

# Armenia in a Shifting Security Environment

**Gayane Novikova**

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In the context of a broad security analysis it is necessary to bring into focus the regional geopolitical environment. It critically – and increasingly – influences developments in and around every regional state. Meanwhile, a fragile regional security per se can greatly contribute to the escalation of existing local conflicts and even transform some of them into regional ones. The global security deficit is increasing.

Armenia's geopolitical location – at the core of an area that includes the South Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, and Iran – is very challenging. A hostile US – Russia relationship, growing disagreements between the US and Turkey, a new cycle of dangerous escalation of tension between the US and Iran, some improvement in Turkish-Iranian bilateral relations and the deepening ties of both states with Russia, – all these trends directly influence and shape the trajectory of Armenian foreign and security policy. Negative and / or unexpected developments in the wider region will seriously threaten Armenia's security. To survive "a battle" between the global and regional actors it needs to demonstrate and to implement maximum flexibility and maneuverability. Armenia's strategic location contains, alongside serious limitations, also some advantages. Therefore, geopolitics matters ...again.

## The "Velvet" and the "Thorns"

The Velvet Revolution of April-May 2018 was focused first and foremost on Armenia's domestic issues. On the one hand, distrust in the existing political system and the power, and corruption, as well as insufficient health care, education, and social security

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**Armenia has close relations with Russia. The previous President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan met with Vladimir Putin several times. The current Armenian government inherited a subordinated relationship with Russia.**

have negatively influenced the demographic situation and foreign investments. The combined impact of these issues upon the economic development of the country was devastating: unemployment and poverty levels, according to the World Bank's prediction, in 2018 would be as high as 18,1% and 38,2%, correspondingly.

On the other hand a widespread belief that internal stability is a main guaranty for Armenia's external security constituted strong leverage for the previous government to manipulate the society and to prevent the open expression of the anger simmering in the society.

A four-day war in April 2016 in the territory of the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) accompanied by artillery attacks by Azerbaijani forces on Armenia proper, brought this myth to an end: A mostly passive and silent disagreement by the society at large with the authorities was transformed into massive non-violent actions in the Spring of 2018, which in turn resulted in a full-scale change of power.

Revising the pillars of domestic policy, the incumbent Prime-Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, has argued on many occasions that a main goal of the Velvet Revolution was the initiation and implementation of significant political and economic change. These transformations – in the medium term perspective – will place Armenia among the most politically stable and attractive for business states. He also confirmed that there will be no critical changes in the directions of Armenian foreign policy, and that Armenia will remain committed to all its international obligations. Meanwhile, his message to the international community accentuated the priority to preserve and strengthen Armenia's sovereignty and security.

The current Armenian government inherited a subordinated relationship with Russia, a very cautious and limited cooperation with the EU, a low-level cooperation with the US and NATO, and a very narrow participation in regional communication and transportation systems. A direct involvement in the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict, and therefore extremely complicated relations with Azer-

bajian and Turkey, continuously play a part in Armenia's interactions with regional and global actors.

Three factors – the threat of becoming a target in a cyber war, a growing militarization of the broader region, and an ongoing conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan – demand from Armenia a reevaluation and modification of its national security and defense strategies. In February 2015, the Ministry of Defense amended its military doctrine shifting away from a deep defense to a preemptive deterrence approach through the adaptation of a so-called deterrence system. This significant change has required a modernization of the weapons arsenal.

### "Just Business"

Russia, affected by European and American sanctions, is eager to preserve and extend its ties with the states, interested in any type of cooperation. Arms sales, together with oil and gas deliveries, have become over the years unique tools for Russia in achieving its strategic goals. Control over its neighboring states plays a significant role in Russia's strategic thinking and acting. Russia remains a major weapons supplier for Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, there are some nuances in its approach to these two states, both of which Moscow defines as its strategic partners. Azerbaijan does not participate directly in any organization under Russia's leadership and does not have a desire to do so. It purchases Russian offensive weapons at export prices. The Russian



Graphics: Via author

**Armenia and Azerbaijan are hostile Caucasian nations involved in a protracted conflict.**

military presence in the Azerbaijani territory ended with the closure of the Gabala Radar Station in 2012.

Armenia is a member of all Russia-led political, military, and economic organizations. One Russian military base is located on Armenian soil; the Erebuni airport near Yerevan hosts the Armenian and Russian air forces; Russian guards patrol Armenia's external borders together with their Armenian counterparts. Russia has been considered one of the main security guarantors of Armenia. As a member of the CSTO (Cooperation and Security Treaty Organization), Armenia has

been purchasing Russian defensive weapons at Russian domestic prices.

Declaring serious changes in the Armenian defense strategy, the Pashinyan government has intensified military ties with Russia, confirming all previous bilateral agreements and focusing upon the purchase of modern weapons. In August, 2018, Armenia signed a new \$100- million loan agreement with Russia, and in January 2019, the two sides signed a new contract: Eighteen new Sukhoy SU-30SM jets will replace old MiG-29 jets. Four of them will be deployed either at the end of 2019 or the beginning of 2020 at the Erebuni Air Base. The Armenian air defense system includes also Russian-made S300 and BUK-M2 surface-to-air missiles of varying range, as well as the Iskander short-range ballistic missile system.

