formalized their military-technical cooperation through a bilateral agreement. Subsequently, Russia commenced the sale of weapons and equipment to Azerbaijan starting from 2005. The initial acquisitions included 24 2S9 Nona self-propelled mortars and 62 T-72 tanks in 2005. From 2009 onwards, Azerbaijan embarked on substantial procurement contracts with Russia, acquiring two divisions of S-300 PMU2 "Favorit" anti-aircraft missile complexes, over 70 helicopters including 60 Mi-17 military transport and 24 Mi-35M attack helicopters.

This collaboration marked one of the largest export ventures undertaken by Russian aviation firms abroad. Over the ensuing years, Azerbaijan expanded its arsenal with the acquisition of 100 T-90S tanks, 100 BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, 18 "Vena" self-propelled mortars, 18 MSTA-S self-propelled howitzers, engineering-fortification vehicles, self-propelled bridges, a significant

number of BTR-82A armored personnel carriers, and TOS-1A heavy flamethrower artillery systems.

During the period preceding the Patriotic War, the region's dynamics, including the conditions and challenges in the frontline zone, necessitated the acquisition of advanced weaponry to maintain military superiority over adversaries. Consequently, a range of new, modern, and high-quality combat equipment sourced from various countries, along with other military products, were integrated into the arsenal.

Furthermore, to ensure the safety of personnel and bolster defensive capabilities, extensive fortification efforts were undertaken across all sectors of the frontline. These measures encompassed the construction of fortified positions, the establishment of new engineering networks, the installation of long-term reinforced concrete firing points, the development of additional earthworks and junctions, and the construction of trenches and underground communication networks. Additionally, modern communication systems meeting contemporary standards were deployed to facilitate effective communication and coordination among troops.

In accordance with the preparation plan, various types of troops, headquarters, and commanders focused on enhancing combat skills and professionalism among personnel. This entailed skillful utilization of combat and specialized equipment, ensuring unit readiness, and conducting extensive training exercises. Throughout 2017, the training regimen included a multitude of strategic, operational-strategic, operational-tactical, tactical, and special tactical exercises, alongside command-staff military games. Specifically, more than 40 command-and-staff military games, command-and-staff training sessions, and mobilization drills, as well as over 20 tactical exercises, were conducted.

To gauge the troops' readiness and enhance combat capabilities, thorough inspections were conducted through planned and surprise evaluations at various intervals. These assessments aimed to ensure a high level of preparedness and proficiency among the armed forces.

An integral measure of a nation's military prowess lies in its armed forces' capacity to satisfy their requisites through domestically produced weaponry and munitions. Azerbaijan has recognized, since the inception of its independence, the critical importance of meeting its own demands for armaments and advancing its defense industry. This strategic imperative stems from the imperative to mitigate reliance on foreign production and to address past adversities, such as embargoes imposed by weapon-exporting nations during historical conflicts. These embargoes underscore the exigency for Azerbaijan to fortify its self-reliance in defense capabilities, thereby enhancing its resilience and strategic autonomy.

On December 16, 2005, by Presidential Decree of President İlham Aliyev, the Ministry of Defense Industry of the Republic of Azerbaijan was established.

Today, the military is being outfitted with armaments produced by institutions under the Ministry of Defense Industry. The establishment of more than 20 military factories and the formation of a modern military-industrial complex within a brief span represent pivotal milestones in our history.

The Ministry of Defense Industry predominantly addresses the current needs of the nation. During its formative years, combat vehicles such as "Matador" and "Marauder," unmanned aerial vehicles, mines, and sniper rifles were manufactured and supplied to the military. These domestically produced weapons have been extensively employed in combat scenarios, demonstrating their efficacy.

Of significant concern is the indigenization of ammunition production to fulfill the military's requirements. Ammunition, notably bullets and shells, play a critical role in combat operations and must be readily accessible. Presently, domestic institutions ensure the provision of ammunition to the military.

Turkish companies play a significant role among the foreign firms collaborating with Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense Industry (MDI). The MDI has achieved joint production of several military products with companies such as "Öztek," "ASELSAN," "Koza Teknik," "MKEK,"

"TİSAŞ," "Otokar," and "HAVELSAN." For instance, collaborative efforts with "Öztek" have resulted in the production of multispectral covers that prevent the visibility of military equipment through thermal and night vision systems. "Koza Teknik" has contributed to the production of training equipment, while collaborations with ASELSAN have focused on joint modernization projects, thermal imaging systems, and binocular manufacturing.

In 2011, a collaborative endeavor was established between the Ministry of Defense Industry and an Israeli firm. Presently, this partnership oversees the production of unmanned aerial vehicles, encompassing models such as "Aerostar," "Orbiter-2," "Orbiter-3," "Orbiter-4," and "Zərbə."

