
RICHARD GIRAGOSIAN: THROUGHOUT TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY, ARMENIA AND ITS NEIGHBORS WILL BE COOPERATING WITH RUSSIA MORE INTENSIVELY THAN WITH THE UNITED STATES

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Regional Studies Center (RSC) Director Richard Giragosian in an interview to ArmInfo talks about prospects of dialog on Syrian settlement between Russia, Iran and Turkey. He forecasts possible consequences of US isolationism for the countries of South Caucasus, particularly prospects of Nagorno-Karabakh settlement. The expert assesses the importance of Iran's President's visit to Armenia in the light of the existing situation and new trends in the Caucasus policy of Russia, Israel and Iran.

Do you consider assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Ankara as an exclusively terror attack or there has been a geopolitical motivation?

Unlike many other experts, I consider the assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Turkey to be a personal step. This tragedy was not necessarily directed against the Russian-Turkish relations, i.e. it was not aimed at undermining the relations. At the same time, the assassination was directly related to Russia's military actions in Syria. I can say that this tragedy will anyway influence the Moscow-Ankara relations - if not today, then in the foreseeable future. What happened in Ankara has once again demonstrated that Syria is the key reason of discrepancies and lack of coordination in the Russian-Turkish relations. In this light, I can forecast that the Moscow-Ankara relations will face big problems due to the Syrian crisis. The publicized results of the Moscow meeting of the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey suggest a conclusion that it is Syria that remains the apple of discord between Russia and Turkey, Region. The key reason is Turkey's striving to force Bashar al-Assad to step down in Syria, while Russia and Iran are insistently resisting it, overtly supporting Damascus. This is why it is Syria that triggers more and more problems between Moscow and Ankara.

By other words, you do not expect any progress in the Syrian settlement following the Moscow meeting of the Russian, Iranian and Turkish foreign ministers, do you?

Definitely no, the fundamental problems between Turkey and Russia will not disappear as a result of the meeting. I can not but mention in this light the emergence of an alternative platform in Kazakhstan for achieving peace in Syria. This platform has already become an alternative to Geneva and it also allows predicting a failure of Geneva processes in Moscow. In my opinion the end of the six-year war in Syria is not in the offing. In any case I do not see any geopolitical prerequisites for that. The positions of the Syrian authorities and their opponents are too strong.

The election of Donald Trump, who positions himself as an advocate of the United States' isolationism policy, as US President has caused concerns in certain corners of the world. Can we forecast that US isolationism policy will cover the South Caucasus as well?

I can state that the US has already applied the isolationism policy in respect to our region. The interest of the US foreign policy in the South Caucasus is obviously subsiding with every passing day. I think that throughout Trump's presidency, Armenia and its neighbors will be cooperating with Russia more intensively than with the United States. At the same time, such a geopolitical state of affairs will directly influence the entire complex of relations in the South Caucasus and it is quite natural.

How this will influence prospects of the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement?

I think that the situation will open new options and paths to increase the level of opportunities and tools for Russia's intervention in the settlement. Of course, that will take place within the framework of OSCE Minsk Group. At that, I still stand for my position stating that the main obstacle for the complete settlement of the conflict should be searched neither in Washington nor in Paris, and even not in Moscow. It could be found in Baku.

Could Russia's strengthening in South Caucasus due to the isolationism policy of the United States lead to the implementation of imposing tools by Moscow in respect to the Karabakh conflict sides to reach the peace profitable for Moscow?

Such a threat could be clearly observed after April 2016. And, of course, in the case of Russia such a wish looks very logical, considering Moscow's efforts to essentially improve relations with Baku. In other words, in such a situation and, which is more important, in the perspective, the real dangers for Armenia are not its enemies but its friends.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani paid an official visit to Armenia to discuss a pretty large agenda on December 21. Does Iran try to fill the vacuum gap capsulated in the South Caucasus in the result of American isolationism?

Obviously it does. It can already be stated that the regional agenda in the Caucasus is decided not only by Russia and Turkey. It has become tripartite, because Iran also became a part of it. But Russia remains the main obstacle for improvement of Armenian-Iranian relations, and Yerevan and Tehran can develop their relations right up to the level allowed by Russia. The final limits of these relations will be set not in Yerevan and even not in Tehran, but in Moscow.

Does increase of Iranian presence in the region comprise positive moments for Armenia?

I am sure that the increase of Iranian presence in the regional Caucasus policy comprises only positive moments for Armenia. To confirm this opinion it is enough to notice that Armenias capability to keep the balance in respect to other countries of the region has sharply increased

due to the cooperation with Iran. The main stimulus for the development of this cooperation is the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, which keep being not very good.

I cannot help but ask another question in this light. Rouhanis Yerevan visit was conducted right after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Nethanyahu's visit to Baku. Do you think that the Armenian-Iranian cooperation is the balancing factor in the regional scale in respect to Azerbaijani-Israeli cooperation?

Of course, it is. In this respect it is enough to remind that Rouhanis visit to Armenia has been postponed three times. And that has been done in the light of expectations from the upcoming visit of Benjamin Nethanyahu to Baku.

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