In comparison to Armenia, Azerbaijan has more financial resources, which provide it with more options to diversify arms purchases. Although Russia remains a major arms supplier, Azerbaijan buys several types of weapons from Israel, Belarus, and Turkey. In addition to the Russian-made S300 and TOS-1A (Solntsepyok) rocket systems, Azerbaijani air defense forces are equipped with Israeli LORA ballistic missiles, Hermes-900 surveillance drones, and EL/M-2106-ATAR sky-capture advanced radars; they possess also Belarusian Polonez tactical missile complex and Turkish İHTAR anti-drone system and SOM-B1 cruise missiles.

The Armenian leadership has many times and at different levels expressed its disappointment and irritation with Russia and Belarus (which are Armenia's partners in the CSTO and the Eurasian Union) regarding their military ties with – and weapons supplies to – Azerbaijan.



Photo: Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**On 24 July 2019, Armenian Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan met with Mamuka Bakhtadze, the Prime Minister of Georgia. They touched upon a number of issues on the Armenian-Georgian bilateral agenda and positively assessed the effective collaboration between Armenia and Georgia within international organisations.**

## Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

Another serious security challenge for Armenia results from the Russian-Turkish cooperation in the military sphere, which is growing and deepening. Of most concern is the deployment of the Russian S400 Triumph in Turkish territory which began, in accordance with a signed in 2017 bilateral agreement, on July 12, 2019. The Russian

can analogue. This system allows Turkey to monitor, control, and defend significant territory beyond its national borders.

It should be stressed that Armenia does not have diplomatic relations with Turkey and is a party to the unresolved Nagorniy Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan – which means it has two closed international borders. In this context two issues are critical for Armenia: Where exactly will the S400 be deployed in Turkey proper, and whether

and Azerbaijan. Already in a possession of strong economic and military ties with these two neighboring states, Georgia has indicated its willingness to enhance cooperation with both states in the military sphere. In particular, on June 18, 2019, Levan Isoria, Georgia's Minister of Defense, stated at the trilateral ministerial meeting in Gabala (Azerbaijan) that his country is interested in extending regular trilateral exercises focused upon the protection of critical infrastructure, and to take part in Azerbaijani-Turkish tactical military exercises. Turkish Minister of Defense, Hulusi Akar, confirmed that the parties are planning to expand their cooperation beyond areas of defense and security. These developments demand from Armenia a strategic response aimed at avoiding any further complications in bilateral relations and at preserving Georgia as a friendly partner state. Armenia cannot allow itself either to support blindly any anti-Georgian steps taken by the Russian government, or to passively observe Azerbaijani-Turkish efforts to involve Georgia in the anti-Armenian campaign and activity.

Armenia faces another variety of complications stemming from the conflict around Iran. The withdrawal of the US from the Iran nuclear treaty in 2018, combined with the very recent highly dangerous escalation of tension in the Strait of Hormuz, in the worst-case scenario, can end in an overt international conflict. It may affect Armenia in many ways: a high probability exists that a flow of refugees from Iran to Armenia would appear; the Armenian-Iranian border would close; and a reduction of Iranian gas supply to Armenia would occur. Moreover, Armenia which has special economic, political, and cultural relations with Iran, can find itself under strong pressure – and even the threat of sanctions – from the US. It is important to acknowledge that all parties which are directly and indirectly involved and can be strongly affected by this conflict, understand the far-reaching consequences of a new war and take certain preemptive steps. In particular, according to Bloomberg (May 31, 2019), in order to avoid further military escalation in the Middle East Russia rejected a request of the Iranian government to buy the S400 missile defense system.

## Concluding Remarks

An intensive militarization of the South Caucasus and a rapidly growing security deficit in the broader Middle East is forcing Armenia to reevaluate and, to some degree, remodel its security strategy.

- It is obvious that no alternative to a strong strategic partnership with Russia exists and Armenia will continue

Photo: Tankasan



**Russian MiG-29 RF-93752 aircraft at Erebuni Military Base in Armenia**

missiles were delivered to the Mürted Air Base in Ankara province. According to Turkish authorities, it has not yet been decided where exactly these complexes will be deployed. However, the same day Andrey Frolov, the editor-in-chief of the Russian journal "Arms Export" (Export vooruzheniy) and an expert at the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, quoting unnamed Turkish sources, mentioned as their possible locations the Mürted Air Base and some area (as yet not identified) in proximity to the Armenian border. Earlier even rumors circulated that Turkey can deploy the Russian missile complex either in the territory of Azerbaijan or Kuwait to avoid a conflict with the US that could lead – and in fact already has led – to an exclusion of Turkey from the American F-35 fighter jet program.

