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Gabala Radar Station and the Problem of Russian-American Cooperation on Missile Defense

Abstract

The US withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002 allowed the U.S. to begin implementing a program to create a global national missile defense system, which was supposed to ensure the strategic security of NATO countries. The project related to the deployment of elements of the American missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic (Third Position Area) triggered sharp criticism from Russia. In 2007, President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin made a proposal to US President George W. Bush to jointly use the Gabala radar station and the next-generation radar being built in the city of Armavir as an alternative to deploying elements of the American missile defense system in Eastern Europe. The Gabala radar station, located on the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan and leased by the Russian Federation (until 2012), has long been important in ensuring strategic security not only for this country, but also for the entire South Caucasus region. After tripartite consultations between representatives of Russia, the United States, and Azerbaijan, Washington made a statement that after modernization, the Gabala radar station could be used as an addition to the Third Position Area of the American missile defense system, which was not in line with Russia's national interests. The US position on this issue led to a sharp deterioration in Russian-American relations.

Keywords: *Gabala radar station, Russian-American cooperation on missile defense, Russian Federation, Republic of Azerbaijan, American missile defense system*

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Qəbələ RLS-si və raket əleyhinə müdafiə sistemləri ilə bağlı Rusiya-ABŞ əməkdaşlığı problemi

Xülasə

2002-ci ildə ABŞ-nin 1972-ci il Raket əleyhinə müdafiə sistemləri ilə bağlı müqaviləsindən çıxması ona NATO ölkələrinin strateji təhlükəsizliyini təmin etməli olan global milli raketdən müdafiə sisteminin yaradılması proqramını həyata keçirməyə imkan verdi. ABŞ-nin raket əleyhinə müdafiə sisteminin elementlərinin Polşa və Çexiyada (Üçüncü Mövqe Ərazisi) yerləşdirilməsi ilə bağlı layihə Rusiyanın kəskin tənqidinə səbəb oldu. 2007-ci ildə Rusiya Federasiyasının prezidenti V. V. Putin ABŞ prezidenti Corc Buşa Amerikanın Şərqi Avropada raket əleyhinə müdafiə sistemin elementlərinin yerləşdirilməsinə alternativ olaraq Qəbələ RLS-dən və Armavir şəhərində tikilməkdə olan yeni nəsil RLS-dən birgə istifadə etmək təklifi ilə çıxış etdi. Azərbaycan Respublikası ərazisində yerləşən və Rusiya Federasiyası tərəfindən icarəyə götürülən (2012-ci ilə qədər) Qəbələ stansiyası təkcə bu ölkənin deyil, bütün Cənubi Qafqaz regionunun strateji təhlükəsizliyinin təmin edilməsində uzun müddət mühüm əhəmiyyət kəsb edir. Rusiya, ABŞ və Azərbaycan nümayəndələri arasında üçtərəfli məsləhətləşmələrdən sonra Vaşinqton bəyan etdi ki, modernləşdirmədən sonra Qəbələ

radiolokasiya stansiyası Amerikanın raketdən müdafiə sistemi Üçüncü Mövqə Ərazisinə əlavə kimi istifadə oluna bilər, lakin bu Rusiyanın milli maraqlarına zidd idi. ABŞ-nin bu məsələdə mövqeyi Rusiya-Amerika münasibətlərinin kəskin şəkildə pisləşməsinə səbəb oldu.

Açar sözlər: *Qəbələ RLS, RƏM üzrə Rusiya-Amerika əməkdaşlığı, Rusiya Federasiyası, Azərbaycan Respublikası, Amerikanın raketdən müdafiə sistemi*

