

**RE-ASSESSING ARMENIA'S SECURITY CHALLENGES:
A RESPONSE TO THE PAPER "REGIONAL SECURITY
DYNAMIC: ARMENIA" BY TATEVIK MKRTCHYAN AND HAYK
KOCHARYAN**

Armenia's Security Policies: Principles versus Reality

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The paper presented by Tatevik Mkrtchyan and Hayk Kocharyan outlines the main security challenges that Armenia is facing and analyzes the responses to those challenges, as envisaged by the security policies of the Armenian government. The authors offer a sound analysis of the documents that regulate government policies in the field of security, such as the National Security Strategy, the National Military Doctrine, etc. They have done a wonderful job analyzing these documents and their applications in practice, showing how the government strategies correspond with the realities on the ground. As I agree with most of the points made by the authors, I would rather focus on some of the aspects of the issues left out of the paper for the simple reason that all aspects of the problem of Armenia's security simply cannot be covered within the limits of a single academic paper. For the same reason I do not claim to offer a detailed analysis of these issues myself, but rather I will try to draw the attention of the speakers and the audience to some issues, which should also become a subject of discussion.

Obviously, the paper deals quite a lot with the document central for Armenia's security policies, the National Security Strategy (the NSS) as well as other documents that encapsulate the principles on which Armenia's security policies are based. I would suggest, that the topic for further discussion here is the relation between the normative and the practical, or in other words, to what extent the principles outlined in NSS and other official documents adequately reflect the realities on the ground

and to what extent are the policies prescribed by these documents correspond to the actual policies of the Armenian government.

Armenia between the West and the East: Not Putting All Eggs in One Basket

Thus, the authors have done a great job analyzing various aspects of the NSS. I would suggest that we continue this discussion by putting the NSS into its historical context and looking at the dynamic of the changing security environment of Armenia. In this sense, a possible topic for further discussion here is to what extent is the NSS, a document conceived in a different historical period, still applicable to the changing realities of today. The authors correctly claim that there is a strong need to re-assess the NSS, as it does not always correspond to the realities of today.

Here is a quote from NSS, brought by Tatevik Mkrтчyan and Hayk Kocharyan, which describes the principles of “complementarity” and “engagement”, upon which Armenia’s foreign and security policy is based:

“Armenia’s strategic partnership with Russia, its adoption of a European model of development, mutually beneficial cooperation with Iran and the United States, membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and its intensification of the cooperation with the NATO alliance explained as contribution to the consolidation of the potential of Armenia’s policy of complementarity (NSS Chapter IV).

This quote, in essence sums up the main goals and trends of Armenia’s foreign policy for the last two decades, or maybe even longer. The ease with which, the authors of document put in the same sentence such goals as “strategic partnership with Russia”, “adoption of a European model of development”, “mutually beneficial cooperation with Iran and United States” reflects a much easier time, before the Ukraine crisis, the war in Syria, the recent presidential election in US. It was a time when contradictions between various geopolitical actors existed, and at some points they could have been quite sharp (as over Kosovo or Georgia), but, in spite of those contradictions, both Russia and the West operated within a

single security framework, based on shared approaches and principles. Today, this security framework, which has never been formalized and existed mostly due to the goodwill and understanding between various actors, is gone up in smoke of the burning tires on Kiev's Maidan, the heavy artillery guns in Eastern Ukraine, the fires of Aleppo. Probably, the last hopes of returning to this common security framework were killed by the actions of the alleged Russian hackers in the presidential elections.

