

Azerbaijan Using Gabala Negotiations to Change Russia's Policy

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Gabala radar station (Source: ayna.az)

December 24, 2012 will mark the end of the contract between Azerbaijan and Russia for the lease of the Gabala radar station (Daryal-type radar station), built by the Soviet Union in 1984 to monitor missile launches at distances as far as 6,000 kilometers (3,728 miles) away. This remains Russia's only military presence in Azerbaijan. The radar station, however, is outdated and no longer serves much military value for Russia, especially since a Voronezh-type early warning stations became operational in 2009 near Armavir in Krasnodar Krai.

Moscow and Baku are currently negotiating the terms of a lease extension for the Gabala radar station. To Russia's surprise – and dismay – Azerbaijani authorities are now asking Russia to pay \$300 million a year instead of the seven million dollars a year previously paid (Trend, June 20).

The radar is politically crucial for Russia, albeit militarily marginal, especially if it wants to maintain its presence throughout the South Caucasus. It gives Russia a foothold in Azerbaijan, a country where the Russian military footprint is weak when compared with its presence in neighboring Armenia and Georgia (within the breakaways regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia). In addition, access to Gabala is an instrument for Russia in negotiating with other key players, such as the United States and Iran. It serves as a bargaining chip in terms of the controversial build-up of a missile defense system in Central Eastern Europe by NATO and the US.

Russia also considers that the withdrawal from Gabala could create a window of opportunity for other regional powers such as Turkey or Israel, which has recently been the subject of substantial rumors according to which it secured access to airbases and facilities in Azerbaijan that will be used to attack Iran in the not-too-distant future. In the last few years, relations between Azerbaijan and Israel have been rather cordial and business-like. In February, the two countries concluded a major contract for the purchase by Azerbaijan of Israeli-made drones and anti-aircraft missile defense systems worth \$1.6 billion (Haaretz, March 29).

Such regional developments make the extension of the lease of the Gabala radar even more important for Russia. But Azerbaijan is upping the ante in the negotiations. In addition to demanding

a price 43 times higher than the previous lease price, Baku is asking to have a larger proportion of Azeri officials based at the radar station, which employs a total of 1,500 people, most of whom are Russians (EurasiaNet, July 19, 2011). Azerbaijan is also demanding compensation for the increased level of pollution, since the radar station is, as Baku claims, harmful to the environment and thus negatively affects the tourism industry in the area (Today's Zaman, March 6).

In late May 2012, Russia threatened to terminate the radar lease agreement. A Russian source close to the negotiations told the Interfax news agency that Moscow is stunned by the unjustified demand for a substantial lease price increase. Russia could build two new similar radar stations on its own territory for the same amount of money. Moreover, Gabala requires major upgrading work to remain functional. Also, from a military perspective, the radar station in Gabala, at the cost of \$300 million, is not worth renewing (Interfax, June 20).

It is doubtful that the station has any military value for the Russians. However, even if one assumes that the Russian military strongly supports the extension of the lease in case some unforeseen external circumstances emerge, it would be more pragmatic to build a new radar station on the Russian side of the border, in the Republic of Dagestan, at least from the perspective of cost-effectiveness.

The fact that Moscow has still not cut off negotiations should be viewed in the context of the Kremlin's policy of maintaining – in some cases strengthening – its military presence in the post-Soviet space. Moscow is also at the moment negotiating with the Kyrgyzstani government on the extension of the Russian Air Force base at Kant, which has been operating since 2003 as the aviation component of the Collective Rapid Deployment Force of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and with the Tajikistani government over the lease of the Qurghonteppa and Kulob military bases in Dushanbe. In both cases, negotiations have been sluggish; Bishkek and Dushanbe have insisted on substantial increases in financial compensation – most likely after the Kyrgyzstanis learned the price Azerbaijan was asking for Gabala – and a reduction of the length of the lease (see EDM, July 9). On the other hand, in 2010, Russia and Armenia agreed to amend the 1995 bilateral treaty on the lease of the Gyumri military base near Armenia's border with Turkey in order to extend it from 25 to 49 years (Itar-Tass, February 25; Lenta.ru, July 2).

Negotiations on Gabala are important because they will set the tone for relations between Russia and Azerbaijan in the coming months. Relations between the two countries have already cooled. In the past, Azerbaijan has, on certain issues, joined the ranks of anti-Russian factions within the group of Eastern European countries, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and along with individual countries like Georgia and Ukraine.

The Azerbaijanis have clearly expressed that they are dissatisfied with the way Russia acts in its leadership role in the CIS. They also resent Russia's negative influence on the OSCE Minsk Group's efforts toward reaching a settlement of the Karabakh conflict. On December 7, Ramiz Mekhtiyev, Head of Azerbaijan's presidential staff, stated at a conference in Baku marking the 20th anniversary of independent Azerbaijan that "The OSCE Minsk Group member-states must realize that the Azerbaijani people's patience is not infinite – it has been exhausted" (Trend.az, December 7, 2011).

Thus, Moscow and Baku will most likely continue this long and intricate series of discussions and backroom trading as long as Russia does not give Azerbaijan its assurance that it will seriously try to resolve the Karabakh conflict through the Minsk Group.