Introduction

The threat of international terrorism and the need for joint efforts to combat it led to an improvement in Russian-American relations in the first years of the new millennium. As a result, it became possible to sign the "Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions" between Russia and the United States on May 24, 2002, which limited the number of nuclear warheads of both states. Washington undertook the commitment to consult with Russia on the deployment of American missile defense systems beyond its borders. In response, Russia moved to dismantle its military bases in Cam Ranh (a naval base in Vietnam) and Lourdes (an electronic tracking station in Cuba). However, the signing of this agreement did not prevent the United States from withdrawing from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in June of that year and starting to implement plans to create a global national missile defense system. Russia feared that Washington was reviving the policy adopted in the early 1980s on the initiative of U.S. President R. Reagan, the Strategic Defense Initiative program (SDI, or as it was also called the "Star Wars program"), which had been curtailed by the United States in 1991. In 2004, the United States informed Russia that a decision had been made to deploy elements of the American missile defense system in Eastern Europe. Russia opposed these plans because it meant placing American bases on its western borders. Despite protests from Moscow, at a summit in Istanbul in June of the same year, NATO countries approved the draft of a global American missile defense system.

In 2007, the United States officially announced its plans to deploy the Third Position Area (TPR) of the American missile defense system on the territory of the Czech Republic and Poland. The TPR provided for the construction of a modern radar in the Czech Republic and the placement of a base for 10-20 interceptor missiles in Poland. According to the Americans, the TPR was needed to protect the United States and European countries from a nuclear missile attack from the Iranian Islamic Republic and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea—that is, the so-called "rogue states." It should also be noted that the successful development of the Iranian missile program at that time, to some extent, contributed to the intensification of Washington's policy on this issue. Reacting strongly to the deployment of the Third Position Area in Eastern Europe, Moscow stated that elements of the American missile defense system would be directed specifically against Russia, since Iran and North Korea at that time did not have missiles of the range that could threaten the United States and its allies in Europe.

On February 10, 2007, Russian President V.V. Putin, in his speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, spoke out against the deployment of an American military base and elements of the American missile defense system in Eastern Europe. He also stated that Iran and North Korea did not have ballistic missiles capable of reaching Europe or the U.S. at that time. Putin also spoke out against the militarization of space. Western politicians criticized this speech of the Russian President at the Munich Conference and compared it "... to Churchill's Fulton speech, in which he proclaimed the Cold War" (Markov, 2019, s. 105).

Research

In such a complex international situation, on June 7, 2007, the President of the Russian Federation, V.V. Putin, at the Group of Eight ("G8") summit in Heiligendamm (Germany), proposed to U.S. President George W. Bush the idea of jointly using the Gabala radar station, which Russia had leased in Azerbaijan. Prior to the summit, Moscow had coordinated the issue with the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, I.G. Aliyev, and had received his approval. The Russian president proposed the radar station as an alternative to the deployment of the U.S. missile defense system in Eastern Europe. Moscow was also willing to cooperate on exchanging intelligence information gathered from the radar. Russia took this step to prevent the deployment of elements of the American missile defense

system near its western borders. In other words, the Russian leadership suggested the joint development of a tactical missile defense system using the Gabala radar station, which, from a military perspective, was a more logical approach to counter a potential missile threat from the southern direction. The Russian president's initiative signaled that Moscow was serious about cooperating with the United States on missile defense and "...that the Kremlin was willing to make a concession to the United States regarding Iran..." (Lokotkova, 2007, s. 8). The United States initially expressed interest in this proposal and decided to discuss it with military experts. Furthermore, the two countries had prior experience of jointly using the Gabala radar station. In 1991, during NATO's military operation led by the United States in the Persian Gulf ("Desert Storm"), the USSR provided the alliance with crucial information obtained from the Gabala radar station.

