

My Friend's Enemy is my Friend: Armenian Foreign Policy between Russia, Iran and the United States

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Abstract

The nature of Armenia's relationship with the USA is quite complex. For years Armenia had to cope with a serious dilemma in defining its foreign policy. On the one hand, ever since its independence Armenia has closely cooperated with Russia, on which it is heavily dependent in such areas as security and economy. Armenia's good neighborly relations with Iran are also vital from the point of view of Armenia's economy and national security. On the other hand, Armenia is also striving to forge close contacts with the West, including the USA and Europe. While the Armenian government has repeatedly stated that it is not planning to apply for NATO membership, it is closely cooperating with NATO, and the level of this cooperation is comparable to those of Armenia's neighbors. This policy of simultaneously advancing relations with Russia and the West is called "complementarism," a term associated with Vardan Oskanian, the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1998 to 2008. However, though the term "complementarism" originated in the late 1990s, the idea behind it has been the main paradigm of Armenian foreign policy since its independence.

Balancing between Americans and Russians: Armenia's "complementarism" policy

Armenia and Armenian issues have never been among the major priorities for American foreign policy. However, from the point of view of the United States, Armenia has a significance somewhat disproportionate to its small size, scarce resources and low level of economic development. This significance can be attributed to two main factors: Armenia's geopolitical location in an important borderland between Europe, Central Eurasia and the Middle East and the existence of an influential Armenian Diaspora in the US.

The first time Armenia became a foreign policy issue for the US was during World War I, when American diplomats did whatever was possible to save the Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire from extermination by the Ottoman government. Throughout the two years of its existence (1918–1920), the Republic of Armenia received humanitarian aid and political support, earning President Woodrow Wilson consideration as a friend of Armenia and Armenians. At one point Wilson's administration even had plans to put Armenia under the government of the United States as a "mandate territory," but these plans were soon abandoned. American assistance to Armenia, which remained mostly within the limits of humanitarian aid, could not save the short-lived republic from being occupied and divided by the Turkish Kemalist movement and the Russian Bolsheviks. During the Soviet years, Armenian political parties and organizations, banned in Soviet Armenia, thrived on American soil. During the first years after the break-up of the

USSR, the USA offered massive humanitarian assistance to Armenia, which was ravaged by the 1988 earthquake and suffering from the war with Azerbaijan and the economic blockade imposed by Turkey.

Throughout the 1990s global and regional settings seemed to favor the Armenian "complementarism" policy. Through the 1990s relations between Russia and the West were mostly constructive: while Russia cooperated with the West on many global issues, the West did not explicitly challenge Russia's influence in the post-Soviet countries. However, in the beginning of the 2000s the nature of the relations between the USA and Russia began to change, due to multiple factors, ranging from the transition to a more authoritarian regime in Russia to the American occupation of Iraq. Russian–American relations were further complicated by "the colored revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine and the warm welcome that these revolutions found in the USA. The American support for the "colored revolutions" was perceived by the Russian elites as a direct encroachment on Russian interests, and the competition between the two global powers intensified, which complicated matters for Armenia and put in doubt the future of the "complementarism" policy. The latest test to Armenia's complementarism doctrine came in August 2008 with the Russian–Georgian war. Armenia, however, managed to avoid choosing sides in the confrontation and even successfully resisted the Russian pressure to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

One of the most interesting aspects of "complementarism" is Armenia's security policy. Armenia is a mem-

ber of the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization and hosts Russian military bases. However, even here Armenian authorities have sought to balance Armenia's extensive cooperation with Russia in the sphere of security by steps in the direction of cooperation with the USA and NATO. Although these steps have been largely symbolic, they were quite significant as they sent an important message of openness for cooperation. One of these steps was the participation of an Armenian regiment in the NATO peace keeping operation in Kosovo. Another example of that cooperation is Armenia's decision to dispatch an Armenian non-combat unit to Iraq. In spite of the relatively small scale of the mission, this has been quite a significant step, when measured against the general context of Armenian foreign policy, and especially the existence in some countries of the Middle East (including Iraq) of large Armenian communities vulnerable to terror and radicalism. A new affirmation of Armenia's determination to cooperate with the USA came in late 2009, when the Armenian government sanctioned the participation of a small Armenian military regiment in the peace keeping operation in Afghanistan.

