

Armenia's Prime Minister Pashinyan's "Failed Policy to Remove Russia has No NATO Guarantee"

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Armenia continues to be under attack by Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region which has simmered between Armenia and Azerbaijan for 30 years. Russian peacekeeping troops try to maintain calm, but recent comments concerning Armenia and NATO have put nerves on edge.

Since its independence, Armenia has maintained a policy of friendly relations with Iran, Russia, and the West, including the United States and the European Union. Armenia-NATO partnership relations date back to 1992 when Armenia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, later renamed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.

In an effort to understand the volatile situation, **Steven Sahiounie** of MidEastDiscourse interviewed **Abraham Gaspayan**, founder and director of "Genesis Armenia" a Think-Tank.

Steven Sahiounie (SS): On September 4, Gunther Fehlinger, the European Committee for NATO Enlargement Chair, (a NGO not part of NATO), tweeted on X his advocacy of Armenia joining NATO. In response, Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Vahan Kostanyan said that Armenia had already been collaborating with NATO and would continue.

In your view, is Armenia looking to join NATO?

Abraham Gaspayan (AG): Absolutely not. The issue of Armenia's membership in NATO has never occupied a primary place in the RA's military and political agenda. I do not think that Gunther Fehlinger is a NATO official of that caliber, whose urging or emotional statements can bring about a serious change. Armenia and NATO have been closely cooperating since the end of the Cold War and Armenia's independence. In 1992, just one year after gaining independence, Armenia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, later renamed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (Armenia has been a member of EAPC since 1997).

Armenia's cooperation with NATO has gradually expanded since it joined the Partnership for Peace in 1994. Armenia operates in a different security environment and is one of the founders of the CSTO military-political treaty, led by Russia. NATO has an Information Office in Yerevan and has decades of experience working with Armenia.

Armenia's partnership cooperation with NATO aims to facilitate ongoing reforms in defense and security sectors within the framework of IPAP, as well as strengthen interoperability capabilities with Armenia's partners. One of the key objectives of Armenia-NATO cooperation in these sectors is to strengthen and enhance democratic control and civilian oversight of the Armed Forces of Armenia.

Since 2002, Armenia has been participating in the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP). In 2004, Armenian peacekeeping forces joined the NATO-led peace operation in Kosovo, and in 2010, they began contributing to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Mission in Afghanistan, which was completed in December 2014. In January 2015, Armenia started contributing to the new Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan.

In August-September 2021, due to the end of NATO's "Resolute Support" mission in Afghanistan, the RA peacekeeping contingent returned to Armenia. In peace-building processes worldwide, from Afghanistan to the Balkans, Armenian soldiers and officers have distinguished themselves with the highest qualities and merits in combat, organization, and command. It is axiomatic that the transition from one military-political system to another poses serious security threats. Russia and Iran in this region cannot calmly accept that fact, although the issue of NATO membership falls within the domain of Armenia's sovereign decision.

SS: On September 6, Armenia announced plans to hold military exercises with the US in what is dubbed 'Eagle Partner 2023' scheduled from September 11 to September 20.

In your opinion, is Armenia moving away from their close alliance with Russia, and moving towards the western sphere of influence?

AG: The Pentagon decides, based on its needs, with which country to conduct such exercises and involving which types of units (including state national guards), planning them in advance. Therefore, similar bilateral or multilateral military exercises are regularly conducted at the initiative of the US.

I would like to note separately that they have adapted and continue to take place regularly in Georgia, Kazakhstan (also with the participation of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), Albania, and dozens of other European, Asian, Arab, and African countries. The exercises pertain to cooperation in peacekeeping missions carried out under the auspices of the United Nations or NATO. Therefore, military exercises cannot and do not aim to elevate Armenian-American relations to a new level. With this in mind, Armenia does not become a partner of strategic significance for the USA or, even more so, an allied state.

SS: The Lachin corridor is a vital link between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, a region that witnessed a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, leading to a ceasefire brokered by Russia in 2020. Since then, Russia assigned a 2,000-strong peacekeeping force to oversee the corridor. **In recent months, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has become critical of the Russian peacekeeping presence, and used undiplomatic language to allege they have failed their mission.**

In your view, is the allegation made by Pashinyan justified?