It is worth remembering that in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the issue of the Gabala Daryal-class radar station was an important component of the military-technical cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Located in the northern part of Azerbaijan, near the city of Gabala, the radar station was commissioned in 1985. This major military facility was part of the Soviet early warning system. The Gabala radar station was designed to monitor outer space and detect launches of land-based and sea-based ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads within a range of at least 8,000 km. After the collapse of the USSR and Azerbaijan's independence in the early 1990s, the government of the Popular Front, led by A.G. Elchibey, sought to address the environmental damage caused by the radar station and its impact on the health of the population in northern regions of the country, considering its closure. Interestingly, in the 1990s, the United States did not object to Azerbaijan granting Russia permission to lease the Gabala radar station. This policy of Washington can likely be explained by the complex international situation at the time, as well as its interest in ensuring stability in the region to safeguard its investments in the economies of the South Caucasus republics, particularly Azerbaijan. In other words, "The United States not only did not object to the presence of the Russian radar station in Azerbaijan, but, on the contrary, was quite supportive of having an additional 'eye' monitoring Iran" (Fedorovskaya, 2013, s. 68).

Official negotiations between Russia and Azerbaijan regarding the lease of this military facility began only after national leader H.A. Aliyev came to power in 1993. This issue became a subject of discussion at nearly all official meetings between the top officials of both countries. The negotiations, which started in 1994, concluded with the signing of the "Agreement on the Status, Principles, and Conditions for the Use of the Gabala Radar Station (Daryal Radar Station)" on January 25, 2002. Under the terms of this agreement, the station was recognized as the property of Azerbaijan and designated as an information and analytical center. The rental fee was set at \$7 million per year. The agreement was concluded for a period of 10 years, with an option to extend the lease. At Azerbaijan's request, the agreement stipulated that the Russian military would use the radar station solely for information and analytical purposes. The agreement also limited the number of Russian personnel at the radar station to no more than 1,500. The Azerbaijani side sought access to the information obtained by the station, but Moscow, citing the need for a separate agreement on this matter, did not consent. Immediately after the agreement was signed, Russia renamed the radar station the "Daryal" Information and Analytical Center.

Turning to the proposal made by Russian President V. V. Putin in 2007 to the United States regarding the joint use of the Gabala radar station, it is important to note that Azerbaijani President I. G. Aliyev regarded it as a concrete contribution to strengthening stability and security in the region. The terms of the 2002 lease agreement between Russia and Azerbaijan did not preclude such cooperation. The Azerbaijani leadership believed that if discussions between Russia and the United States on this issue advanced further, Azerbaijan would be open to negotiating the specifics of joint operations, but the cooperation should be limited to the sharing of information collected by the radar. Additionally, given the interest in the Gabala radar station, Baku hoped to secure the support of both Moscow and Washington in the peaceful resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

In his speeches, V. V. Putin repeatedly highlighted the advantages of the Russian proposal to use the Gabala radar station in Azerbaijan compared to U.S. plans to deploy elements of its global missile

defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. In his view, the station would allow for the detection and, therefore, interception of missiles in the early acceleration phase of their trajectory. In this scenario, missile debris would fall into the sea, rather than over European countries.

For the United States, the Gabala radar station could primarily be of interest for monitoring Iranian airspace. However, on June 15, 2007, U.S. Secretary of Defense R. Gates, during a meeting in Brussels with his Russian counterpart A.E. Serdyukov, stated that Washington would not abandon its plans to deploy elements of the missile defense system in Eastern Europe. The United States was willing to use the Gabala radar station only as a supplement to the Third Position Area (TPA). The U.S. refusal to jointly use the Gabala radar station as an alternative to deploying missile defense elements in Poland and the Czech Republic signified to Russia that the planned missile defense system would be specifically directed against Russia. Russia was not convinced by the counteroffer to jointly build a missile defense system in Europe, which Gates had made earlier during his visit to Moscow (Aliyev, 2007, s. 2). Moscow understood this as “negotiating for the sake of negotiating” and nothing more.

