



Armenia's Unique Geopolitical Reality: An Asset for NATO's Stability Projection Southwards

*By Vahagn AFYAN,
Deputy head of Mission,
Embassy of the Republic of Armenia to Poland*

How can Armenia's geopolitical context contribute to stability in its immediate vicinity and in NATO's Southern Neighborhood?

Introduction

This paper will consider Armenia's geopolitical location from the perspective of NATO's Southern neighborhood and examine its cohesion, dependability and potential contribution to NATO's intended task of projecting stability.

With regard to NATO and its relationship with Armenia, the first step is to create a better understanding of the particularities of the country and its policy. Increased knowledge of the ongoing integration processes affecting various political, economic and military aspects, as well as internal political developments, will allow a full exploration of the potential for strategic partnership between the Alliance and Armenia. There are also specific concerns of Armenia which are presented separately in this paper as

factors that should be considered. The conclusion will present some general recommendations about projecting stability for Partners, for Armenia and the use of Armenian facilities.

Armenia's security, defense and economic integration

Cooperation between NATO and Armenia started in 1992, immediately after regaining its independence subsequent to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. At the time, NATO approached all three South Caucasus states as one package, and Armenia was included in that group due to its geography. The region gradually gained strategic importance for NATO, including through cooperation with Armenia in different spheres. As a result, there are ongoing projects in the framework of PfP Trust Fund policy. Of

significance, Armenia and Georgia are the only two nations among Partner countries with active NATO Information Centersⁱ. Nowadays, the Armenia-NATO relations have a certain agenda based on common interests. NATO continues to help Armenia on implementing reforms to modernize its defense institutions and defense education. The IPAP enhanced Armenian engagement in the PfP and deepened her participation in PARP and the EAPC. Armenia is committed to continue an active positive agenda with the Alliance and has demonstrated this through its involvement in NATO-led ISAF and KFOR operations. High-ranking Armenian authorities were welcomed to NATO's Summit in Warsaw and a wide range of bilateral issues have been discussed with NATO's high-ranking officials in Armenia and in NATO HQⁱⁱ.

By investing in its ability to shift from being a security consumer into a security contributor, Armenia is also now engaged in UNIFILⁱⁱⁱ and MINUSMA. In terms of contributing to international security, Armenia has also acceded to the OSCE. It should be noted that the OSCE Minsk Group is the only internationally mandated format of conflict settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh^{iv}.

Armenia is a member of the CSTO. Some articles of that Treaty provide Armenia with needed collective defense opportunities and a security guarantee. However, there is a significant skepticism within Armenian society about whether or not this collective defense would ever be invoked. Despite these reservations, Armenia assumed the CSTO chairmanship and, after one-and-a-half-year delay, Armenia's representative was appointed to the post of Secretary General of that Organization.

While Armenia's simultaneous cooperation with both CSTO and NATO

may seem contradictory on the surface, Armenia has demonstrated that it is possible to have a certain level of cooperation in different formats with both organizations. In addition, during a meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, it was stated that during Armenia's negotiations with the EU with respect to its membership in the EAEU, attention was drawn to the fact that although Armenia is a founding member of the CSTO, it has also been cooperating with NATO since its independence^v.

Accordingly, last year was considered an important milestone in EU-Armenia relations because Armenia was able to sign a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU. This is another significant example of Armenia's ability to keep a balanced posture in its relations.

However, more recently, the political landscape changed unexpectedly; or perhaps it is more accurate to say that unrest and growing protests resulted in changes within Armenian domestic policy. Nevertheless, these protests and changes were dealt with in a very democratic and constitutional manner, without resort to violence^{vi}.

Many articles were published in well-known international mass media about this period in Armenia. Notably, this peaceful transition occurred without foreign influence. Among other comments expressed by representatives from different countries and organizations, the Chairman of NATO's Military Committee, General Petr Pavel, specifically mentioned that it was unexpected not to see Russian interference^{vii}. General Pavel also stressed that NATO was ready to deepen its cooperation if the new Armenian government wanted to strengthen ties with Alliance.

Nevertheless, according to the Armenian Constitution a new Prime Minister was elected by the Parliament. The ruling

Republican Party first rejected, but then accepted the candidacy of Nikol Pashinyan, the leader of the protests. Later on, the new government was formed from mostly new and young faces.

Defense and security concerns of Armenia

The biggest problem for Armenia remains the unsettled situation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Despite the trilateral ceasefire agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan and de-facto authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1994 and 1995, time after time escalations have occurred across the Line of Contact. Among these, the most tense and significant military escalation was in April 2016^{viii}. The main international organizations, including NATO, have on numerous occasions stated that there is no military solution to this conflict. Indeed, shortly after the 2016 four-day war clashes, the Armenian position on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was stressed at the Warsaw Summit^{ix}.