Another test of the policies of "complementarism" is Armenia's relationship with Iran. While historically Iran has often been perceived as a threat, today Armenia enjoys a close relationship with the country. Reconciling the need to maintain good relations with Iran and Armenia's partnership with the USA was relatively easy in the 1990s, when moderates and reformers like Rafsanjani and Khatami dominated Iranian politics. However, the balancing act became more difficult when relations between Iran and the US (and the West in general) deteriorated under Bush and Ahmadinejad. In general, though, the West has viewed Armenia's cooperation with Iran with understanding, since Armenia's geopolitics and conflicts with Turkey and Azerbaijan make good relations with Iran a strategic necessity for Armenia. In its turn the Iranian leadership has been keen to preserve the good relationship with Armenia and resisted calls from some radicals to openly support Muslim "brothers" in Azerbaijan against Armenia in the Karabakh conflict. Of course, Iran has a number of unresolved issues in its relationship with Azerbaijan that influence its policies in the South Caucasus.

The USA as a Mediator: Turkish-Armenian Relations and the Karabakh Conflict

One of the most important issues from the point of view of American policy vis-a-vis Armenia and the region in general is the issue of Armenian-Turkish relations. The

US has been involved in efforts to break the ice in Armenian-Turkish relations for a long time. Complementing calls on both sides to normalize relations, the US intervention included unofficial mediation efforts and track two diplomacy, as in the case of the American-sponsored Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Committee (TARC), an informal group that consisted of former diplomats from Armenia and Turkey. Since 2008, especially in the wake of the Russian-Georgian war in August, the USA actively supported the so-called "football diplomacy" and the Armenian-Turkish normalization process. When Barak Obama visited Turkey in April 2009 he made a reference to Armenian-Turkish relations and called for opening the border that had been sealed by the Turkish government in the early 1990s. The April 23, 2009, Armenian-Turkish statement about the existence of a roadmap for normalization came about in part thanks to the serious involvement of American diplomacy, including a late night telephone call Serzh Sargsyan received from Vice President Joe Biden. Similarly, when in October 2009 the signing of Armenian-Turkish normalization protocols was under threat, the mediation by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton together with her Russian colleague Sergey Lavrov, was instrumental in securing the signatures of both Armenian and Turkish sides.

While American involvement in Turkish-Armenian relations has mostly an indirect and informal character, in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the USA officially plays the role of mediator as one of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group. Both sides have criticized the mediators in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process and sometimes have blamed them for the fact that no political solution to the conflict has been reached so far. However, it is difficult to deny the positive role of the mediators in preventing the conflict from reemerging as a full-scale violent confrontation. The US government position on the Karabakh issue is quite complex. On the one hand, US diplomats have often repeated that the US does not consider Nagorno-Karabakh an independent state and recognizes Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, something that invites criticism in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as within the Armenian-American community. On the other hand, the US has offered millions of dollars in humanitarian aid to Nagorno-Karabakh, in spite of protests coming from Azerbaijan.

Armenian Americans: Realities and Myths

As noted above, one of the factors that determines Armenia's significance for American foreign policy is the existence of an important Armenian-American community.

Though relatively small compared to some other ethnic communities within the USA (estimates usually put the number of Armenians in the USA at over one million), the Armenian community is well-organized and vocal in the defense of its interests and priorities. The Armenian community's significance is boosted by the fact that Armenians are one of the most established and well-integrated ethnic communities of the US. The roots of the Armenian American community go back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when thousands of Armenians fleeing massacres in the Ottoman Empire found refuge in the USA. Since then generations of Armenians have successfully integrated into American society while keeping a strong attachment to their historical homeland. Large numbers of Armenians can be classified as middle class, and some Armenians have successfully entered the top levels of American government, business and culture. The Armenian community in the USA maintains close connections with Armenia. The idea that contributing to the historical homeland is a moral obligation for American Armenians is quite widespread. While in most cases these contributions take the form of financial assistance and charity, there have also been certain cases, when prominent Armenian Americans relocated to Armenia, as did Raffi Hovannisian, a lawyer from California, who became the first minister of foreign affairs of independent Armenia and who is an influential figure in contemporary Armenian politics.

For decades the focus of American Armenians has been winning official recognition by the US government that the extermination of Armenians by the Ottoman government in 1915 constituted an act of genocide. This campaign usually focuses on two main goals: ensuring that the US president uses the term in his address to Armenian Americans on April 24, the day when Armenians around the world remember the victims, and passing a Congressional resolution, which would officially recognize the mass killings of 1915 as genocide. Though Ronald Reagan used the word "genocide" in referring to the Armenian genocide in 1981, most US presidents have avoided the term since then. A constant source of bitterness for American Armenians is the fact that virtually all successful presidential candidates have given the promise to recognize the genocide during the election campaign in order to gain the votes of American Armenians, and later reneged on that promise, fearing an angry reaction from Turkey.

