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ANALYSIS

Black Sea Geopolitics after the Russia–Ukraine War: The View from Armenia

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Abstract

This article reviews the impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the changing regional security situation on Armenia with a reference to Armenia’s own security predicament, which has been persistent since the disastrous 44-day war in 2020. In that context, this article explores the perceptions of Armenia’s political elite and experts on the regional situation based on public statements and published articles and interviews.

Introduction

For landlocked Armenia, access to the Black Sea via Georgian ports has been vital, as they provide ferry connections to Bulgarian and Romanian ports and, before the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, ports in Ukraine. Furthermore, a ferry link from Poti to Russia’s Port Kavkaz has been in use periodically, supplementing and sometimes substituting overland automobile cargo traffic between Armenia and Russia. As the recent rounds of Armenian–Turkish consultations do not seem to be leading to a border opening in the short term, access to Georgian ports will remain highly important in the foreseeable future. Additionally, the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna have raised some hopes regarding the theoretical possibility of a new North–South transportation corridor linking Iran with Georgian Black Sea ports via Armenia, as well as new oil and gas pipelines in the same direction. However, Iran’s ongoing uranium enrichment seems to have indefinitely delayed any agreement on the partial lifting of international sanctions; this may even result in the failure to reach such an agreement (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Impact of the Russian–Ukrainian War on Armenia and Perceived Security Challenges

Some of Armenia’s policy priorities during the early stage of the Russian large-scale aggression could be summarised as follows: avoiding recognition of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic; avoiding military support for Russia and, consequently, international isolation and sanctions; evading

any direct involvement in the sanctions imposed on Russia; and securing a continuous supply of grain and other staple foods from Russia. Such efforts to maintain a neutral stance have included abstaining from voting at the UN Human Rights Council when the Ukrainian delegation requested an urgent debate on the human rights violations during Russian aggression and from voting when the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution demanding that Russia immediately end its military operations in Ukraine, as well as engaging in absenteeism during the vote at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) to adopt a document on the consequences of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine (Grigoryan, 2022a). In contrast, before February 2022, the Armenian delegations at various international fora almost invariably voted in Russia’s favour on issues regarding its occupation of parts of Ukrainian territory.¹

In addition, officially, Yerevan has been sensitive to allegations of Armenia’s support of this Russian aggression, especially those originating from Azerbaijan, including the alleged possibility of the redeployment of some Russian troops from its 102nd military base in Gyumri to Ukraine (Kucera, 2022) or that Armenia supplied four Su-30SM fighter aircraft (acquired in 2020) to Russia for deployment against Ukraine. In the latter case, the authorities invited defence attachés from the embassies of EU and NATO member states to the airbase to disprove these allegations (Armenia Ministry of Defence, 2022).

At the same time, avoiding antagonising Russia has been a long-term principal feature of foreign policy. Obligations deriving from Armenia’s membership in

1 See, for example, the UN General Assembly’s resolution A/RES/76/70, ‘Problem of the militarization of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as well as parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov’ (UN 2021a), A/RES/76/179 ‘Situation of human rights in the temporarily occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine’ (UN 2021b), or voting on similar issues in the previous years.

the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) or the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) have hardly ever been questioned. Even though the CSTO declined Armenia's request to intervene because of an Azerbaijani incursion into Armenia's territory in May 2021, Armenia sent approximately 100 troops to Kazakhstan in January 2022 as part of a CSTO mission, and the secretary of Armenia's Security Council, Armen Grigoryan (no relation with the author), told public television that "The public has raised concern about why Armenia appealed for help and didn't receive it and is now providing it. First of all, it's a matter of responsibility, if Armenia has an interest in the CSTO mechanisms' functioning, and the answer is a clear yes" (Mejlumyan, 2022). When Azerbaijan moved further into the Armenian territory during an intensive fight on 13–14 September 2022, the Armenian government formally invoked the CSTO's collective defence provision, seeking military aid to restore the territorial integrity of the country in accordance with article 4 of the CSTO charter; however, no such aid followed (Mejlumyan, 2022). Consequently, the secretary of the Security Council noted in an interview with the RFE/RL Armenian Service that Armenia lacked any hope that the CSTO defence mechanisms would be activated (Aslanyan, 2022). Furthermore, Russia, which is the dominant CSTO member, failed to fulfil similar obligations that are stipulated by the 1997 bilateral treaty on friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance.

Notably, several foreign observers have considered the recent events in terms of Russia's diminishing power (Walker, 2022; Cenus, 2022). Some Armenian experts have also viewed Azerbaijan's recent incursion into Armenia in terms of Russia's weakness—resulting from its unsuccessful military engagement in Ukraine. Particularly, the director of the Regional Studies Centre, Richard Giragosian, has noted this and other important factors including the recent agreement with the EU, whereby Azerbaijan would supply natural gas to Europe as an alternative to Russian energy, and Azerbaijan's rather accurate estimation of the international community's likely reaction, which involved the usual accusations of "false equivalency" and "inappropriate parity" as well as statements calling on "both sides" to de-escalate. At the same time, Giragosian notes, some more principled reactions, from France and the Netherlands in particular, could be rather unexpected towards Baku (Giragosian, 2022). However, Giragosian also notes that "There is neither a future nor relationship between Armenia and the CSTO. ... And, I think Prime Minister Pashinyan's call for invoking security and guarantees only exposes the weakness and emptiness of that relationship. ... However, at the same time, the bigger challenge, well beyond the CSTO, is that Russia is now

completely exposed as a danger. It's a challenge of being an unreliable partner for Armenia. That's quite a different challenge than a predictable enemy. An unreliable friend is a new challenge" (Civilnet, 2022).