What does all this mean for Armenia? To what extent are the principles of "complementarity" and "engagement" possible to maintain in this new security environment. So far, Armenia has resisted the urge to make a choice between the poles of the emerging global and regional competition, since that would entail serious security risks. However, at certain moments, the pressure to make a choice becomes so strong that resisting that pressure is ripe with even worse security risks. Thus, on September 3 2013, Armenia surprisingly ditched the already negotiated Association Agreement with the EU, opting instead for the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan (later to become the Eurasian Economic Union). To the outside world Armenian officials tried to sell the story, according to which Armenia's choice was based on economic benefit. But in internal discussions even some government figures explained the decision by security considerations. A repetition of the same scenario on a smaller scale took place recently, when Armenian government opted out of the NATO wargame "Agile Spirit" in neighboring Georgia, and the decision was announced on the last minute once again.

However, while time after time being force to make a reluctant choice, Armenia sticks to the policy of complementarity (though the word itself is no longer used as it is associated with a former Minister of Foreign Affairs, who is in opposition to the current government). Hayk Kocharyan and Tatevik Mkrtychyan quote one of the recent speeches of Serzh Sargsyan, in which he says the following about Armenia-EU partnership "Throughout this process Armenia has vividly demonstrated that it has been possible to make compatible various integration processes while

harvesting and sowing everything positive and useful, which unite and does not divide nations”¹.

These policies, with a different extent of success, are performed by most post-Soviet countries, including almost all Russian allies, even an ally as close to Moscow as Belarus. These policies are often called “multi-vector policies” or “maintaining the balance between East and West”, which is probably not a very accurate term, since in most cases there is a strong imbalance between the West and East in this relationship. Rather, a term borrowed from world of finance, “strategic hedging” explains the situation better, at least in case of Armenia. “Strategic hedging” in this case means that Armenia is heavily invested in its security relationship with Russia, yet it is hedging this strategic choice by developing relationships with the EU, USA and NATO, following the famous principle of “not putting all eggs in one basket”.

Number One Challenge to Armenia’s Security: Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Obviously the paper pays significant attention to the most pressing issue for Armenia’s security, that of the Karabakh conflict. As the paper deals with the issue in detail, we shall focus only on some of the aspects of the Karabakh conflict.

As with other issues, when it comes to Armenia’s security policies, the subject of the relations between the principles and policies outlined in official documents and the policies on the ground remains a major topic of discussion. Thus, when it comes to the issue of which is the solution, seen as the preferred one for Armenia, the NSS in effect outlines a model of solution, which is not far from that suggested by “the Madrid principles”: “Nagorno Karabakh should have a geographic link to Armenia and its security should be guaranteed” (NSS, Chapter III).. Of course, the concept of “geographic link with Armenia” is open to interpretation. In a recent

¹Statement by President Serzh Sargsyan at the Congress of the European People’s Party, 29.03.2017, Available at: <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2017/03/29/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-statement-at-the-EPP-congress-in-Malta/>

statement, the outgoing US Minsk Group co-chair, Richard Hoaglande interpreted the concept of the geographic link with Armenia as follows: "It must be wide enough to provide secure passage, but it cannot encompass the entire area of the Lachin district"², (and nothing was said of the Kelbajar district, as if its return to Azerbaijan is simply out of question). Obviously, this is hardly the interpretation that the Armenian government prefers. However, it is quite an interesting detail, worth noting: instead of fostering maximalist expectations regarding the fate of Karabakh, the NSS prefers a quite moderate approach, which would probably be considered excessively soft by the majority of Armenian public opinion today.

There are couples of additional issues, related to Karabakh conflict, which I would like to raise to stimulate the discussion, in addition to those that have been presented by the paper. Thus, one question, which concerns Armenian society, especially in the wake of the 2016 escalation, is the following: to what extent has Armenia's security alliance with Russia, and Armenia's membership in the CSTO served the purpose of ensuring the security of Armenia and, specifically, Nagorno-Karabakh.