During the latest election campaign, Barak Obama issued several strong statements advocating the need to recognize and condemn the genocide officially. Although it can be argued that Obama has come closer to fulfill-

ing his promise than most of his predecessors – in his April 24, 2009, address to the Armenian community, he announced that his views on the issue are on the record and have not changed and used the Armenian term *Eghern* (literally – “a great crime, a man-made catastrophe”), which is comparable to using the Hebrew term “Shoah” to describe the Holocaust – many American Armenians were bitterly disappointed by Obama's decision to avoid the use of the English (and international) term *genocide*.

The issue of official recognizing the genocide has long since gone beyond being an issue that concerns only American Armenian voters and the American government. Turkey has reacted angrily to the genocide recognition campaign and repeatedly warned that the damage done to American-Turkish relations by the recognition would be irreparable. Moreover, the Turkish government spends millions of dollars in awareness campaigns and lobbying in an effort to counter those carried out by American Armenian organizations. Ironically, contrary to the hopes of the Armenians and fears of the Turks, an official recognition of the genocide by the American government is unlikely to have any immediate practical effect, while the ongoing genocide recognition campaign is an effective tool of spreading awareness about the genocide and putting pressure on the Turkish government to come to terms with its country's past. In any case, the activities of the Armenian community are among the factors that, along with geopolitical considerations, have influenced the US government's interest in the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations.

However, it would be wrong to overestimate the influence of the so-called “Armenian lobby” over the formulation of American policy towards Armenia and the region. Besides, it is important to remember that on certain issues there are important differences and divisions between the government of Armenia and some Diaspora organizations, as well as between different segments of the Diaspora itself. A recent example of these differences is the mixed reaction with which Diaspora Armenians reacted to Serzh Sargsyan's initiative of normalizing relations with Turkey and the signing of the Armenian-Turkish protocols. Sargsyan, who visited Los Angeles prior to signing the protocols, faced a cold reception from some influential Armenian American organizations and massive street protests by local Armenians. While some American Armenian organizations, such as the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA) have cautiously supported the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, others, such as the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), have criticized the Turkish-Armenian process and the American government's role in it.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the nature of the relationship between Armenia and the USA has been quite complex. Armenia has managed to combine an alliance with Russia and good relations with Iran with a close partnership with the USA and a drive to participate in European integration. Global and regional trends, as well as internal developments might influence Armenia's policy, pushing it from one side of this spectrum to the other. The current trend of "reset" in the relations between the USA and Russia offers certain hopes that Armenia's "complementarism" policy might bear fruit. Normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations is one of those issues, in which

the positions of the American and Russian governments largely coincide, at least at this point. Armenia's "complementarism" policy is also dependent on the future of Iranian-American relations: the fate of the Obama administration's initiatives on Iran and the outcome of the post-election struggle in Iran will certainly influence Armenia's position between Iran and the West. However, even taking into account all these factors, the long term foreign policy strategy of Armenian elites is unlikely to change. Armenia's history, geopolitics and current situation suggest that for years to come Armenian foreign policy will be dominated by the need to find a balance between stronger neighbors and global powers.

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Recommended Reading:

Alexander Iskandaryan, "NATO and Armenia: A Long Game of Complementarism," *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 5, April 16, 2009.

US Policy towards the South Caucasus: How To Move Forward*

By Fariz Ismailzade, Baku

Abstract

Since the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States, many in the South Caucasus, as in the rest of the world, wonder what the new administration's vision and policy toward their respective region will be. The reset of US-Russian relations and the seemingly soft foreign policy of President Obama raise concerns among South Caucasus citizens that the United States is gradually distancing itself from this strategically important region. Although the US legitimately has other foreign policy priorities, such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, disengagement from the South Caucasus/Caspian region would offset the geopolitical, economic and energy gains made in the past decade as well as leave the South Caucasus nations in a security vacuum.

Evolution of US Policy towards the South Caucasus

Warm relations with Russia characterized the early years of post-Cold War US Presidents. Both President Bill Clinton and George W. Bush embraced their Russian counterparts and genuinely attempted to find a common language of cooperation with the Russian Federation. During the early Clinton years, a "Russia First" policy, actively pursued by Deputy Secretary of State

Strobe Talbott, even prevailed in the foreign policy agenda towards the post-Soviet space.

Yet, as the Caspian region emerged as a strategically important region with vast energy resources, the US administration began to become actively engaged in this area, working with the newly independent states of the Former USSR in pursuit of regional development, economic growth and political stability. During those times, the US government was instrumental in helping the South Caucasus countries to strengthen their independence, halt regional conflicts, revive their economies and integrate into Euro-Atlantic political

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