

# The main dimensions of Armenia's foreign and security policy

By Narek Galstyan

## ■ Executive summary

This policy brief surveys the core principles and objectives of Armenia's foreign policy, which is influenced by the Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) conflict with Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani-Turkish blockade and isolation of Armenia, Turkey's unwillingness to settle relations with Armenia without preconditions, Armenia's dependence on Georgian transit routes and its excessive dependence on Russia in strategic areas of its economy. To deal with these negative influences, Armenia's foreign policy includes a military-strategic alliance with Russia, a regional partnership with Iran, and deepening relations with the EU, U.S. and NATO.

The main conclusions of this analysis are as follows:

- The policy of Turkey and Azerbaijan towards Armenia is destructive. There are no essential changes in their policy toward Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, despite various agreements, the calls of the international community and Armenia's readiness to find compromise solutions.
- To diversify its energy and communication routes in order to balance Turkey's influence, Armenia should develop relations with Iran, but international sanctions against that country adversely affect Armenia's security. A military strike against Iran over the nuclear weapons issue would have extremely negative consequences for Armenia.
- Armenia should deepen its relations with the West and Russia to balance the influence of these powers on its affairs.

## Introduction

The Georgian-Russian war in 2008 changed the geopolitical environment in the South Caucasus. It was a signal to all those involved in regional processes that the consequences of war can be quite unpredictable and that military measures do not always guarantee a desirable result, and was vivid proof of the fact that any instability in the region would be a direct threat to its energy and communication projects. It made clear to the West that its projects in the region could not be secured if unresolved conflicts and closed borders remain.

The war also had a direct impact on Armenia's foreign and security policy. It was a shock for the Armenian economy, because the country's foreign trade mainly passes through Georgia because of the Azerbaijani-Turkish blockade. The

war gave an opportunity to Turkey to activate the idea of a Caucasus stability platform. It also served as the main reason for Armenia's attempts to actively diversify its foreign relations and start the so-called "initiative" foreign policy, the result of which was two years of Armenian-Turkish "football diplomacy".

## Security threats

The core principles and objectives of Armenia's foreign and security policy are laid down in country's National Security Strategy (NSS) (Armenia, 2007). According to the NSS the two main principles of this policy are complementarity, in terms of which Armenia should have effective relations with all interested actors in the region, and participation in beneficial international processes.

According to the NSS the security threats that Armenia faces are the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the aggressive stance of the Azerbaijani government, preparations for military operations against Armenia and/or Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), and the Azerbaijani-Turkish blockade and isolation of Armenia.

After 2008 meetings were organised between international mediators and Armenian and Azerbaijani officials, while joint statements by representatives of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Minsk Group (OSCE MG) were made about the need for peaceful negotiations. But the situation remains unchanged. Ceasefire violations, sabre-rattling rhetoric and anti-Armenianism characterise Azerbaijani policy, with negative effects on the negotiation process. The most recent problem was the Safarov case,<sup>1</sup> which negatively influenced the negotiation atmosphere. However, Armenia has declared that it will continue with negotiations.

Another security threat is the Turkish-Azerbaijani blockade of Armenia.<sup>2</sup> Armenia and Turkey do not have official diplomatic relations. There have been many attempts to regulate relations, the most recent being the so-called "football diplomacy" initiated in 2008 by the Armenian president, S. Sargsyan. This resulted in an agreement on the normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations without preconditions and "in a reasonable timeframe", which had to be ratified by both Turkey and Armenia. It was over the process of ratification that disagreement arose and ratification did not occur. Turkey's formal reason for stopping the normalisation process was the statement of the Constitutional Court of Armenia that the protocols are constitutional and do not contradict the Armenian Declaration of Independence, which contains a provision that Armenia will pursue a policy of international recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Armenia claims that Turkey knew this beforehand. Another problem was the conditioning of the agreement's ratification on a settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Galstyan, 2009: 91-107).

Why did Turkey participate in the "football diplomacy" if it knew that nothing would come of it? Several factors may have forced Turkey to start a dialogue with Armenia:

- strong pressure from the West and Russia;
- the steps to implement the Caucasian Stability Pact;
- the hope that Armenia would at least temporarily abandon the policy of international recognition of the Armenian Genocide; and
- a Turkish attempt to gain credibility, to intervene in the OSCE MG process and associate the process of Armenian-Turkish rapprochement with the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Other factors led to Turkey's failure to ratify the process:

- The OSCE MG co-chairs and Armenia refused to link the process of Armenian-Turkish rapprochement with settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.
- The Armenian authorities continued a policy of international recognition of the Armenian Genocide in parallel with the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement process.
- Azerbaijan threatened to cancel economic projects with Turkey.

### Difficulties and opportunities in the northern and southern "gates"

In the NSS the destruction of Armenian transit routes is seen as an external threat to the country. The territory of Georgia has great strategic importance for Armenia, despite Georgia's participation in Azerbaijani-Georgian-Turkish hydrocarbon and transit projects that bypass Armenia. Instead, Armenia emphasises the importance of the proposed Armenia-Georgia highway that will link the country to the Black Sea.

Although the authorities of both countries stress that there is no unresolvable obstacle in their relations, many problems exist: the protection of the national-cultural identity of native Armenians in Georgia (particularly in Javakhk), the validation of the legal status of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia and the preservation of Armenian cultural monuments in Georgia.

The NSS also specifies that the international economic sanctions against Iran could threaten Armenia. Iran has great strategic importance for Armenia and Armenian relations with Iran are deepening. In this context, the Armenia-Iran railway, gas pipeline, oil refinery and hydro-electricity co-operation are significant. These projects are aimed at diversifying Armenia's energy supplies, especially in case of possible future regional destabilisation.