When it comes to this issue, there is a distinction in Armenia between membership in CSTO and the bilateral relationship with Russia. This is also reflected in a speech by Serzh Sargsyan, quoted by the authors of the paper: "There is no doubt that each country has its own interests and priorities, but they should not be cited against our shared interests and mutual obligations. Every time when the armed forces of Azerbaijan use guns, rocket mortars, or artillery against the Republic of Armenia, they are firing at Astana, Dushanbe, Bishkek, Moscow, and Minsk"³. The concern expressed in this statement reflects the fact that during the April escalation the CSTO members and the organization in general failed to offer political

² Minsk Group US Co-Chair Presents Six Main Points for Karabakh Conflict Settlement, Epress.am, 24 August, 2017, <http://epress.am/en/2017/08/24/minsk-group-us-co-chair-presents-six-main-points-for-karabakh-conflict-settlement.html>

³ The Statement of the President of RA at the session of the CSTO Collective Security Council, Working visit of president Serzh Sargsyan to Russian Federation, 21.12.2015, <http://www.president.am/en/foreign-visits/item/2015/12/21/Working-visit-of-President-Serzh-Sargsyan-to-Russia-December-21/>

support (let alone military) to its member Armenia, with the exception of one quite timid statement by the acting secretary of the organization on the first day. Moreover, some members, Belarus and Kazakhstan signified support for the position of Azerbaijan, a country that is a member of neither CSTO nor EAEU.

Hence, Armenia's membership in CSTO is seen through the lens of its bilateral security relationship with Russia. Whatever Sargsyan says no serious policy maker or military planner in Armenia expects Belarusian and Tajik military to come to Armenia's aid in case of an Azerbaijani attack on Armenian border. Obviously, what matters for Armenia's security is the strategic relationship with Russia. However, here as well some serious questions have been raised, especially in the aftermath of the April war in 2016. Russian weapon sails to Azerbaijan, which have been continued even after the April escalation, as well as Moscow's reluctance to offer political support to its ally, have led to a serious disappointment in Armenia, raising the question, to what extent Armenia's reliance on Russia in its security issues is justified. To an extent, Armenian government has since then tried to deal with this issue by taking steps in two directions: on the one hand, by raising the issue with Russia, and on the other by engaging in "strategic hedging", as described before. In particular, "the strategic hedging" approach manifests itself in maintaining relations with NATO, as well as, recently, in the attempts to foster military cooperation with China⁴.

The April escalation in Karabakh also gave rise to the so-called concept of "nation-army" put forward by the government in 2016. The authors discuss this topic, so I will not go into details regarding this issue. However, there are certain questions that need to be asked in relation to the government's use of the term "nation-army". To what extent is the "nation-army" an idea that the government is willing to put in action, and to what extent is it simply a PR stunt or political manipulation, aimed at

⁴ Armenian defense minister begins official visit to China, Panorama.am, September 5, 2017, <https://www.panorama.am/en/news/2017/09/04/Armenian-defense-minister-begins-official-visit-to-China/1828971>

consolidation of society around the ruling government and marginalizing opponents? There are reasons to think that this may be more of a political tool than a real program. In those countries, where the concept of “nation-army” has been implemented, usually this includes arming of the general population in some form. It is highly questionable that Armenian government would implement that model, because of concern for public safety, as well as concerns for a possible popular uprising (especially in the wake of the *Sasna Tsrer* incident in July 2016).

So far, the only instance where the concept of “nation-army” was put in practice, was the introduction of a *de facto* tax, which envisages that every working Armenian citizen, irrespective of the size of their income, will have to pay 1000 drams from their salary for a special fund, designed to support the families of the soldiers killed in battle. When opponents raised concerns related to constitutionality and social justice in connection with this *de facto* tax, government officials and pro-government media simply accused the opponents of acting against Armenia’s interests and in this way breaking the ranks of “the nation-army”.

Other Issues for Discussion

As I don’t have enough time and space to offer a detailed discussion of other aspects of Armenia’s security policies I will simply list some of the aspects, which also need to be discussed.