On July 1-2, 2007, an informal meeting between the Presidents of Russia and the United States took place in Kennebunkport, Maine, USA. V.V. Putin once again raised the issue of jointly using the Gabala radar station. “He also added that Russia was ready to modernize the Gabala radar station in Azerbaijan on its own” (Aliyev, 2007, p. 16). Alongside the station in Azerbaijan, he proposed jointly using the new generation Voronezh radar station, which was under construction in southern Russia in the city of Armavir (Krasnodar Territory). According to the Russian President, the Armavir radar would cover all of Europe, making it unnecessary to deploy American missile defense systems in Eastern Europe. “This would eliminate the need to place our strike systems near European borders and remove the deployment of U.S. strike systems as part of missile defense in space” (Lokotkova, 2007, s. 9). During the negotiations, the U.S. side emphasized the need to modernize the Gabala radar station. According to Putin, interceptor missiles could be deployed in Turkey, on sea platforms, or in Iraq. After the meeting in Kennebunkport, the issue of jointly using the Gabala and Armavir radar stations was handed over to the consideration of American and Russian diplomats, experts, and military personnel. If this issue were resolved positively, Russia was even prepared to abandon its plans to deploy strike missile groups in the Kaliningrad region.

It is interesting that before the meeting mentioned above, on May 15, 2007, the Russian Ambassador to Azerbaijan, V. Istratov, stated at a press conference in Baku, “The United States has repeatedly shown interest in obtaining information from certain radar stations that Russia leases from Azerbaijan” (Lokotkova, 2007, s. 11). It is also worth noting that in 2005, Azerbaijani media reported that the United States was planning to build two radar stations on the territory of the republic. “According to Azerbaijani journalists, one of the radar stations is being built in Astara, on the border with Iran, while the second is being constructed in the Khizi region, on the southern slope of the Greater Caucasus Range” (Aliyev, 2007, s. 14). There were no official statements from either side regarding this matter. The United States would not have been opposed to having military bases in Azerbaijan, primarily for the following reasons: first, to transport oil and gas from Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries to European markets, in order to reduce Western countries' energy dependence on Russia; second, to ensure the security of oil and gas pipelines, as well as international transport corridors passing through the South Caucasus republics, connecting Asia and Europe; and third, to potentially use Azerbaijani territory in operations against the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, even if Washington had approached Baku with such a proposal, there is a high likelihood that Azerbaijan would have rejected it, citing its non-aligned foreign policy, which prohibits the placement of foreign military bases on its territory. Additionally, the Azerbaijani leadership has repeatedly stated that the territory of Azerbaijan cannot be used against neighboring states.

In July 2007, at a meeting of the Russia-NATO Council, the Russian delegation presented the details of its proposal for the joint use of the Gabala and Armavir radar stations. The director of the U.S. Missile Defense Agency gave an enthusiastic assessment of the prospects for jointly using the Gabala radar station. However, after some time, the Americans claimed that the technical and technological standards of this station did not meet the standards adopted in the United States. On

August 18, 2007, the head of the U.S. Missile Defense Office, G. Obering, proposed converting the Gabala and Armavir stations into the Fourth Position Area of the American missile defense system, but insisted on moving forward with the creation of the TPA in Eastern Europe. Russia did not consent to this and, "...since August 17, 2007, resumed regular flights of Russian strategic aviation, which had been interrupted since 1992" (Fenenko, 2022, s. 225). Despite such strong statements from both Washington and Moscow, on September 18-19, 2007, at the Gabala radar station, representatives from Russia, the United States, and Azerbaijan continued to discuss, at the expert level, the technical possibilities of jointly using the radar to monitor missile launches from Iran and North Korea. "The First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Space Forces, A. Yakushin, who led the Russian delegation, said that each side formed a working group of 10 people, mostly military personnel and diplomats" (Gavrilov, 2007). Notably, this was the first time that U.S. military personnel were allowed to visit the Gabala radar station, which had previously been considered a top-secret facility.

On November 22, 2007, the United States submitted its proposals to the Russian Foreign Ministry in written form regarding the creation of a joint missile defense system in Europe. "The essence of these proposals was to create a unified missile defense system to protect the United States, Russia, and NATO countries from missile threats. To achieve this, Washington proposed integrating the planned missile defense facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic, ... along with Russian facilities, into a single system" (Grinevsky, 2009, s. 124). When referring to Russian facilities, the Americans were specifically referring to the Gabala radar station (Azerbaijan) and the radar station under construction near Armavir in the Krasnodar region of the Russian Federation.

