

## Analysis

# NATO and Armenia: A Long Game of Complementarism

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## Abstract

Armenia's relationship with NATO, and indeed the entire course of its Euro-Atlantic integration, is constrained by the country's close ties with Russia. The framework of Armenia's cooperation with the NATO is static, albeit in a positive way. This policy is unlikely to change abruptly despite a wide variety of events taking place in and around the South Caucasus, including the Russia-Georgia war of August 2008, Russia's withdrawal from the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty in December 2007, the recent diplomatic rapprochement with Turkey, the global financial crisis, and Iran's upcoming presidential elections.

## Developing Ties with NATO

Armenia-NATO cooperation dates back to the 1990s. After a few years of regular contacts, in the mid-nineties, Armenia became involved in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and started to participate in sessions of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Starting roughly from 2005, contacts between Armenian officials and NATO bodies became much more active at all levels. Institutionally, this activity was reflected in the fact that Armenia obtained a NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP). As soon as the IPAP was signed, Armenia's cooperation with NATO intensified in a number of areas including the drafting of a military doctrine, cooperation in military education, a peacekeeping mission to Kosovo, and the modernization of communication and control systems.

In 2008, soldiers from NATO-member states participated in a joint military exercise on Armenian territory. Regular contacts between NATO and Armenian officials included top-level meetings between Armenia's presidents Robert Kocharyan and then Serzh Sargsyan, and the NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. In June 2008, Armenia doubled its peacekeeping force in Kosovo and even considered the option of sending similar troops to Afghanistan. The format of institutional cooperation between Armenia and NATO was thus similar to that of Armenia's neighbors in the South Caucasus, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

## The Russia Factor

Armenia's policy vis-à-vis NATO differs in one crucial respect from Azerbaijan's and Georgia's. Armenia is party to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and maintains smooth political relations with Russia. These ties impose certain limitations on Armenia's political integration with NATO. The fact that Armenia's ties with NATO receive much less publicity than is the case with Azerbaijan and Georgia derives from Yerevan's

reluctance to directly associate Euro-Atlantic integration with an anti-Russian foreign policy stance. Armenia was party to the CFE until the treaty started to become meaningless after Russia pulled out. Armenia still has a fairly large Russian military base on its territory. Since Moscow shut down its military bases in Georgia, which once formed a strategic entity with the Armenian base, this base lost most of its military value because communication has to go via Georgia and is increasingly problematic, but it has grown in political significance.

For Armenia's political leadership, even a small step in the direction of closer Euro-Atlantic integration has always had a political connotation. Because of the country's effort to sustain positive relations with Russia, Armenian officials never so much as hint that the country may wish to join NATO in the future.

## A Policy of Complementarities

Such a reactive and cautious approach stems from the overall nature of Armenia's foreign policy. Armenians define this policy using the term "complementarism" – a policy based on sustaining a constant equilibrium between a long-term, values-based European orientation and the country's current security situation, which is tightly connected to the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. In contrast to neighboring Georgia, which has effectively lost all realistic hopes for bringing Abkhazia and South Ossetia back under its control, Armenia has something to lose. The "something" here is not just Karabakh; Armenia is getting investments and hopes also to get credits from Russia, which would be especially helpful during the global financial crisis, and greatly values the opportunity to purchase weapons from Russia at discounted prices. Unlike its neighbors, Armenia has no common borders with Russia, and consequently Armenian society and elites do not feel directly threatened by Russia, as Georgia does. Therefore, relations with Russia form part of the foreign policy equi-

librium that Armenia aims to achieve. Until the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is finally settled, Armenia has no other option than to continue reforming its military forces while maintaining the military potential to cooperate with NATO and CSTO simultaneously.

Finding the right balance between West and East is not always easy for Armenia. For example, maintaining good neighborly relations with Georgia while at the same time being an ally of the Russian Federation is as delicate a matter as broadening cooperation with Iran while also seeking close relations with the U.S. The Russia-Georgia August 2008 war put Armenia's policy of "complementarism" to a severe test. Armenian politicians were careful to distance themselves from Russia's anti-Georgian rhetoric, especially given that Armenia has a similar problem in the unresolved dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. Clearly, just as Russia opposed Georgia's military effort to recapture its secessionist territories, Yerevan does not want to see a forceful restoration of Azerbaijani control over the Armenian-populated and de facto independent republic of Nagorno Karabakh.

So far, Armenia's policy seems to have worked. Now that the Russia-Georgia war has made communications between Armenia and Russia even more difficult, the policy of "complementarism" is that much more important because Armenia needs to cooperate with both Georgia and Russia in order to sustain its economy.

That said, it is clear that Armenia's cautious yet confident cooperation with NATO and the OSCE will continue in the future. It is obviously easier for Armenia to cooperate with organizations such as the OSCE or the Council of Europe, of which it is already a member, than with NATO or the EU. Nevertheless, grad-

ually expanding the format of its integration with the European Union and NATO will remain one of the priorities on Armenia's foreign policy agenda. Armenia will continue implementing standards and norms, while building up cooperative activities. Potentially, Armenia's peacekeeping battalion may be increased to become the first brigade in the Armenian military that conforms to NATO standards.

### Changes Likely to Be Slow

Neither the potential opening of the Armenian-Turkish border nor the possible improvement of relations between the U.S. and Russia after the election in Iran can serve to quickly and radically change the situation described above. It is impossible to imagine a development that would cause Armenia to aggravate its relations with any of its neighbors. Moreover, if the region becomes less problematic, for example, if Turkey opens its borders with Armenia and/or successfully moves along the path of European integration, and Iran improves its international image, Armenia will have even more room to keep up and even boost its "complementarity" foreign policy, including even closer cooperation with NATO.

Armenian officials have repeatedly declared that ongoing military reforms in Armenia would be fully implemented by 2015. Any further reforms will need to involve a transition from the current Soviet model of the Armenian army to a more modern one. Should the geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus evolve by that time, giving Armenia more opportunity for "complementary" maneuver, it may be at that point that the country will enter a new stage in its relationship with NATO.

#### *About the author*

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