Looking at more recent events, there was a potentially explosive situation from a security and defense standpoint because Azerbaijan had moved its military forces to a more active posture. OSCE Minsk Group urged to keep heavy equipment positioned in the rear of the frontlines^x.

On the other side, Armenia has historical difficulties with Turkey. Although a reconciliation process was initiated in October 2009, Turkey didn't ratify the signed Protocols and supported Azerbaijani interests. Consequently, after almost nine years, Armenia stopped the reconciliation process.

It is well known that the border with Turkey is being jointly guarded by Armenian and Russian troops. But from time to time, unpleasant situations arise when some Russian soldiers illegally exit the Russian base. This very sad situation happened in January 2015

when a Russian soldier killed an entire Armenian family^{xi}. The other reason for anger within the Armenian society concerns the Russia-Azerbaijan armament sales agreements^{xii}.

Of course, Georgia is not on the list of concerns for Armenia. Relations between the two countries are close, friendly and centuries-old; they include intensive high-ranking visits and are developing on a positive way. Considering that more than 70% of goods transit through that country, stable relations with Georgia are very important for Armenia.

Armenia has a similarly good relationship with Iran. It would be a possible threat for Armenia to have unstable relations in its southern neighborhood given a 35km shared border. There are some ongoing as well as some suspended projects between the two countries in the energy and construction sectors. But there is a risk that after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, followed by the re-installment of harsher sanctions against Iran, many refugees may flow from Iran to Armenia. In addition, Armenia regularly has to prevent the illegal transit of narcotics originating from that country^{xiii}.

The role of Armenia as an agent of Southern Stability

Armenia is East for the West, and West for the East^{xiv}. This plurality of views about Armenia's geographical position can even be observed within NATO. For example, the maps at NATO Allied Command Transformation's and Strategic Direction - South Hub (NSD-S) place Armenia in the Middle Eastern neighborhood; thereby including it in the South Strategic Direction. However, in terms of NATO's 360 degrees approach^{xv} Armenia is not located in the Eastern corner of the geographical map but rather it is considered to be a part of the South Caucasus area. This diversity

of views regarding Armenia's geographical position is an asset for its ability to act in more geopolitical spheres. Armenia is situated at the center of a triangle of three significant regional players. From the North, Russia has reactivated its aspirations to be a global power. From the West, Turkey continues with ambitions dating back to the Ottoman Empire, and from the South, Iran is flexing its muscles in different regions. Armenia is therefore obliged to have a balanced posture and with regard to the Alliance is located in a so-called "sanitary" zone.

For NATO, it is crucial to decrease the extent and impact of Russian influence. Meanwhile, for Russia, South Caucasus reliability is essential. Currently, Turkey is a challenge not only for Armenia but also for NATO. For Iran, Armenia has prevented the unification of Turkey and Azerbaijan in its North. Therefore, in a strange way, Armenia's role as a wedge between these countries helps in general to bring stability all over the South Caucasus.

With its semi-blocked and landlocked reality, Armenia avoids fragmentation and tries to build bridges by using its diverse foreign, security, economic and integration policies. Armenia even initiated some industrial development in military technology. Since the independence of Armenia, the role of the Armenian Diaspora has always been useful in different countries of the world. Fortunately, in our days, there is no difficulty maintaining long distance contacts given the capabilities of new technologies. The younger educated generation in Armenia has made progress in innovation in technological domains of significance.

Conclusion and recommendations

The 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, which established the core tasks of collective defense, crisis management and cooperative security, continues to be

relevant in today's fast paced, changing and demanding age. The partnership and dialogue initiatives form a key part of NATO's ability to execute these tasks.

From a political perspective, Partnership initiatives must be clear and tailored for every Partner because otherwise they will not be successful, as it was observed with the failure of the EU Eastern Partnership^{xvi}. When considering the task of projecting stability, it will be important to use an integrative and customized approach instead of a distributive and binary policy.

Every Partner needs to have sufficient information about any initiative before they can truly engage and be involved in it. The corollary is that NATO also needs to know how each Partner country can be engaged in any program. Although every level of Partnership is different, the successful cooperation within any Partnership initiative, which is transparent to the others, would provide encouragement and guidance for other Partners.

The engagement of Partners is also essential in NSD-S exploratory activities. More active cooperation with Partners' Interpol entities could be really useful in terms of NATO's intention to project stability in its Southern neighborhood. This is not only about looking at measures to prevent illegal migration, it is also about how to assist Partners to maintain and advance their achievements.