During two visits to Russia in October 2007 and August 2008, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates held talks on missile defense with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov in the "2+2" format, where the issue of joint use of the Gabala radar station was also discussed. However, these negotiations were unsuccessful. At the Sochi summit on April 6, 2008, the presidents of Russia and the United States issued a Declaration on the Strategic Framework for Russian-American Relations, in which "... the parties expressed interest in creating a system for responding to potential missile threats, in which Russia, the United States, and Europe would participate as equal partners" (Fenenko, 2022, p. 226). On July 7, 2008, at the G8 summit in Toyako, Japan, during a meeting between Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and U.S. President George W. Bush, discussions on missile defense cooperation made it clear that the United States was expanding its project and planning to deploy interceptor missiles for the U.S. missile defense system in Lithuania.

The report by the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 2007 noted that after V.V. Putin's "package" proposals to the Americans in Heiligendamm and Kennebunkport, Russian representatives: "Conducted a series of consultations with key European countries, China, and India, in formats such as the UN, OSCE, and NATO Parliamentary Assembly. They actively explained the Russian approach in the media and at specially convened press conferences with the participation of the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Ministry of Defense. Four Russian-American meetings were held in the format of high-level expert groups. The topic was also discussed at a meeting of foreign ministers and defense ministers of Russia and the United States (the '2+2' format)" (Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Activity of the Russian Federation in 2007, 2008). However, despite all the protests from the Russian government, it was not possible to halt the deployment of the U.S. missile defense system in Eastern Europe. The U.S. did not compromise and did not abandon its plans to deploy missile defense elements in Eastern Europe. In July-August 2008, the United States signed agreements with the governments of Poland and the Czech Republic to deploy missile defense systems on their territories.

At the meeting between Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama in Moscow on July 6, 2009, the possibility of cooperation in missile defense was once again discussed. The presidents agreed that specialists from both sides could explore potential cooperation on this issue. On July 10, the Russian leader once again warned the U.S. about the potential consequences of their plans to create a missile defense system in Eastern Europe. The new U.S. administration was interested in more thoroughly studying the potential of the Gabala radar station to

address the issue of its possible use as part of missile defense cooperation with Russia. A few days after Barack Obama's visit to Moscow, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg raised the possibility of including the Gabala radar station in the missile defense system during a trip to Baku on July 11, 2009. However, the U.S. was only willing to use the station in Azerbaijan as an addition to the radar system planned for the Czech Republic. Russia, on the other hand, viewed the Gabala radar station as a full-fledged replacement for the Eastern European missile defense system.

On September 15, 2009, tripartite consultations regarding the use of the Gabala radar station were held in Baku, with experts from Russia, Azerbaijan, and the United States participating. After visiting the Gabala radar station, American experts concluded that the station was outdated. However, Russian experts argued that radars built during the Soviet era were specifically designed for early warning of ballistic missile launches and, as such, could be integral components of American missile defense systems. "At the same time, the relatively advanced age of the Gabala radar in no way prevents it from functioning alongside newer radar stations" (Dvorkin, 2007).

Thus, Russia's opposition to the U.S. plans to deploy elements of its national missile defense system in Eastern Europe did not lead to any meaningful results. "There are still no prospects for reaching a common understanding regarding missile defense in Europe" (Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Activity of the Russian Federation in 2007, 2008).

Regarding the issue of joint Russian-American use of the Gabala radar station, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov stated: "At one point, the Russian side proposed that Azerbaijan, as the owner of the radar station, agree to its joint use by Russia and the United States. We naturally responded that this could be our modest but very important contribution to the non-proliferation regime, and we were ready to discuss the issue" (Mamedov, 2011). He also emphasized that, given the current circumstances, the Gabala radar station held significant strategic importance and, as such, should receive appropriate consideration as a strategic asset.

