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Russia in the South Caucasus: Armenia, Artsakh, and the Developing New World Order

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Abstract

The article analyzes Russia's role and interests in the South Caucasus. It discusses Armenian–Russian relations in the framework of Armenia's so-called multi-vector foreign policy and presents the main aspects of cooperation. This is followed by a discussion of the Second Artsakh War, its transformative impact on the strategic security environment in the South Caucasus, and Russia's new role in the region. The article concludes by presenting some of Russia's approaches to Armenia and Armenia–Azerbaijan relations and suggesting ways of bringing a durable peace to the region.

Introduction: Russia in the South Caucasus

The developing new world order directly impacts regional security landscapes in various parts of the globe. The South Caucasus is no exception. The Second Artsakh War has clearly demonstrated that the geopolitical landscape has been undergoing gradual transformation, with the strengthening of some traditional actors, the weakening of others, and the arrival on the scene of new forces.

Russia has been one of the main actors in the South Caucasus for centuries. Today, its policy toward the region is based on comprehensive and full-scale political, geopolitical, military, economic, and cultural relations. Russia constructs its relations with the South Caucasus on both a bilateral and a multilateral basis. Multilateral relations include the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the idea of Greater Eurasia.

This is demonstrated by the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2015), the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2016), and the newly ratified National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2021), as well as other public strategic documents, articles, and interviews by Moscow and/or Russian scholars and experts.

The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation of 2015, under the article on strategic stability and equal strategic partnership, states that one of the main directions of Russia's foreign policy is the development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the CIS member-states, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. It goes on to emphasize that Russia is developing the potential of regional and sub-regional integration and coordination in the CIS area in the framework of the CIS, the CSTO, the EEU, and the Union State of Russia and Belarus. It says that Russia stands for the transformation of the CSTO into a universal international

organization that can counter regional challenges of military-political and military-strategic character, as well as threats in the information domain. At the same time, the Strategy outlines that the formation of the EEU inaugurated a new stage of Eurasian integration. It states that Russia will make every possible effort to contribute to the strengthening of the Union, with the goals of achieving further integration, stable development, comprehensive modernization, and cooperation, as well as improving the economic competitiveness of the member-states (Strategy 2015).

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation takes a similar approach to Russia's foreign and security policy toward the region. The Concept touches upon conflicts in the post-Soviet space and states that Russia actively stands for political-diplomatic resolution of the Transnistrian and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts in particular (Concept 2016).

In July 2021 Russia published its new National Security Strategy, which sheds more light on its perception of current security threats and challenges, as well as its interests in the South Caucasus. The South Caucasus has no separate reference in the Strategy. However, the countries of the region are mentioned indirectly in Article 101. Paragraph 5 of the Strategy says that Russia's foreign policy priorities are being implemented by “deepening cooperation with the member-states of the Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS), Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on bilateral basis, and in the framework of integration units, primarily EEU, CSTO and the Union State [with Belarus]” (Strategy 2021, p. 40). That paragraph also discusses economic integration and the development of multilateral cooperation in Greater Eurasia (Strategy 2021, p. 40). Paragraphs 30 to 32 of the same article likewise refer to the post-Soviet space and the CIS region, mentioning the revitalization of cooperation in international develop-

ment, the participation in the activities of regional international organizations, mutual economic assistance, and the resolution of social and humanitarian issues, as well as issues connected with the development of new technologies (Strategy 2021, p. 43). Paragraphs 11 and 12 mention “support for the elimination and prevention of the appearance of points of tensions and conflicts on the territory of states neighboring Russia” and “Russia’s growing role in peacekeeping” (Strategy 2021, p. 40).

In sum, it can be concluded that Russia sees the South Caucasus as part of the wider CIS area. Moscow is interested in promoting strategic stability and cooperation (political, economic, and geopolitical) in and with the neighborhood, including in the South Caucasus. Finally, the development of the EEU, the CSTO, and the Greater Eurasia concept are top regional priorities for Russia.

Armenian–Russian Relations: Strategic Partnership as Part of a Multivector Foreign Policy Agenda

After gaining independence in 1991 following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Armenia started actively building relations with almost all global and regional powers present in the South Caucasus and beyond, chiefly Russia, the US, the EU, and Iran.

