

Russia's New Thinking Towards Armenia and Azerbaijan: An "Obstructionist" vs. an "Integrationalist"

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Global Research, September 16, 2017

[Oriental Review](#) 15 September 2017

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Featured image: Russian and Armenian presidents after talks in Moscow, March 2017

While there are a host of differences between the two states, the one that Russia is beginning to care the most about nowadays is how Armenia is standing in the way of Moscow's Great Power engagement with the "Ummah" while Azerbaijan is doing everything it can to facilitate it.

Analyzing Armenian-Azerbaijani relations is a lot like talking about those between India & Pakistan and "Israel" & Palestine, in that they're extraordinarily complex, deeply rooted in history, and involve very passionate arguments about land, religion, and geopolitics, among many other factors. There's no "easy way" to address them without risking the ire of one or the other side, though there's also no avoiding that such seemingly intractable conflicts exist as a fact in today's world. That being said, it's worthwhile to discuss how a Great Power such as Russia understands its developing role in the [emerging Multipolar World Order](#) vis-à-vis these disputes, and the most pertinent one to look at is over Nagorno-Karabakh, seeing as how Moscow was a direct - if albeit unofficial - participant in it and is also a party to the OSCE Minsk Group which aims to bring about a resolution to this long-standing problem.



A Geopolitical Thaw

In fact, it's actually the last point which is the most important to dwell on for the moment, since it had long been assumed by outside observers - whether rightly or wrongly - that Moscow had an interest in indefinitely "freezing" the conflict, but that's no longer the case. The old and debunked argument goes that Russia, due to the Orthodox Christian roots that it shares with its fellow Armenian co-confessionals, was always tacitly on Yerevan's side and will forever remain that way no matter what, which is what many Armenians had assumed. Passively allowing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to remain "frozen" was supposedly a signal from Russia that it approved of Armenia's position on the issue, which implied that Moscow didn't believe that disputed territory should ever return to Baku's control. That may have been the case for the past two decades, but in recent years Russia's attitude has remarkably changed as it began a pronounced rapprochement with Azerbaijan.

"Military Diplomacy"

To be clear, relations between the two were never completely in the doldrums like some have presented them as, since Russia has consistently remained Azerbaijan's military partner. It's actually this part of their bilateral relationship which upsets Armenians the most, since they have difficulty understanding the "military diplomacy" that Russia's been applying towards this pair of rivals and others. To summarize what the author wrote in his Sputnik piece last year about how "[Army Expo 2016 Showcases Russia's Success at Military Diplomacy](#)", Russia sells weapons to both sides of a conflict in order to maintain the strategic parity between them, believing that this prevents one side or the other from obtaining a decisive advantage that would consequently encourage them to restart hostilities, such as what the US regularly hopes that its military partners will be able to do one day in upsetting the regional balance of power in Eurasia.

"The 19th-Century Great Power Chessboard"

Russia's employment of military diplomacy is a complementary part of its envisioned 21st-century geostrategic role in the emerging Multipolar World Order, which is to ultimately become the supreme balancing force in the Eurasian supercontinent. To that end, it also adheres to the paradigm of the "19th-Century Great Power Chessboard", whereby Russia prioritizes its relations with similarly sized Great Powers at the perceived (key word) expense of its smaller- and medium-sized ones such as Serbia, Syria, or in this case Armenia, in order to advance the "greater good" of multipolarity. This guiding concept plays a major influence on the decision-making mindset of Russia's "progressive" foreign policy faction, as explained by the author in his recent piece about how "[Russia's Foreign Policy Progressives Have Trumped The Traditionalists](#)" in making sense of Moscow's foreign policy pivots to the Ummah.

Keeping Out Of The Karabakh Conflict

Partially due to these abovementioned factors, Russia refused to militarily get involved during the brief flare-up between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in spring 2016. The author discussed this in extensive detail in his analysis at the time titled "[Armenian-Azeri Tensions Just Got Alarming: Here's Why It's Happening](#)", but the overriding reasons were twofold; the first is that its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) mutual defense obligations only apply to internationally recognized Armenian territory, which doesn't include Nagorno-Karabakh because not even Yerevan officially recognizes its self-proclaimed "independence" and desire to unite with Armenia; and the second is that Moscow wasn't really sure who started the latest round of violence and was very wary about getting tricked into sparking a larger region-wide conflagration that would only work out to the US' grand strategic interests.



Walking With Caution In The Caucasus

To expand on this last detail about Russia's lingering suspicions, it's worthwhile to read what the author wrote last year about a potential Nagorno-Karabakh Continuation War and the "Armenian Dagger" in his work about "[Greater Eurasia Scenarios In The Mideast](#)". Basically, Russia fears that hyper-nationalist [Color Revolutionaries](#) might overthrow the "moderate" government and spark another war with Azerbaijan, all with the intent of dragging Russia into a chain reaction of regional conflicts through its CSTO mutual defense obligations to

Armenia. Even in the event that there's no pro-American regime change in the country, the Western diaspora-backed "grassroots" pressure on the authorities could be sufficient enough to move them in that direction anyhow. This may have even been responsible for the spring 2016 flare-up that interestingly followed the heavy Color Revolution unrest the preceding summer, which led the author to conclude at the time that "['Electric Yerevan' Is Sliding Out Of Control](#)".