One of the outcomes of the projection of stability should also include assistance to reform, where necessary, proper bodies within partner nations, so that they become more resilient and self-sustaining. There is a need to convey to these nations the importance of building stability in their country through legitimate authority and effective governance. To do otherwise, especially for some of the MENA region countries, would possibly renew misguided narratives and perceptions that the

stabilization initiative is a new version of intervention and new type of imperialism.

Of course, NATO is not an investment organization and there is not a large budget allocation for PfP countries. However, initiatives under the umbrella of Projecting Stability have to be both attractive by their economic aspects and should not require any further expenditure demands from Partner countries. To do otherwise will doom the initiative to stay at the level of words and political rhetoric.

Finally, considering Armenia's specific role and potential contributions, Yerevan should at a minimum maintain, and, if possible, increase its support to NATO peacekeeping operations.

In terms of its political diversity, another interesting opportunity that could be facilitated by Armenia would be to broker dialogue between different sides;

including US and Iran, Georgia and Russia, Russia and NATO.

Armenia can also support the initiative by involving the Armenian Diaspora capacities particularly in the MENA region.

It could be helpful in terms of capacity building measures to use Armenian military industry experiences especially in the area of new technologies. To accomplish this, it would be mutually beneficial to cooperate with government and even with private sector by using Trust Fund capacities. In addition, this approach would make it mutually affordable to work on a whole range of projects, or discrete subcomponents. A possible focus on some artificial intelligence technologies and reactivating cyber defense projects would also serve to highlight Armenian interest toward the Alliance's activities.

Yerevan, 03 June 2018

ⁱ "Information Centre on NATO in Armenia". *Information Centre on NATO in Armenia*. <http://www.natoinfo.am/en/>

ⁱⁱ "NATO Deputy Secretary General visits Yerevan and thanks Armenia for contributions to NATO missions". *NATO*. Accessed 18 December 2017. https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/news_150043.htm?selectedLocale=en, "Working visit of delegation headed by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Ashot Hovakimian to NATO Headquarters to discuss the Armenia-NATO IPAP assessment report". *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia*. Accessed 24 May 2018. http://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/item/2018/05/24/dfm_ipap/

ⁱⁱⁱ "UNIFIL Troop-Contributing Countries". *UNIFIL*. Accessed 25 January 2018. <https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-troop-contributing-countries>

^{iv} "Nagorno-Karabakh issue". *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia*. Accessed 25 April 2018. <http://www.mfa.am/en/artsakh-issue/>

^v "President Serzh Srgsyan and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg recapped the results of the negotiations at the joint press conference". *President of the Republic of Armenia*. Accessed 27 February 2017. <http://www.president.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2017/02/27/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-joint-press-point/>

^{vi} "When the people's power isn't enough". *The Washington Post*. Accessed 27 April 2018. <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/the-washington-post/20180427/282011852971785>

^{vii} "NATO General Surprised By Lack Of 'Visible Russian Interference' In Armenia Crisis". *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*. Accessed 4 May 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-general-surprised-by-lack-of-visible-russian-interference-in-armenia-s-crisis/29208187.html>

^{viii} "Joint Statement by the Heads of Delegation of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries". *OSCE*. Accessed 8 December 2018. <https://www.osce.org/mg/287531>

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- ^{ix} “Statement by President Serzh Sargsyan at the meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the NATO member and non-member states dedicated to the Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan”. *President of the Republic of Armenia*. Accessed 9 July 2016. <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2016/07/09/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-speech-at-NATO-summit-in-Poland/>
- ^x “Press Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group”. *OSCE*. Accessed 23 April 2018. <https://www.osce.org/minsk-group/378637>
- ^{xi} “Russian soldier jailed for life for killing Armenian family”. *BBC*. Accessed 23 August 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37168865>
- ^{xii} Jebejyan, Hripsime. “Kosachev’s response to why Russia sells weapons to Azerbaijan”. *Aravot*. Accessed 14 March 2018. <http://www.aravot-en.am/2018/03/14/209004/>
- ^{xiii} “Armenia reports another massive heroin seizure”. *Azatutyun*. Accessed 1 November 2017. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/28829196.html>
- ^{xiv} “We have always been at the juncture between the west and the east”. *Gulf News*. Accessed March 2018. <https://armenia.globalfdireports.com/articles/serzh-sargsyan/>
- ^{xv} “Statement by NATO Defence Ministers”. *NATO*. Accessed 25 June 2015. https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/news_121133.htm?selectedLocale=en
- ^{xvi} Hushcha, Maryia. “From Prague to Riga: Has the EU’s Eastern Partnership been a failure?”. *E-International Relations Students*. Accessed 14 April 2017. <http://www.e-ir.info/2017/04/14/from-prague-to-riga-has-the-eus-eastern-partnership-been-a-failure/>