



საგარეო ურთიერთობებისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების ქართული ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**THE ARMENIAN MILITARY AND
RUSSIAN-ARMENIAN RELATIONS**

EUGENE KOGAN

EXPERT OPINION



2015



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Editor: Jeffrey Morski
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Introduction

The proposed article assesses Armenia's regional strategic position, looks into the state of the Armenian military and the Armenian military of Nagorno-Karabakh, evaluates the vulnerability, preparedness and thinking of the military of both forces about their adversary, Azerbaijan, and, finally, deals with Russian-Armenian relations. Armenia's agenda is dominated, in particular, by its relations with Russia and remains pivotal for the South Caucasus region in general.

Prior to addressing these issues it is of utmost importance to emphasise two very important and crucial factors that concern Armenian weakness or vulnerability. As long as Russia maintains control over Armenia, it keeps Turkey, as the other regional power, at arm's length and prevents *any* possibility of rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia. At the same time, according to the author, Russia sends a clear message to Azerbaijan and Georgia: "Russia is here to stay, keep Armenia in its sphere of influence and maintain a status quo policy on Nagorno-Karabakh," "Georgia, beware that the threat of unfinished business with you remains on the table," and "Azerbaijan, remember that after Georgia, you are the next in line." In other words, for Russia, Armenia's geostrategic position in the region was and still is the *key* to the South Caucasus region. A strong Russian domination sends a clear message to the EU and the US that both actors have neither a place nor a role to play in the region. As long as both actors are not ready to *challenge* the domination of Russia in Armenia, in particular, and the South Caucasus region, in general, Russia remains the power to reckon with and not anybody else. Therefore, the regional balance of power is a concept that is detached from the South Caucasian reality.

Even though the Armenian military may wish to stay away from potential Russian military operations in the region, it cannot since, economically and militarily, President Vladimir Putin remains in control over decisions made in Yerevan. The September 2013 decision of Armenia to join the Russian-led Customs Union (CU) that ultimately led to membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) on 1 January 2015, strengthened Russia's control over Armenia that showed its signs back in 2004. On 20 December 2004, Boris Gryzlov, Speaker of Russia's State Duma, said that Armenia was "Russia's outpost in the Caucasus region"¹ and not a sovereign state. Additionally, factual data presented below supports the author's assertion. Finally, the geostrategic position of Armenia requires the Armenian

military's sober assessment of the country's both friendly and hostile environment and behaving accordingly. Namely, first and foremost relying on its own military force and side by side maintaining membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). We need to remember that the CSTO is neither a substitute nor an alternative for the Armenian military force.

Armenia's Regional Strategic Position

For countries situated in the South Caucasus, geographic location or, rather, geostrategic position presents huge challenges. They either directly face their adversary, as in the case of Georgia and Russia, or they face each other and their adversary's allies' supportive role, as in the case of Turkey and Azerbaijan against Armenia. Armenian vulnerability is further compounded by its geographic position. Armenia is a landlocked country, having sealed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey and open borders with Georgia and Iran; it has very limited room to manoeuvre. Although Armenia has no common border with Russia, Moscow maintains a cost-free military base in Gyumri and an air contingent at the Yerevan-based Erebuni airbase. The military base in Gyumri cum Erebuni airbase considered by Russia as a bridgehead against Georgia in the case of military campaign against Tbilisi. Furthermore, Russia could exert pressure on Georgia by demanding a military corridor across the Georgian region of Samtskhe-Javakheti to Gyumri and, in the case of a refusal, staging conflict with Georgia. Such a scenario should not be dismissed out of hand. The military base in Gyumri is also perceived by Russia as a platform of deterrence against Turkey in the case of potential Turkish involvement in the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Even though Armenia and NATO co-operate militarily and Armenia and the US stage joint peacekeeping exercises, Russia remains the most important actor in the geostrategic game in the South Caucasus.

Russia shrewdly uses the Armenian government as a pawn in its South Caucasus chess game of regional dominance. The Armenian government realises that its utter dependence on Russia puts it in a very vulnerable position; however, it has limited options. The West at large has done very little to reduce the dependence of Armenia on Russia. As a result, Armenia has surrendered its sovereignty and become a loyal supporter of Russia in the South Caucasus. To back up its strategic position, Armenia is obliged

to maintain a robust military force and be prepared for every eventuality with and/or without assistance from Russia and the Russian-led CSTO. Both issues are discussed below.