Baku As The Eurasian Bridge

Just a few days after the "Four Day War" in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with his Iranian and Azerbaijani counterparts in Baku and [announced](#) that all three sides had agreed to integrate their transport infrastructure in creating the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC), which is planned to eventually connect India with the EU by means of their three countries. Baku's newfound role as the indispensable civilizational bridge connecting European, Russian, Iranian/Persian, and Indian civilizations harmoniously corresponds to the multipolar tenets of peaceful integration and win-win cooperation between countries. While it may have looked to some outside observers as though Russia was "pivoting" towards Azerbaijan, nothing of the sort happened because this was merely just another tweak in Moscow's Eurasian balancing act, especially in working to achieve an equilibrium in its already excellent relations with Yerevan and its burgeoning ones with Baku.



Russia's Armenian Ally

To expand on the previous, President Putin [recently lauded](#) the fantastic state of bilateral relations between Russia and Armenia, remarking that "Moscow and Yerevan have been effectively cooperating within the integration processes taking place in Eurasia, coordinating their activities to ensure regional security and stability." This is certainly true on all accounts because of Armenia's membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAU) and the CSTO, as well as the Russian base in Gyumri and the two countries' [joint air defense system](#). On the surface of things, relations are proceeding just fine and there's nothing to be worried about, but peek behind the curtain just a little bit and it becomes apparent that some Armenians are furious at Russia's outreaches to Azerbaijan, believing that this constitutes a "betrayal" of their national interests and could even threaten their preferred status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Abandonment And Betrayal

Many Armenians believe that Russia's refusal to overstep its CSTO mutual defense obligations and launch a coordinated full-scale offensive against Azerbaijan in 2016 was an unforgiveable disappointment, and they think that Moscow's continued "military diplomacy" with Baku in the months afterwards and its new trilateral initiative to turn Azerbaijan into a Eurasian Bridge between civilizations are "anti-Armenian" to the core. Believing that Russia was the first to "abandon" and then "betray" it, Armenia ironically took the actual first step in doing this against Russia by making headway in reaching an EU "Association Agreement" and deciding to participate in a multilateral NATO exercises this year, though [curiously pulling out](#) of a second planned one right before it began for what can only be speculated was heavy Russian pressure.

The author wrote about this in two separate pieces lately titled "[Armenia Abandoning Russia: Consequences For The Caucasus](#)" and "[Are Armenia, India, And Serbia "Balancing" Against Russia Or "Betraying" It?](#)" which analyze this issue more in depth, but the main point is that Armenia is abrogating its institutional obligations to Russia via the EAU and CSTO through its surprising outreaches to the EU and NATO. To be fair, though, Armenia doesn't see this as an "abandonment" or "betrayal" but rather a "balancing act" in response to its disappointment with Russia's improved relations with Azerbaijan. Herein, however, lays the irreconcilable strategic divergence between Russia and Armenia.

Unfreeze In Order To Federalize

Unlike whatever Russia may have thought in the past, the full-spectrum paradigm shifts unfolding all across the world as a result of International Relations entering into the tumultuous transitional phase from unipolarity to multipolarity have given Moscow the impetus to unfreeze the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in order to settle it once and for all, thereby preventing this festering problem from being abused by the US and its allies to disrupt Eurasian integration processes. Although no official plan has been publicly presented, at least not as of yet, it's very likely that Russia's envisioned conflict resolution strategy is to see the progressive reintegration of Nagorno-Karabakh into the Azerbaijani state that it's unanimously recognized by all UN members as being a part of, following in the footsteps of what Moscow has suggested for Donbas vis-à-vis Ukraine.

One can argue about the wisdom and merits of reintegrating Donbas into post-coup Ukraine, but it can safely be assumed that if Russia would promote this approach when it comes to its own ethnic compatriots in Eastern Ukraine, that it more than likely wouldn't think twice about doing the same to Armenians in Western Azerbaijan.

There is some theoretical (key word) basis to this approach, however, in that Russia believes that federalized solutions could empower the reintegrated minority group with extra - and in some cases, depending on the constitutional processes involved, even disproportional - political influence over the rest of the larger state. This doesn't necessarily make them "Trojan Horses" of a foreign power, but could be seen as an added incentive for their breakaway authorities to peacefully return to the national governments that they're universally recognized as being a part of. It could end up being that foreign peacekeepers might have to play a role in some capacity during the initial reintegration transition, but that's a point that could be discussed if the general proposal itself proceeds far enough along the line to be taken seriously by all parties.

As it relates to Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan is definitely in favor of a peaceful solution to the long-running conflict and has expressed flexibility in the past about how this could play out, while Armenia is dead-set against any change to the status quo which would endanger its ethnic compatriots' full control over the disputed territory.