In the early 2000s, Armenian foreign minister Vardan Oskanyan conceptualized this approach as “complementary foreign policy.” Later, under third President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan (2008–2018), the concept was renamed “multivector foreign policy,” but it remained substantively almost the same.

The key idea of both concepts is that Armenia should develop multifaceted cooperation with all centers of power, from Russia and the US to Iran and China.

This approach has been reflected in Armenia’s cooperation with NATO and engagement with the EU. Armenia has signed Individual Partnership Action Plans and contributed to NATO’s missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo, among other things. In 2009 Armenia joined the EU’s Eastern Partnership Program; though it did not sign an Association Agreement in 2013, in 2017 Armenia and the EU agreed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, which came into force in 2020.

However, relations with Russia have held a special place in Armenia’s foreign policy since independence. Armenia has been a full member of the Russia-led CSTO (known before 2002 as the Collective Security Treaty), the CIS, and the EEU; Russia also maintains a mili-

tary base in Armenia with about five thousand soldiers. Economically, Russia—along with the EU—is one of Armenia’s main trading partners and sources of foreign direct investment.

April 2018 witnessed the “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia, when street protests resulted in a peaceful transfer of power. The leaders of the “Velvet Revolution” did their best to make it clear both internationally and domestically that the revolution had no geopolitical agenda (Mkrtchyan 2019). The new government continued the multivector foreign policy strategy inherited from previous governments. This was reflected in the new National Security Strategy of Armenia, signed in summer 2020 (Strategy 2020).

Shortly after the revolution, new Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan gave an interview to Russian media outlet *RT* in which he averred: “As I keep saying, there is no geopolitical or foreign policy-related intention in the Armenian Velvet Revolution. And I keep saying there was no geopolitical plot. It was a purely internal process that had to do only with Armenia. This process will not result in a foreign policy U-turn. I say this because the people who made the revolution happen have no problem with the foreign policy of Armenia; there is no demand to change the foreign policy” (EU Relations 2018).

The issue had a special resonance among the Armenian public due to the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. Many in Armenia believed that the Rose and Orange Revolutions (as well as the Euromaidan) had pushed Tbilisi and Kiev to make a geopolitical U-turn toward the West and pursue EU and NATO membership, causing the deterioration of relations with Russia and leading to the Georgian war of 2008 and conflict in Donbas.

Since Russia was (and remains) Armenia’s main security guarantor, cooling relations with Russia, many believed, would mean the loss of Artsakh¹ and a direct military threat from Turkey.²

Russia and the Second Artsakh War

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan—with the support of Turkey—began a new war against Artsakh, which ended on the night of November 10, 2020, after 44 days. As a result of the war, Artsakh lost a significant portion of its territory, including its cultural center—the city of Shushi—and Hadrud.

The conflict had been frozen since the first Karabakh war of 1992–1994 ended with the Three-Party Cease-fire Agreement of May 1994. The OSCE Minsk Group,

1 Artsakh is the Armenian name for the de facto Nagorno Karabakh Republic, which declared its independence from the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic upon the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Armenia supports Artsakh being populated by Armenians.

2 Since the early 1990s, Turkey has been blockading Armenia by closing its land border due to its support of Artsakh, has regularly threatened Armenia, and has directly supported Azerbaijan (both during the first war in the 1990s, when it amassed troops on the border and threatened direct invasion, and during the more recent war).

co-chaired by Russia, US, and France, had been leading peace talks. Despite frequent violations of the ceasefire, the co-chairs regularly visited Baku, Stepanakert, and Yerevan, as well as organizing direct meetings between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The talks were based on the Madrid principles (2007) and updated Madrid principles (2009)—1) non-use of force or threat of force; 2) the right of peoples to self-determination; and 3) territorial integrity—as well as six key components of conflict resolution (Statement by the OSCE 2009).

The Second Artsakh War changed the security landscape not only for Armenia, Artsakh, and Azerbaijan, but also for the region more broadly. Or to be more precise, it demonstrated the already transformed reality. The November 10, 2020, ceasefire statement was directly brokered by the President of Russia and signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia. The Statement contained nine points. Among these, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to open transportation routes between the countries, while Russia was to secure the newly built transportation infrastructure between mainland Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic through the territory of Armenia and deploy peacekeepers to Artsakh.