State of the Armenian Military and the Armenian Military of Nagorno-Karabakh

Even though we know that the overall Armenian military force is comprised of Ground Forces and Air and Air-Defence Forces, we have few known facts to ascertain whether or not this force is combat-ready and capable of inflicting serious damage to its adversary, Azerbaijan. It is easier saying that the force is combat-ready and capable of inflicting damage but harder proving actual readiness since the Armenian defence establishment neither confirms nor denies this information that they consider to be confidential. It is, however, accurate saying that the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army is combat-ready and prepared for every eventuality since the commanders of the force are well-aware of their adversary's capabilities and goals. They are responsible for the defence of the front line. It is known that back in the early 1990s, during the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the nascent Armenian and the Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh forces won the ultimate victory over the Azerbaijani forces. This historical victory has been cherished over the last 25 years; however, at the same time, the linkage between the Armenian military and that of Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh was strengthened and transcended. It has become a normal procedure for the Armenian conscripts serving for a certain period of time in Nagorno-Karabakh along the Line of Contact (LoC), watching its adversary and experiencing an atmosphere of tension first-hand, uncertainty and military skirmishes. In light of last year's August military combat between the armed forces of Armenia and those of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, the Armenian Minister of Defence, Seyran Ohanyan, said that troops deployed along Armenia's border with Azerbaijan and the more militarised LoC around Nagorno-Karabakh must be constantly prepared for "punitive" or "preventive" measures. To that end, Ohanyan said: "The commanders of army battalions and even companies must now be allowed to take such action on their own. I am calling on everyone to give the commanders that freedom."² The point of operational autonomy was further augmented in note 6.

According to the Military Balance 2014, the Army is comprised of 22,900 [professional and contract soldiers, author's comment] and 18,950 conscripts. The Air Force and Air-Defence Aviation Forces have a total of 1,100 members. In total, there are 41,850 army troops and 1,100 Air and Air-Defence Forces personnel. Paramilitary Forces have the strength of 4,300 troops and consist of Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) units and Border Troops under the aegis of the Ministry of National Security (MNS).³ Armenia has also developed an NCO corps. The Military Balance 2014 does not mention the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army at all. As to why this army is not mentioned, it is not entirely clear. We may, however, assume that since Nagorno-Karabakh remains a region of conflict there is a lack of clear information on the strength of the armed forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. Still, according to Emil Sanamyan, the Armenian Armed Forces, *including* [author's italics] those deployed with the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army, number about 53,000. There are several thousand more with militarised forces subordinated to the national security and police services.⁴ According to the IISS Strategic Comments, the Armenian army *excludes* Nagorno-Karabakh's forces which may number as many as 20,000. Armenian forces as compared to the Azerbaijani forces *are seen* [author's italics] as better trained and more capable of sustaining a protracted conflict.⁵ Thus, if we exclude the army and the Air and Air-Defence Forces of Armenia from a total count, we can say that the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army as of June 2014 is comprised of between 11,000 and as many as 20,000. If we say that the population of Nagorno-Karabakh is about 100,000 people, then the defence army constitutes between 9% and 20% of the whole Nagorno-Karabakh population. If 20%, this is certainly a large number. If we exclude non-combatants such as children, women and old people, then the number of combatants may be less. Still, the strength and resolve of this force to fight and win the renewed conflict should not be underestimated. There is an additional factor that the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army remembers. According to the army's perception, Nagorno-Karabakh is their native land. As a result, the army is ready to defend it until the last drop of blood. It is harder to pass an objective judgement about the Armenian forces' discipline, resilience and fighting spirit. After all, the Armenian armed forces did not fight the war against Azerbaijan since the ceasefire agreement was signed in 1994. As a result, we need to be as careful as possible when the IISS Strategic Comments choose to say that Armenian forces *are seen* as being better trained and more capable of sustaining a protracted conflict.

