
WASHINGTON EXPERTS TAKE RARE LOOK AT ARMENIA

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American experts on the post-Soviet space discussed United States policy toward a shifting political and security landscape in Armenia, concluding that Washington has little leverage to influence events there.

The Washington think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies on April 2 held a relatively rare event on Armenia: Armenias New Challenges: How Should the West Respond? The challenges included Russian arms sales to both Armenia and its foe, Azerbaijan, who are locked in conflict over the territory of Nagorno Karabakh; and a political transition in which President Serzh Sargsyan is expected to slide into the premier's seat as that office becomes the most powerful in the country.

Miriam Lanskoj, senior director for Russia and Eurasia at the National Endowment for Democracy, argued that the current geopolitical shift in the region, particularly a Russian-Turkish rapprochement and stronger Azerbaijan-Russia relations, resulted in Armenia looking for support from the European Union and the United States.

Though such a shift is creating new opportunities for the West, it also carries danger: Lanskoj warned that every time when global powers have rearranged their stances, there was a war in the Caucasus.

The conflict over Karabakh dominated the discussion; Jeffrey Mankoff, CSISs Deputy Director for the Russia and Eurasia Program, in his opening remarks said that on his way to the event, he had been notified that today is the second anniversary of the so-called Four-Day War, the outbreak of fighting in April 2016, the worst violence the conflict has seen since a ceasefire was signed in 1994.

While both nations' leaders were ultimately responsible for the escalation of the conflict, Russian arms sales fueled it, argued Kenneth Yalowitiz, a global fellow at Kennan Institute and former US ambassador to Belarus and Georgia. The question is, do [the Russians] want peace or they want the same situation of providing the arms for both sides [of the conflict], Yalowitiz said.

Solutions are out there. What is lacking is any political will [for compromise] on either side, he argued. The former ambassador also warned that any future conflict may not be limited to the disputed land, but rather could be a direct war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. He went as far as describing a worst-case escalation scenario, one with the Armenian military targeting Azerbaijan's natural gas pipeline and Baku striking Armenia's nuclear power plant.

Meanwhile, the US is pulling back from the region, said Paul Stronski, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He suggested that in the near future, the European Union would have a bigger leverage on Armenia than the US, by virtue of a new cooperation agreement with the EU under which Yerevan has committed to economic, political and judicial reform, as well as anti-corruption efforts.

But with representatives of both Armenia and Azerbaijan taking advantage of a rare opportunity of being in the same room to double down on their agendas, the question of the Western response, featured in the event title, was largely left unanswered.

At a Q&A session, the Azerbaijani embassy and state media took turns making statements that all but repeated their governments official talking points. Before, after and during the event, a number of Azerbaijani accounts tweeted similar claims at all the panelists.

The Armenian response was similarly repetitive, and the diplomats wrangling back and forth dominated the rest of the session.

Wrapping up the event, Yalowitz called on both sides to move away from the current poisonous level of communication.

This simply has to be overcome, he concluded.

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