In 2011, tensions between Russia and the United States escalated further. During a meeting of the Russia-NATO Council in Sochi on July 4, 2011, Moscow and Washington were unable to resolve the issue of the American missile defense system's deployment in Eastern Europe. On November 23, 2011, President Dmitry Medvedev announced the cessation of negotiations with the United States on a joint missile defense program (Shakleina, 2018, s. 261-320) after the U.S. rejected Russia's proposal to deploy elements of its missile defense system at the Gabala radar station in Azerbaijan and at the Armavir radar station in Russia.

In response to the actions of the United States, Russia halted the dismantling of the missile division in the city of Kozelsk (Kaluga region) (Fenenko, 2022, p. 227), threatened to deploy the Iskander operational-tactical missile system at its western borders in the Kaliningrad region, and considered withdrawing from the 1987 "Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles." As a protest against the U.S. EuroBMD program, Russia suspended its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (signed in Paris on November 19, 1990 - S.M.).

In December 2012, the lease agreement for the Gabala radar station expired. In response, Russia proposed extending the lease for another 25 years (an extension of the 2002 contract). However, Azerbaijan chose not to extend the lease. Russian historians note that "The parties were unable to agree on the extension of the contract, as the Azerbaijani side set conditions unacceptable to Russia, increasing the rent from \$7 million to \$300 million per year - i.e., a 43-fold increase" (Fedorovskaya, 2013, p. 66). When discussing the rent, it's important to consider that the station is located in a picturesque mountainous area, which could potentially be developed as a resort, yielding profits far exceeding the proposed rent.

It is highly probable that several significant factors influenced Baku's decision. First, Azerbaijan's foreign policy of "equidistance and multi-vectorism" played a role. Second, there was concern that Russia could use the station against regional countries, which conflicted with the peaceful principles advocated by Baku. Furthermore, despite the 1993 withdrawal of Russian military bases from Azerbaijan, about 1,500 Russian military personnel remained stationed at the Gabala radar station, giving the impression of a Russian military presence in the republic, which contradicted

Baku's policy. Finally, the failure to extend the lease agreement was likely influenced by the growing Russian-Armenian rapprochement. In August 2010, the "Protocol on Amendments to the Bilateral Agreement on the Russian 102nd Military Base in Gyumri of 1995" was signed between Russia and Armenia, extending the Russian military presence in Armenia until 2044. Russia's continued military cooperation with Armenia, which occupied Azerbaijani territories, was not in line with Baku's interests (Vneshnepoliticheskaya i diplomaticheskaya deyatelnost' RF v 2007 godu).

As a result, the Gabala radar station ceased operations. Many politicians and military experts from both sides, following the withdrawal of the last Russian military personnel from Azerbaijan, forecasted an unoptimistic future for Russian-Azerbaijani relations. However, contrary to these skeptical predictions, military-technical cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan was not severed, and relations between the two countries have continued to develop positively. The signing of the "Declaration on Allied Interaction Between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation" in Moscow on February 22, 2022, is proof of this continued cooperation.

Conclusion

Summing up the topic "Gabala radar and the problem of Russian-American cooperation on missile defense", we can draw the following conclusions:

— firstly, if the Russian-American negotiations regarding the joint use of the Gabala radar station as an element of the national American missile defense system are successful, this would lead to the intensification of strategic cooperation between Russia and the United States, and as a result to the improvement of relations between these superpowers, which is very important for everything world community, since the worsening relations between these two world actors today keep the world on the brink of the Third World War;

— secondly, the Russian Federation, whose positions were weakened in the South Caucasus in the early 90s of the 20th century and were finally reduced by the Russian-Georgian conflict of August 2008, could strengthen its influence in such an important strategic region;

— thirdly, as a result of the transformation of the Gabala radar station into an element of the united Russian-American missile defense system, the political weight of Azerbaijan would increase not only in the region, but throughout the entire post-Soviet space.

On the other hand, one cannot but exclude the fact that the joint use of this station by the two superpowers would make the Republic of Azerbaijan a possible target of nuclear missile attacks from third countries.

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