Armenia's mid- to senior-level officers are nearly all veterans of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, including prominent wartime commanders. In recent years, the Armenian military has moved to discharge some of the figures who became officers during the war without a formal military education. Nearly all of Armenia's military forces are concentrated at the Ministry of Defence and the militaries of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh operate as one force. On the ground, Armenian military units benefit from greater operational autonomy than their Azerbaijani counterparts.⁶ While overall military doctrine remains influenced strongly by Russian thinking, Armenia's overseas deployments, which include support to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, enable the troops serving in the Pul-e Khumri Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to learn lessons from their NATO counterparts.⁷ We need not to overestimate the importance of serving with the PRT since the number of Armenian troops is small. There are 40 contractors on a mission in Kunduz while 81 defend the airport of Mazar-e Sharif and the military base of the assistance forces.⁸ Still, the exposure of the Armenian military contingent to Western operational thinking trickles gradually into the minds of Armenians. However, with the recent events in Ukraine, Armenia's Western exposure is likely to be downgraded but not yet terminated. Even though President Vladimir Putin is not very happy with the continued co-operation between Armenia and NATO he *has not yet* demanded that Armenia cease its co-operation with NATO.⁹

According to the Military Balance 2014, Armenia has about 210,000 reserve military with at least 15 years of military experience.¹⁰ Back in April 2011, thousands of reserve troops were called up and spent one week in military camps to refresh and improve their combat skills. The Armenian Ministry of Defence said that the drill meant to "upgrade the combat skills of reserve personnel" and raise "the level of mobilisation readiness in the Republic of Armenia." Davit Karapetyan, the ministry spokesman, stated that the Armenian army command has decided to hold reserve drills on a more "regular" basis. He added that they will also be more intensive than in the past. The previous Armenian reserve mobilisation was announced in March 2010. The Ministry said at the time that it wants to ensure that "every duty-bound Armenian man knows his place and function in the military" in the case of a large-scale armed conflict.¹¹ There has been no further information released on the drill of reserved units.

Despite all the numbers mentioned above and the drills of the reserve troops, the major weakness of the combined military remains the shrinking population of Armenia. Over the last 25 years, the population of Armenia has shrunk from about 3.5 million to slightly more than 2 million today and thus far the emigration trend continues. As long as Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh remain dependent on conscripts, they will not be able to maintain a constant number of troops. At the moment, and for the foreseeable future, it is hard to imagine a *massive influx* of 18-year old Armenians coming from the diaspora to Armenia and their subsequent conscription. On the other hand, Armenians who live in Russia but served with the military may be considered to be a professional reserve force. However, the author has no information about their number or the willingness of the Armenian military to call them up and use them in the case of a renewed conflict. What is known, however, is that according to a bilateral agreement between the Russian and Armenian Ministries of Defence, conscripts of Armenian origin who live in Russia can either serve with the Russian or Armenian armed forces.¹² Again, the author has no information about their number.

Since women are not subject to conscription, their enrolment in military academies in Armenia will not mitigate a shortage of male conscripts.¹³ In 2013, for the first time, young women in Armenia enrolled in the country's two military academies. After acquiring a bachelor's degree, they will be required to serve as officers in the military for ten years. Currently, more than 1,500 women are serving in Armenia's armed forces, mostly in administrative capacities.¹⁴

Whether or not fully professional armed forces can solve the demographic problem is not clear at the moment. Furthermore, fully professional armed forces require long-term financial allocations. Thus, the Armenian military establishment remains trapped between a rock and a hard place namely, between the shortage of conscripts and the wish to have a professional army that should be supported financially in the long run. Whether or not Russia will provide the long-term budgetary assistance cannot be taken for granted.

Armenia's Defence Budget

The Armenian 2013 state budget envisages military expenditure at USD 451 million with USD 105 million increase as compared to 2012.¹⁵ Howev-

er, how exactly and how efficiently the Ministry of Defence spends these funds is proving to be anybody's guess. Defence spending has long been considered off-limits to public scrutiny. The Chamber of Control, which monitors Armenia's state budget, has *never* [author's italics] publicised any information about the spending habits of the Ministry. A 2010 Ministry of Defence audit was deemed "strictly classified."¹⁶

Even though transparency has improved in recent years, the official published defence budget in Armenia still does not capture the *full extent* [author's italics] of military related spending by the country. This is primarily due to the exclusion of much of the military spending in Nagorno-Karabakh, military pensions and the value of the assistance obtained from Russia for border protection. According to the official budget figures, 75% of the budget for Ensuring National Security is allocated towards operational expenditure with capital spending accounting for the remaining 25%. In addition to the problems of transparency is that of exchange rates. The AMD has only been convertible since 2006 so the US dollar conversion rate prior to this has been inferred from GDP data produced by the IMF.¹⁷ In other words, the data prior to 2006 was approximate. To the full extent of the country's military related spending, we need to add the following missing components:

- a) The value of military assistance from Russia in terms of arms and special military equipment. We need to emphasise that arms and special military equipment, which Russia provided and continues to provide Armenia with, is not free of charge as several analysts claimed but offered at a discount rate;
- b) The cost of education and training of Armenian military in the Russian military academies;
- c) The cost of bilateral Russian-Armenian military exercises;
- d) The cost of Armenia's participation in the CSTO military drills;
- e) Military spending in Nagorno-Karabakh is the anyone's guess and
- f) Military pensions remain an additional costly factor.

As a result, if we add the six missing components to the official defence budget, we can say that the *unofficial* defence budget is likely to be somewhere between USD 600 million and USD 800 million or about 4% to 6% of the GDP. The author admits that he does not have supportive evidence

to prove his assessment while the Armenian Ministry of Defence remains non-committal on the issue. Nevertheless, it can be said that the Armenian economy with a state budget of about USD 14 billion in 2015 is a largely militarised economy. As was presented above, the financial assistance that the Armenian defence budget indirectly receives from Russia is of utmost importance to Armenia. At the same time, financial assistance from Russia strongly binds Armenia to Russia and precludes Armenia to back away from Russia. Thus far, the Armenian government has failed to find a solution to Russia's Armenian Gordian Knot.

Russian-Armenian Relations

According to Armenian government data, Russia currently ranks as Armenia's largest economic partner with USD 3 billion worth of investments in the country. Russian firms' control of 80% of Armenia's energy resources accounts for two out of three of its telecommunications companies and now holds a 30-year management contract for its railway.¹⁸ It is true that after Russia, France and Greece are the second and third biggest investors, respectively, but this is due to a national rather than an EU-related initiative. Furthermore, the key difference is that Moscow uses its investments as a tool to gain economic and political dependence on Yerevan's part.¹⁹

Apparently, the Russian government listened carefully to the recent wave of Armenian discontent and, as a result, reduced the price of gas from about USD 316 per one thousand cubic meters (tcm) as of June 2013 to USD 165 in August 2015. The draft of the respective Armenian-Russian agreement was approved at the 18 August 2015 Cabinet meeting of the Government of Armenia. The agreement will be in force until 31 December 2015 whereupon it will be necessary to sign a new agreement.²⁰ Thus, it remains to be seen whether or not the new agreement will be kept at the level of USD 165 or not. Furthermore, as was recently reported Armenia plans to sell its 41 km-long section of an Iranian natural gas export pipeline to Gazprom. As a result, the decision leaves Moscow in full control of natural gas supply routes to Armenia.²¹ No confirmation of the planned sale has yet been published.

Thus, Armenia has chosen Russia as its external power master with Moscow controlling much of the infrastructure in the country. Russia also has a substantial military presence in Armenia that serves as Armenia's security guarantor from Azerbaijan (its adversary in the Nagorno-Karabakh territo-

rial dispute) and from Turkey and Iran (whose borders the Russian military patrols).

Other external powers have very limited influence in Armenia. Barring any substantial weakening of Russia's geopolitical position, Armenia can be expected to remain loyal to Moscow and continue participating in Russia's regional initiatives²² even if Armenian politicians feel uncomfortable or perhaps even reluctant to participate in Russia's activities.

The September 2013 decision made by President Sargsyan to join the Russian-led Customs Union clearly underlined the direction of Armenia.²³ The same decision exposed the weakness of the multilateral policy pursued by President Sargsyan since 2009. It clearly showed that when Armenia is compelled to make its choice Russia remains the final choice even if as Armen Grigoryan stated: "The decision to join the Customs Union means surrendering state sovereignty."²⁴ On 10 October 2014 Armenia signed the EEU agreement at the session of the Supreme Council of the EEU in Minsk.²⁵ The agreement became effective on 1 January 2015.

In military terms, Armenia remains a staunch member of the Russian-led CSTO. In early July 2013, Artur Bagdasaryan, after meeting Nikolay Bordyuzha, Secretary General of the CSTO, said that Russia has promised to modernise the Gyumri military base and the airbase at Yerevan's Erebuni Airport. The modernisation work began in 2013 and will continue for several years. Bagdasaryan also said that: "Collective security forces are being formed in the South Caucasus region where Armenia is the sole CSTO member state. Joint air forces will also be set up here."