Without discussing the details of this Russian-Turkish deal, which to some extent jeopardizes Turkey-NATO relationships and puts Turkish-American relations at a serious risk, it is necessary to mention that the S400 parameters (i.e. a target flights altitude 27.3 km, an anti-aircraft range 400.7 km, a radar detection range of 600.3 km, and a ballistic missile range of 59.5km) possess real advantages over the American MIM-104 Patriot missile defense system (19.3; 69.2; 149.7, and 19.3 km, respectively). As The Wall Street Journal correctly pointed out, the S400 has not been tested in battle; however, on the paper it outperforms its Ameri-

its programming system will allow using it against the Russian Sukhoy SU-30SM fighter jets, which are in the Armenian arsenal?

At the beginning of May, 2019, the armed forces of Azerbaijan and Turkey conducted three-day joint exercises around Baku. One month later another joint short-term exercise took place in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, on the border with Armenia. In mid-June 2019, the Armenian Armed Forces evaluating the country's air defense capacities, conducted military exercises with the inclusion, among others, of the S300 missile defense system.

## Georgia and Iran: In Trouble

Two other direct neighbors of Armenia – Georgia and Iran – which are of a strategic importance for Armenia, are facing serious problems owing to the increasing pressure from Russia and the US, respectively.

The scale of the most recent anti-Russia demonstrations in Tbilisi, which were followed by the arrest of several oppositional figures, blamed for an attempted coup-d'état, indicates once again that the existing conflict within the Georgian society between pro- and anti-Russian forces can be easily transformed into a tit-for-tat game between Russia and Georgia. In search of protection from Russia, Georgia leans toward the US and NATO as non-regional partners and – on the regional level – toward Turkey

its membership in all Russia-led international organizations, above all in the CSTO and the Eurasian Union. However, in the light of the broad spectrum of special relationships of other members of these organizations with Azerbaijan, Armenia should make it clear that its security, as well as the security of the Republic of Artsakh, is non-negotiable and it constitutes a high priority for both the Armenian government and the Armenian society.

- Armenia needs to be more involved in those NATO's partnership programs which don't conflict with its obligations to the CSTO and its bilateral military agreements with Russia.
- It should take advantage of the high interest of the European states toward the new Armenia and use this momentum to stimulate and implement programs aimed at democratization of the state and society.
- The Armenian-American relationship has high potential, which still needs to be explored.
- There is no sign of any improvement in Armenian-Turkish relations; however, it cannot be excluded that Russia will try to initiate and mediate low-level bilateral talks.
- Armenia should avoid any tension with Georgia and remain neutral in the Russian-Georgian conflict. This will allow, to some extent, to slow down Georgia's slipping into the Turkish-Azerbaijani sphere of influence. A more pro-active and multilayered policy toward Georgia will be beneficial for Armenia.
- Armenia cannot compromise and put in danger its special relationship with Iran,



Photo: US Army

**Trainers from the US Army Security Assistance Training Management Organisation (USASATMO) provide instruction to Armenian soldiers during a Warrior Leader Course conducted in Yerevan, Armenia. The US has been trying to reduce Armenia's and Azerbaijan's dependence upon Russia.**

a country of a strategic importance to Armenia.

- An interesting nuance is related to an attempt by the US military circles to obtain a share in the arms race in the South Caucasus. An offer from the US National Security Advisor John Bolton, made in November 2018, to sell arms to Armenia and Azerbaijan in order to reduce their dependence upon Russia still remains unanswered. Each state has its own reasons to continue to keep silent. However, on July 12, 2019, the US House of Representatives passed an amendment that prohibits the transfer of US weapons to Azerbaijan unless the President certifies that such weapons

will pose no threat to civil aviation. This initiative is an answer to Azerbaijan's standing threat to shoot down civilian aircraft operating out of Artsakh's Stepanakert Airport, that as a consequence, remains closed.

All these shifts in the security environment require from the Republic of Armenia also a serious revision of its approach to the resolution of the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict. A statement by David Tonoyan, Minister of Defense of Armenia, can be viewed as the first indication of upcoming changes. **On March 29, 2019, at a meeting with the representatives of the Armenian Diaspora in New York,** he warned Azerbaijan: **"...the formula 'territories for peace' will no longer exist, and we will reformulate it as 'new war – new territories.'"** This preemptive deterrence approach does not mean that Armenia will withdraw itself from the negotiations; rather, it indicates the seriousness of its intention to re-include the Republic of Artsakh into the negotiations and to provide full-scale security to both of the Armenian state entities.

Therefore, growing political-military tensions in the broad region make peace in the South Caucasus even more fragile. However, in the best-case scenario, an established internal stability will allow Armenia to increase its strategic importance and become a stabilizing factor in the region. International economic support in the form of grants and significant investments in the Armenian economy, will also indirectly contribute to regional security. Conversely, in the worst-case scenario Armenia will be trapped in regional warfare. ■



Photo: Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**On 24 June 2019, Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan met with Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in Geneva, where they discussed ongoing reforms of the judicial system in Armenia.**