Armenia also sees Iran's involvement in various regional processes as a factor for regional stability. Armenia's problems with Turkey and Azerbaijan make Iran and Armenia natural partners, while Iran is Turkey's regional strategic opponent. There are also several problems in Iranian-Azerbaijani relations. It is apparent that, for security reasons, Armenia wants to improve its relations with Iran, but it may face some obstacles, especially because of the international sanctions against Iran.

1 In 2004 an Armenian army officer was murdered by an Azerbaijani officer, R. Safarov, during NATO's Platform for Peace programme in Budapest. In 2006 a Hungarian court sentenced Safarov to life imprisonment. But in August 2012 Hungary extradited Safarov to Azerbaijan, whereupon President Aliiev pardoned him on his arrival to Baku. Safarov has since been promoted to major and is a national hero.

2 Turkey recognised Armenia's independence, but in 1993, as a sign of solidarity with the Azerbaijani position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, unilaterally closed its border with Armenia. The border remained closed even in 1994, when a ceasefire agreement was signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Even the customs union with the EU in 1995 did not force Turkey to lift the blockade. Turkey insists on preconditions for the normalisation of relations: settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in Azerbaijan's favour, the withdrawal of international recognition of the Armenian Genocide and unilateral Armenian recognition of the 1921 Treaty of Kars. Unlike Turkey, Armenia has always supported the establishment of diplomatic relations and the reopening of the border without preconditions.

## Between the West and Russia: complementarity in action

In the NSS complementarity is reflected in the parallelism of the strategic alliance with Russia; Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) membership; and multidimensional co-operation with the EU, the U.S. and NATO. Armenian-Russian relations remain key to Armenian foreign and security policy. This relationship is conditioned by a military alliance, Russia's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and the presence of a large Armenian community in Russia. But it is an asymmetrical relationship because of Armenia's high dependence on Russia in terms of energy (particularly natural gas and nuclear fuel supplies), rail communications and telecommunications.<sup>3</sup> Despite its benefits, this close relationship limits Armenia's ability to manoeuvre in various ways. The absence of alternatives is the main object of concern. In spite of this, Armenia is developing its relations with the West while simultaneously co-operating with Iran. It seems that the West and Russia understand the complicated Armenian security situation, which is why it has not been forced to choose between the major power centres, while following a relatively independent foreign policy.

Armenia acknowledges the strategic role of the U.S. in the global and regional context and has co-operated with the U.S. in the spheres of defence, anti-terrorism, democratisation and economic modernisation. Another significant factor is the existence of the influential Armenian diaspora in the U.S, while the U.S.'s pragmatic perception of Armenian foreign policy is also an important factor.

Relations with the EU are a priority for Armenia. In contrast to Georgia, Armenia does not wish to become a NATO/EU member, but is actively engaged in European/NATO institutions. Armenia acknowledges the positive significance of the European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership programmes for both internal reforms and regional co-operation, and participates in NATO's Partnership for Peace programme. The EU is still not ready to take serious responsibility in the region, but if it does not manage to implement a safe neighbourhood strategy, confidence in the EU in comparison with Russia and the U.S. will weaken in Armenia. In this context, the EU's involvement in post-conflict reconstruction in Nagorno-Karabakh (as in Georgia) would be welcomed. The EU should use its experience to support regional co-operation initiatives in parallel with conflict settlement processes. It is important also to use Turkey's EU membership application for the normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations.

However, such undesirable developments as the further exacerbation of the Iranian issue, the emergence of profound differences between Armenia and Russia (CSTO)

or the U.S./NATO/EU, and the resumption of active military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh could radically affect Armenia's foreign and security policy.

## Recommendations

- The international community should implement mechanisms to limit the negative impacts of the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiation process. Criticism should be directly addressed and violations of agreements should receive an adequate response. Armenia supports the continuation of negotiations based on key principles: recognition of the de facto status of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), and international guarantees of its security and the current Armenian-NKR border. Peace will not be achieved without the NKR's participation in negotiations.
- Unconstructive Turkish policy remains the main problem in the normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations. Pressure on Turkey by international players has not achieved the desired results, while the protocol format of the failed 2010 agreement was sharply criticised in Armenian political and analytical circles. It will therefore be necessary to find a new format, perhaps after the upcoming elections in the two states.
- Armenian-Georgian issues could be resolved by carrying out joint Armenian-Georgian economic and educational projects, giving the Armenian Apostolic Church legal status, settling the issues around the protection of Armenian cultural monuments, legalising the Armenian language as a regional language in Javakhk and endowing its population with some degree of autonomy. In turn, Armenia should assist the Georgian authorities to provide the material conditions and accommodation needed for the maintenance of Georgia's Armenian population.
- Although the international community seems to understand Armenia's approaches to its foreign and security policy, sanctions against Iran clearly affect Armenia adversely. More sanctions and military operations against Iran could seriously undermine Armenia's security and throw up a series of global and regional threats.
- Because of the complexity of the geopolitical environment, Armenia has to have a complementary foreign policy based on good relations with both Russia and the West (see above). Against the background of the competition for influence in the South Caucasus between the West and Russia, Armenia has managed to retain its space for manoeuvre and benefit from co-operation with both centres of power. Only a dramatic confrontation between them could undermine this situation.

<sup>3</sup> In 2008 management of the South Caucasus Railways lines in Armenia was handed over to the Russian railways. In addition, two of three Armenian telecommunication operators – VivaCell-MTC and ArmenTell-BeeLine – have Russian capital.

## References

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