Sergey Minasyan, Deputy Director of the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute, said that the plans for the joint air force were not clear in particular, where it would be based – in the North Caucasus or in Armenia. Minasyan speculated that CSTO military transport aircraft might be based in the Russian North Caucasus while air-defence units as well as possibly MiG-29 interceptors and surface-to-air missile units would be based in Armenia. Minasyan further guessed that the modernisation of Armenia's air force was likely related to this CSTO air unit; for example, helping to integrate Armenia's command-and-control system with that of the CSTO.²⁶ Thus, we need to differentiate between Bagdasaryan's official statements and promises made by Bordyuzha and the reality on the ground. What is evident, however, is that the Russian goals with regard to Armenia are direct-

ly linked to the Russian goals towards Azerbaijan. By playing both sides, Russia remains ambiguous and insincere.²⁷

At the same we need to remember that as long ago as August 2010, President Serzh Sargsyan was instrumental in securing a deal that extended the lease of the Gyumri military base until 2044 and President Vladimir Putin has responded accordingly.

In January 2013, Putin authorised his government to sign a new Russian-Armenian defence agreement that calls for joint arms manufacturing. Sergei Shoigu, Minister of Defence, and Colonel General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff, discussed the planned deal during subsequent trips to Armenia. President Sargsyan thanked President Putin on 12 March 2013 for “good progress” in defence co-operation.²⁸ The Armenian Parliament ratified the military co-operation agreement with Russia on 4 December 2013²⁹ while the Russian president has thus far did not ratified the agreement.³⁰ Whether or not this new defence agreement will be implemented or shelved remains to be seen. The author remains sceptical of the agreement implementation since, on 9 February 2012, secretaries of the security councils of Armenia and Russia confirmed their interest in widening the scope of military and technical co-operation between the two states³¹ although very little practical has been accomplished so far.

Conclusion

Armenia, being a member of the CSTO, does not mean that Russia, in the case of a renewed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, will side with Armenia *automatically*. Bordyuzha, in his recent statement on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict escalation, was very cautious. He said: “Armenia, as a full-fledged member of the CSTO, has the right to get extra forces from the CSTO in the case of a Nagorno-Karabakh conflict escalation.”³² There is, however, a huge difference between ‘has the right’ and ‘getting forces right away.’ It would be a grave mistake for Armenian officials to take the Russian statements at face value. As for the promises of the Russian officials, we need to bear in mind that their words may not necessarily match their deeds. Thus, Armenian officials should have no illusions about Russian divided loyalty.

Both the Armenian army with its Air Force and Air-Defence Forces component plus the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army will need to fight on

their own. It is evident that the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army is as well-equipped as - or perhaps even better equipped - than the Armenian armed forces. The Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army positioning along the LoC and its intelligence on and about the adversary are of a better quality as compared to the Armenian Armed Forces. It is harder to make an assessment of the mid- to senior-level officer staff's military preparedness since, according to Sanamyan, they operate as one force. Even if we assume that the armed forces of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh do not operate as one force, there is a large degree of interoperability and synergy; let us call it mutual understanding, coherent strategic thinking, same military equipment, same military training procedures and a strong will to repel the adversary and win the potential conflict. Most crucially, since the ceasefire agreement of 1994, the Nagorno-Karabakh military has established well-entrenched defensive fortifications in the mountain area surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh.

The major weaknesses, as highlighted above, remain the shortage of conscript soldiers, the lack of long-term budgetary assistance for fully-fledged professional armed forces, prevalent Russian military thinking and, finally, the continued Russian economic, political and military dominance over Armenia. As presented above, the exposure of the Armenian military to Western operational thinking remains limited. Furthermore, Russia can, at any suitable time, for Russia, request - or rather demand - stopping even this limited exposure to and participation of the Armenian troops in Western military operations. The West at large is unlikely to react forcefully to Russia's demands and Russia is fully-aware of this crucial fact and thus keeps Armenia trapped under its control. Finally, it should be reiterated that there is no such thing as a regional balance of power since Russia is the power in the region and not anybody else. As long as the West at large is not ready to *challenge* Russian domination over Armenia, the country will do nothing to alienate Russia. By maintaining control over Armenia, Russia continues to intimidate Georgia and Azerbaijan.

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