Since 2013, the Ministry embarked on the path of foreign arms exports, marking a significant milestone in its international engagement. Initial exports amounted to \$13 million, witnessing a remarkable escalation to \$101 million the subsequent year. This positive trajectory continued, with exports surging nearly tenfold from 2013 to 2017.

The export portfolio primarily comprises combat equipment, mines, grenades, and various firearms, reflecting Azerbaijan's increasing role in global arms trade. Notably, there is a growing global demand for combat equipment, highlighting the strategic importance of Azerbaijan's contributions in this domain.

The operations of the Ministry of Defense-affiliated factories are experiencing a notable expansion. Presently, two aviation repair plants under the ministry's purview are actively fulfilling foreign orders. These plants attract inquiries from a diverse array of regions, including Ukraine, Latin America, Central Europe, and the Middle East. Their primary function entails the comprehensive repair and modernization of aviation assets and air defense systems for our nation's military.

For instance, the modernization of "Mi-24" helicopters at the Azerbaijan Aviation Plant, achieved through collaboration with South African and Ukrainian facilities, exemplifies this endeavor. This joint effort has resulted in the elevation of these helicopters to the "Mi-24G" standard, endowing them with enhanced night combat capabilities. Notable enhancements include the installation of specialized electro-optical equipment, upgrades to artillery systems, and the implementation of tailored armor modifications.

Furthermore, ongoing initiatives are directed towards the modernization of "Su-25" aircraft and air defense systems in Azerbaijan. These endeavors are being pursued collaboratively with foreign entities at domestic facilities, signifying a concerted effort to bolster the nation's defense capabilities through strategic partnerships and advanced technological advancements.

Conclusion

During a challenging period marked by Armenia's aggression and the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, Azerbaijan faced numerous geopolitical threats. Despite these obstacles, Azerbaijan successfully established its state and military infrastructure. Over time, it enhanced its military potential, shifting the military balance with Armenia in its favor.

Comprehensive reforms enabled the Azerbaijani Armed Forces to reach the level of leading states' armed forces. Today, the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan constitute a unified, centrally managed force with strengthened material-technical infrastructure and intellectual capacity, capable of fulfilling any assigned combat mission.

Analysts, referring to the outcome of the Patriotic War, suggest that Azerbaijan has prepared for future conflicts, whereas Armenia has largely relied on past conflict outcomes for preparation. The 44-day Patriotic War is often described by military experts as a conflict between 5th generation and 3rd generation technology (Museyibov, 2020).

Before the conflict, both Armenian military analysts and experts from other countries deemed the military restoration of Azerbaijani territories unattainable. This notion was reinforced by Armenia's portrayal of its army as invincible and the creation of the myth of the impregnable "Ohanyan line" in the occupied territories over three decades. Throughout the years of occupation, instead of condemning the breach of international law, some states emphasized Azerbaijan's

perceived inability to retake its territories militarily. They, at times, pressured Azerbaijan to recognize the pseudo-regimes established in the occupied lands.

On November 10, 2020, Armenia was compelled to sign a capitulation agreement, marking its defeat. Under this agreement, the districts of Kalbajar, Lachin, and Agdam were peacefully returned to Azerbaijan, with the Azerbaijani flag raised in these areas. Notably, on November 8, after 28 years of occupation, the liberation of Shusha by the Azerbaijani army represented a significant milestone in the Second Karabakh War. The value of the military equipment either destroyed or captured by the Azerbaijani army from Armenia during this conflict is estimated to be at least 3.8 billion US dollars (Chan, 2021).

During the Patriotic War, the Azerbaijani Special Forces demonstrated exceptional skill, unwavering patriotism, and formidable combat abilities (10). Armenian forces encountered not only advanced military hardware such as "Bayraktar" and "Harop" drones but also faced the formidable "Yaşma" Special Forces unit, which became synonymous with fear and respect (Military Strategy Magazine, 2022).

The continuous refinement of combat effectiveness and professionalism within the Armed Forces is an ongoing and systematic process, informed by the lessons gleaned from the experiences of the Patriotic War. Presently, Azerbaijan is diligently engaged in the further advancement and modernization of its Armed Forces, leveraging insights derived from the war's outcomes (Eurasianet, 2022).

The outcomes and insights of the Patriotic War serve as not only a case study for Azerbaijan but also a subject of scrutiny for the world's leading military institutions, which diligently analyze them. This phenomenon is evident in the opinions expressed by military experts in prestigious academic journals and international media outlets. For instance, the article titled "The US Army Learns from the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", published in "Foreign Policy", epitomizes this global trend of studying and drawing lessons from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Detsch, 2021).

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