There have also been even more critical opinions in Armenia of Russia and its role in the region. The former chargé d'affaires in Russia, Director of the Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation, Stepan Grigoryan, has noted how Russia abstained from the fulfilment of its duties as an ally even before launching its current aggression against Ukraine, particularly referring to Azerbaijan's military incursion into Armenia in May 2021 as well as other occasions. According to Grigoryan's sources in the government, Russia also sides with Azerbaijan, exerting pressure on Armenia to open an extraterritorial transportation corridor through its territory that is controlled by Russian border guards, which would effectively isolate Armenia from Iran (Tumakova, 2022).

According to some reports, Russian border guards deployed in Armenia have already installed five modular checkpoints in the vicinity of villages in the southern part of the country, close to its border with Iran, and they started checking travellers' documents some time ago. The National Security Service of Armenia did not respond to journalists' enquiries regarding this issue, while Russian representatives have stated that their actions are aimed at the prevention of illegal migration and smuggling (Khulyan, 2022). Considering the border control regime is already in place, the Russian explanation has not eliminated the existing concerns.

According to information publicised on 16 September 2022 by a watchdog nongovernmental organisation, the Union of Informed Citizens, some of the modular checkpoints are not being used at the moment, although the Russian border guards had previously attempted to build fences and effectively mark the corridor along the road connecting Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan; thus far, such attempts have been unsuccessful (Factor TV, 2022). In turn, former member of the National Assembly (2019–2021) and political scientist Mikayel Zolyan notes that Armenia has suggested opening all regional communication routes, but Azerbaijan apparently supports the corridor approach, which would give it a direct connection to Nakhichevan and Turkey while otherwise keeping Armenia isolated; thus, the latest military escalation was an attempt to exert pressure on Yerevan, whereby Russia remained passive because the corridor approach suits its interests as well (Dubnov, 2022).

However, Chairman of the Centre for Political and Economic Strategic Studies, Benyamin Poghosyan, while also considering that "[t]he ongoing war in Ukraine created additional complications for Russian

and CSTO military involvement”, at the same time, argued that “Russia is likely to perceive any decision by Armenia to withdraw or freeze its membership in the CSTO as a hostile action ... [a] decision to withdraw or freeze Armenia’s membership in the CSTO would negatively impact Armenia–Russia relations. It would further deteriorate Armenia’s external security environment” (Poghosyan, 2022).

Brief discussions with other Armenian experts, as well as observations in the media and on social networks, also show that scepticism towards CSTO membership and Russia’s security guarantees has grown considerably. Russia’s apparent interest in providing a transportation corridor under its control to Azerbaijan is also interpreted in terms of the possibility of having an additional overland connection between Russia and Turkey—a significant factor, given Turkey’s ongoing active collaboration with Russia regarding the circumvention of international sanctions. Furthermore, military escalations continue to serve as inspiration for the pro-Russian opposition to apply domestic pressure on the Armenian government, even advocating the possibility of joining the Russia–Belarus union state, which is likely Russia’s next policy goal vis-à-vis Armenia (Grigoryan, 2022a; 2022b).

Prime Minister Pashinyan’s statements have been sceptical yet cautious. Most recently, he mentioned his conversation with a CSTO official among many issues covered in a lengthy interview with Public Television of Armenia: “it was even said that the CSTO was concerned that it might lose Armenia. To which I replied that there is the opposite concern in Armenia — that Armenia will lose the CSTO. Or when they say that Armenia will leave the CSTO, in Armenia there is the opposite concern — that the CSTO will leave Arme-

nia. And this is not a play on words. We expect a clear political assessment of the situation” (Dovich, 2022).

Conclusion

In summary, the security vacuum and lack of options for a peaceful settlement with Azerbaijan on favourable terms, largely because of Russia’s continuing dominance of the negotiations while remaining an unreliable partner, amidst a lack of U.S. and EU regional engagement, are perceived as security challenges for Armenia. This situation is further exacerbated by Armenia’s economic and infrastructural dependence on Russia.

Regardless of the eventual outcome of the Russian aggression against Ukraine and any postwar settlement, the entire European security architecture can hardly return to the *status quo ante*. While some of Armenia’s policy-makers’ recent decisions have clearly resulted from short-term considerations, longer-term planning, including a reassessment of some of the priorities and available opportunities, has become especially important.

It still remains to be seen whether EU’s diplomacy will keep expanding its activities, including mediation, also after the side event of the first European Political Community summit, which may help to avoid further border incidents (European Council, 2022). While not a substitute for security guarantees that Armenia has recently been lacking, such activities increase the possibility of a peaceful settlement, which would eventually improve economic and social perspectives. While abrupt moves perceived hostile by Russia would create additional security risks, maintaining the long-term dependence on Russian security guarantees, as well as economic dependence, may multiply the risks in the longer term.

About the Author

Armen Grigoryan is co-founder and vice president of the Yerevan-based Centre for Policy Studies.

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