AG: Pashinyan's statements should be considered in the context of the anti-Russian course adopted by his government, which, however, does not mean that he is accepted with open arms in the West.

Pashinyan has become equally unpopular with both Russia and the West due to his unbalanced foreign policy narrative and actions.

Maybe it seems to him that if he cursed or spoke in improper diplomatic terms about Russia or Iran, he would be welcomed in the USA or Europe with open arms. In 5 years, he destroyed the entire map of RA diplomacy, allies, and friends, and with his short-sighted and uncalculated steps, he dragged Armenia and Artsakh into war. Clause 6 of the November 9, 2020 ceasefire agreement defines the responsibilities of each side regarding the Berdzor or Lachin Corridor. Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan share equal responsibility there.

Russia is deeply involved in Ukraine and is unable to fully fulfill its obligations, which is extremely worrying and problematic. However, we should not forget that the government of Armenia, with Azerbaijan and the urging and patronage of the West, entered into a separate agreement in Prague in October 2022 and announced that it recognizes Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan. This is a manifestation of Pashinyan's failed policy, the goal of which is to remove Russia from this region without receiving clear security guarantees from NATO or the West.

SS: Russia maintains a permanent military base in Armenia, part of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); however, early this year, Armenia declined to host military exercises conducted by the CSTO. Pashinyan also said that reliance on Russia as Armenia's security guarantor had been a "strategic mistake."

In your opinion, is this a case of Pashinyan voicing personal views, or do the Armenian legislators and voters feel the same way?

AG: Armenia was a country that exported security until 2018. In response to Azerbaijan's continuous aggressions and wars, the armed forces of Armenia and Artsakh not only responded adequately but also compelled Azerbaijan to exercise restraint at the diplomatic table, rather than speaking from a position of power, and to keep the conflict settlement within the framework of the only internationally mandated structure, the OSCE Minsk Group. After the four-day war in 2016, Ilham Aliyev himself acknowledged that the international community was pressuring him to recognize the independence of Artsakh or the right of Armenians to self-determination.

This was the institutional memory of Armenian statehood that Pashinyan inherited in 2018, and he wasted it on short-sighted moves and empty promises from the West, resulting in strained relations with Iran and Russia. Pashinyan's team has always been distinguished by its anti-Russian attitude. The people of Armenia have never harbored enmity towards anyone or their neighbors unless any of them have shown aggression. About 3 million Armenians live in Russia, who also have significant investments in Armenia's economy. This naturally also brings with it a calculated approach to the safety factor. The Russian military base will remain in Armenia until 2045. This is an interstate treaty. Pashinyan and his junta want to push Russia out of the region, which will negatively affect the factor of peace and stability in the region and will upset the strategic balance in favor of NATO member Turkey.

Turkey has been illegally closing the border with Armenia for 30 years, is directly involved in Armenia and the Armenian people, denies the fact of the Armenian Genocide, threatens the security of Armenia and the Armenian people, and considers the 10-month-long fascist blockade and closed borders against 120,000 Armenians living in Artsakh as legal. Under such conditions, attacking the Russian peacekeeping mission contributes to the success of Turkey's political agenda.

SS: The apparent change of position by Armenia in their relationship with Russia may be part of the US-NATO campaign to demonize Russia because of the Ukraine conflict, which is a US-NATO conflict with Russia, fought on Ukrainian, and increasingly Russian soil.

In your opinion, has the US promised Armenia anything in return for their reverse in their cooperation with Russia?

AG: The USA has not provided and cannot provide any guarantees other than statements and immaterial promises. What happened in Ukraine was another failure of American diplomacy, which cost the Ukrainian state and people dearly. Washington and the collective West have one goal: to remove Russia from the South Caucasus through Armenia, after which they will start discussing the issue of security guarantees, which is an absolutely reckless move and an empty proposition. Armenia will not become Ukraine. I believe that Russian security influence will continue to prevail in Armenia and Artsakh, but this does not mean that the Armenian people are satisfied with Moscow's performance of security obligations. And that is another matter for discussion.

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