"Obstructionists" vs. "Integrationalists"

Accordingly, it's accurate to speak of Armenia as being an "obstructionist" in Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan as an "integrationalist", which are very important differentiating concepts to bear in mind considering the positive predisposition that Russia's progressivist leading foreign policy faction has towards integration, particularly with the Ummah. In fact, the obstructionist and integrationalist labels can also be applied more broadly as it relates to these two states' roles in either hindering or helping Russia's unprecedented

rapprochements with Turkey and Iran.

Armenia is prone to relying on the divisive “Clash of Civilizations” narrative to imply that its fellow Orthodox co-confessionalists in Russia are obligated to support it out of “Christian solidarity” against Muslims. Some Armenian voices even assert that their country is the only thing standing in the way of what they fear monger as the supposedly anti-Russian strategy of “Pan-Turkism” which they say poses an existential threat to Slavs. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, doesn’t have to resort to guilt-tripping Russia and scaring it in order to advance its interests, as these overlap with Russia’s own and aren’t unnatural to Moscow like what Yerevan wants it to do.

For example, Azerbaijan is poised to become a convergence point between Russian (Slavic), Azerbaijani (Turkic), Iranian (Persian), and Indian (majority-Hindu) civilizations through the NSTC, so there’s more of a win-win integrational reason for Moscow to conform to Baku’s position on Nagorno-Karabakh than to adhere to Yerevan’s obstructionist one which would – whether intentionally or inadvertently – perpetuate unnecessary divisions and distrust in the [Russian-Turkish-Iranian geopolitical crossroads](#) of the Caucasus. Accepting that the foreign policy progressives are in power and that they’re calling the shots on the “19th-Century Great Power Chessboard”, then it increasingly becomes apparent that Russia would prefer for Armenia to seek a peaceful compromise on Nagorno-Karabakh in order to promote the “greater good” of multipolarity.

The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, perpetuated to this day by Armenia’s obstinate position despite Yerevan’s ironic refusal to “recognize” the self-proclaimed “independence” of its own proxy statelet, dangerously obstructs the multipolar process of Eurasian integration by serving as a ticking unipolar-influenced time bomb positioned smack dab in the heart of the [Great Power Tripartite](#) of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, threatening to go off in the future on America’s command as the ultimate “scorched earth” tactic to divide and rule the Caucasus.

Concluding Thoughts

The international situation has so profoundly changed since the commencement of the New Cold War in late-2013 that it’s difficult for some people to accept all that’s transpired since then, especially when it comes to the historic progress that Russia has made in its efforts to promote strategic partnerships with the Muslim countries of Turkey, Iran, and especially in this case Azerbaijan. As was explained in the analysis, Russia endeavors to become the supreme balancing force in 21st-century Eurasia, and to this end it sought to “wipe the slate clean” in its relations with its non-traditional partners in order to begin completely anew on a neutral and unbiased footing.

This win-win strategy is commonplace among multipolar states and isn’t directed against any other party, though some countries – especially those who are Russia’s “legacy” partners – adhere to the unipolar “zero-sum” paradigm in jealously believing that this is detrimental to their own national interests. Such is the case with Armenia, which cannot accept Russia’s newfound and sincere high-level strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, believing that the “military diplomacy” between them on a bilateral level and their much broader multilateral cooperation on the NSTC are “anti-Armenian” and explain why Moscow “abandoned” and “betrayed” Yerevan during the spring 2016 flare-up in Nagorno-Karabakh.

In response to these subjective perceptions, Armenia is clumsily moving towards its own objective real-life “abandonment” and “betrayal” of Russia as it attempts to “balance” between its traditional Moscow ally and the West, irresponsibly flirting with the EU and NATO in capacities which draw into question its legal and tacit commitments to the EAU and CSTO. All of this is being done because Armenia is unwaveringly opposed to changing the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh and the former majority-Azerbaijani-populated but now-cleansed regions surrounding it that are presently occupied by its ethnic compatriots, which makes Yerevan the main obstacle to peacefully resolving this conflict.

The progressive foreign policy faction in charge of Russia’s grand strategy is eager to put an end to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict once and for all, fearing that this festering geopolitical wound could dangerously damage Moscow’s rebalancing act in Eurasia, especially as regards the Ummah and Russia’s two-closest Muslim Great Power neighbors of Turkey and Iran. Therefore, Russia has begun to slowly but surely make its intentions known to resolve this issue in line with international law, which in all cases favors Azerbaijan because not a single country in the world – Armenia included – recognizes the self-declared “independence” of the disputed territory and its ethnically cleansed environs.

Going forward, Russia’s relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan will continue to be determined by their respective attitudes towards peacefully reintegrating the occupied territories into the rest of the country that they’re unanimously recognized by all UN member states as being a part of, as well as allowing for the consequent return of all internally displaced people to their hometowns. Given that Armenia is adamantly against both of these principles, Russia will have no choice but to perceive of it as being an obstructionist player, especially in terms of impeding multipolar Great Power integration processes in Eurasia, whereas its Azerbaijani rival will be positively assessed as facilitating these game-changing continental dynamics.

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