The paper has discussed the issue of Armenia-Turkey relations and their security implications for Armenia. Hence, I will not go into this issue. However, I would like to draw attention to the conundrum of Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhijevan, where the security challenges presented by the Karabakh conflict and Armenia-Turkey relations converge. Nakhijevan has a border with Turkey, and has seen a high rate of Azerbaijani-Turkish military cooperation in the recent years⁵. According to the controversial 1921 Kars treaty, Turkey has a status of guarantor of Nakhijevan’s status,

⁵ Eduard Abrahamyan, Armenia and Azerbaijan’s Evolving Implicit Rivalry Over Nakhchivan, Jamestown, August 3, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/armenia-and-azerbaijans-evolving-implicit-rivalry-over-nakhchivan/>

which may offer Turkey a pretext to intervene into the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, in case military actions involve the territory of Nakhijevan. In addition, Nakhijevan is in the immediate vicinity of Yerevan (only 50 km to the suburbs of Yerevan) and the deployment of rocket systems such as the Russian-supplied 9K58 Smerch (60–90 km range) multiple rocket launchers is a grave source of concern from the point of view of Armenia's security⁶.

In addition to the issues discussed so far, I would like to point attention to those aspects of security that do not necessarily have a military dimension, yet are equally serious. Unfortunately, both Armenian government and Armenian analytical community are often operating with a narrow definition of security, as something that has to do mostly with military issues and/or covert actions. Such understanding of security leaves out many important dimensions of the problem.

Thus, to bring one example, this narrow understanding of security leaves out matters of environmental security. In case of Armenia, an extremely important aspect is the issue of seismic activity, which presents a deadly threat for the security of Armenia's population. In fact, the indifference of both the government and the society to the gravity of the seismic threat is simply astonishing for a country that has experienced a devastating deadly earthquake less than three decades ago.

Equally neglected are issues related to public health. Socio-economic difficulties and the degradation of the public health system may put Armenia at risk of public health emergencies, devastating effects of which may be comparable to those of war or natural disaster.

An extremely problematic aspect of Armenia's security is energy security. As in the field of military security, here Armenia is heavily relying on Russia, which has helped to provide for the needs of the country in the short term, but presents serious challenges in the long term perspective. The paper mentions Armenia's deal with Gazprom, which guarantees the Russian company a monopolist position in the Armenian market until 2043, and this is only one of the challenges that need to be discussed when it comes to

⁶ Ibid.

energy security. And in certain cases, as in the case of the Armenian nuclear power plant different dimensions of security, such as energy security, environmental security and military security come together.

Issue of cyber security is another topic that needs to be discussed. Cyber-security is increasingly becomes a challenge globally, and in case of Armenia the challenges in this field come both from the global trends, and from the conflicts that exist in the region. It is true that, as a country with a relatively low level of proliferation of IT in various spheres of economy, may be less vulnerable to cyber threats than some of the more advanced countries. However, even Armenia is still advancing in such fields as digitalization of state services, of business, etc. So, in these fields there is a need to take precautions against the possible risks associated with cyber warfare and other possible cyber risks.

Cyber security is often related to information security. In Armenia, usually when it comes to information security, the most common perceptions of threats point to Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, an important issue is often overlooked, that of the influence of foreign media, particularly Russian media on the Armenian society. Of course, Russia is Armenia's ally, however, whatever their relationship, the two countries may have diverging interests in a number of issues, so the domination of a foreign country's media in the information field, is a cause for concern.

Finally, there is another issue that deserves to be discussed - the problem of securitization of the public discourse. In Armenia the expression "a matter of national security" is often invoked in relation to issues that would normally considered to be very far from the field of security, such as the rights of LGBT persons or the proliferation of religious teachings that differ from those of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The concept of security perceived in this way is often used by the government to silence its critics, or by different political and social groups in order to marginalize and demonize their opponents, presenting their views and actions as "threats to national security". This is a worrying trend, which not only leads to unhealthy conditions for the public debate, but also diverts attention from the real issues related to the security of our country.