
POSSIBLE SANCTIONS FOR THE RUSSIA-ARMENIA-IRAN AXIS

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In the past 10 days, the Trump administration has taken a significantly harder line against the Kremlin and its supporters. Following the alleged Russian use of nerve gas in the United Kingdom, the United States has expelled 60 intelligence officers and imposed sanctions on 19 Russian persons or entities for cyberattacks on America. Secretary of State nominee Mike Pompeo is a supporter of Russian-related sanctions, according to a number of experts interviewed by the Atlantic Council.

Ariel Cohen characterizes Pompeo as much tougher on the Kremlin than former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Adrian Karatnycky predicts that Pompeo will support sanctions, and Brookings Institutes Alina Polyakova thinks it is likely he will advocate a strong policy to deter Russia. Incoming National Security Advisor John Bolton is also a known hawk on Russia.

This is bad news for countries doing business with the Russian defense establishment. In August 2017, Congress mandated further sanctions on these countries. While President Trump waived these penalties in February 2018, the White Houses new make-up could mean trouble for almost all former Soviet republics (only Ukraine and Georgia avoid purchasing Russian military equipment).

One of Americas non-NATO allies in the Caucasus, Armenia, is in danger for its ties with Russia and with Iran. Shortly before President Trump announced his waiver, the U.S. embassy in Yerevan warned the Armenian government they risked sanctions, according to Haykakan Zhamanaknewspaper. Officially, the Armenian government follows a policy of complementarity that balances good relations with Russia and the West. In reality, however, more than 5,000 Russian troops are bivouacked on Armenian soil, and Russia has been a vital source of military equipment for the country.

Armenia also has defense ties with Iran. United Nations sanctions on Iran's nuclear program hampered the growth of military ties between the two countries, but the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015 has opened new possibilities for Yerevan. Deputy Ministers of Defense David Tonoyan and Movses Hakobyan (currently chief of general staff) led delegations to Iran in May and June 2016. According to press, the visit resulted in a memorandum of mutual understanding and a number of agreements that are being kept secret.

In early 2017, the new Armenian defense minister, Vigen Sargsyan, paid an official visit to Iran to discuss military cooperation in the fields of military industry and science. Sargsyan also held security discussions with Iran's National Security Council, and visited several defense industries. Armenia seeks to expand its cooperation with Iran in the defense sphere and we believe that this visit will promote further cooperation, he said.

Iran made a reciprocal trade visit in October, when Iranian Defense Minister Nasrollah Kalantari traveled to Armenia to renew talks about Armenian-Iranian military cooperation. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarifi applauded Armenia's initiative, emphasizing the importance of increased bilateral cooperation.

The recent flurry in defense cooperation is merely the resumption of older military ties. In 2002, the United States blacklisted the Lizin biochemical corporation for selling dual-use equipment to the Iranian-controlled Al-Ahd Sadeq Trading Company in the United Arab Emirates. Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian admitted that Lizin had sold the products, and that the United States had warned Yerevan of the products' dual use capability. Armenian president Robert Kocharian denied any government involvement in the company, despite the fact that the United States identified Armen Sarkisian as the deals broker. Sarkisian is the brother of two previous Armenian prime ministers.

Between April 2006 and June 2008, according to a State Department cable released by WikiLeaks, coalition forces in Iraq recovered from Iranian-backed militias multiple RPG-22 antitank weapons and PKM machine guns purchased by Armenia. Some of the weapons were used to kill American servicemen. The United States concluded the weapons could only have reached Iraq via a deal between Armenia and Iran.

Yerevan has become the pivot point of a potential Russia-Armenia-Iran axis. According to Lt. Col. Vladimir Evseev, member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and head of the Caucasus Department of the CIS Institute, it is time to create a more formal defense triangle. To cement this alliance, the three countries signed a roadmap in 2016 to unite the three (and Georgia) in a North-South energy corridor. Armen Manvelyan of the National Academy of Armenia said that in this process, Armenia should put emphasis on its experience in cooperation with Russia and Iran.

Armenia is a small country and needs the support of its more powerful neighbors, but it is treading a dangerous road in uniting two countries that oppose American interests. The European Union is taking the right steps in signing a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Armenia, giving it an alternative to these hostile powers. The United States should also take steps to encourage Armenia to look to the West for help.

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