There are several views of Russia's position in the South Caucasus following the Second Artsakh War. Some claim that Russia has lost some influence because Turkey is now militarily involved in the conflict, which has not happened since the Sovietization of the region in the very early 1920s. Indeed, in Aghdam, an occupied part of Artsakh, Turkey has even received a formal military mandate (along with Russia) to control the ceasefire regime (Russian-Turkish Center 2021).

That being said, Russia has deployed around 2,000 peacekeepers to Artsakh and expanded its military presence in Armenia to help Armenia contain Azerbaijan's rising territorial ambitions. Moreover, if the November 10 Statement is implemented, Russia will receive control over important transportation routes in the South Caucasus.

A definite change, however, is that for the first time since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Turkey openly supported Azerbaijan and demanded full participation in the peace talks as an equal partner with Russia—and without the US and France (as OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs and major world powers). Given that the Artsakh conflict is one of the most important security issues not only in the South Caucasus, but in the entire post-Soviet space, this new format has the potential to revolutionize the regional security architecture and diminish the role of the West.

Russia and Armenia both have their own reasons for being opposed to Turkey's involvement: Russia, for instance, sees the South Caucasus as a sphere of its major

or even exclusive interest. Yet it is clear that Turkey continues to strengthen its position in Azerbaijan, likely with a view to further expansion both in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia. Already, therefore, we are seeing the South Caucasus gradually shift from being exclusively part of the post-Soviet space to being an item on the Middle Eastern agenda.

The new reality will demand that the major players in the region (chiefly Russia, the US, and the EU) re-evaluate the current reality and then—should they find it necessary—take decisive action. For their part, the Armenian political elites should modernize their foreign and security policy strategy to provide for Armenia's coherent development, including in terms of hard power capabilities, within this new, much more dangerous and unpredictable environment.

Discussion and Conclusion

During a recent Geopolitical Session at the Russian-Armenia University in Yerevan entitled "Armenia and Russia: Imperative for a New Strategy," Dr. Nikolai Silaev, a leading scholar at MGIMO's Institute of International Research, stated that the Second Artsakh War had caused Russia to engage much more actively in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia-Azerbaijan relations than it had previously.

In his view, "Armenia should be not just our [Russia's] ally, Armenia should be a strong ally. I mean that we can rely on an ally that has enough power to implement its functions in the framework of the alliance, which can defend itself in important, even not all, cases... The alliance provides a lot to both Armenia and Russia, as Russia's status as the dominating power in the South Caucasus depends on whether there is a resilient alliance between Armenia and Russia." He added that transport routes between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be opened to bring prosperity and peace for all sides (Geopolitical Session 2021).

The outcome of the war is still enormously painful for the Armenian state and society—and will be for a long time to come. Armenia clearly needs an explicit modernization strategy, resources, and partners to implement it. To date, Russia remains the main actor leading dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan and providing security to the population of Artsakh. Moreover, by facilitating and signing the November 10, 2020, and January 12, 2021, statements, Russia fosters peace and cooperation in the region.

However, when it comes to the normalization of relations with Azerbaijan, both Armenia and Artsakh have a trust deficit. Azerbaijan has massively undermined the trust of the Armenians by waging the war during the Covid-19 pandemic, keeping Armenian prisoners of war as hostages and asking for compromises to free them,

violating Armenia's territorial integrity after the war, and deploying troops on the territory of sovereign Armenia. This is all the more serious, since Azerbaijan's actions go against multiple statements by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs over the last 25 years to refrain from the "use of force" or the "threat of the use of force". Azerbaijan has violated these principles. This, in turn, goes against the logic of the November 10, 2020, and January 12, 2021, statements: the statements aspire to bring peace and stability to the region, but by acting this way, the Azerbaijani authorities are forcing the Armenian side to question the sincerity of Azerbaijani intentions. This has

led to increased calls for the militarization of Armenia and Artsakh—and, someday, revenge.

Finally, peace and cooperation in the region cannot be established without providing security guarantees for the people of Artsakh. Azerbaijani policy over the last thirty years, as well as during the Soviet period, has clearly demonstrated that neither Azerbaijan, nor peacekeepers, nor a superpower will bring durable peace. The people of Artsakh should have the opportunity to determine their own fate and future, as enshrined in the OSCE Minsk Group's Madrid document, the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, and the UN Charter.

About the Author

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