

RUSSIAN-ARMENIAN RELATIONS: A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP OR HEGEMONIC DOMINATION?

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Abstract:

Russia and Armenia have special relations, which have regional implications. In this paper the characteristics of the Russian-Armenian relations will be analyzed and it will be examined whether Russian-Armenian relations are a strategic partnership of the both states or the relations are based on Russian hegemonic domination. The implications of the Russian Caucasus policy and Armenian policy during Ter-Petrosian and Kocharian era will be dealt with.

Keywords:

Russia, Armenia, hegemony, Nagorno-Karabakh, Putin, Ter-Petrosian, Kocharian

INTRODUCTION

Russia as a successor of the Soviet Union in many ways entered the world politics as a "new" actor. Russia and the Soviet Union are not comparable in terms of their impact on world politics and their visions. The Soviet Union was one of the superpowers of the bipolar world and it was an empire with messianic ambitions. On the other hand, the Russian Federation has domestic tensions, serious economic problems and has only a relative impact in what Russia calls is "Near Abroad" (*blizhneezarubezhe*). Armenia has also joined the world politics as an independent state after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike the other former Soviet republics, Armenia has special relations with Russia. The reasons for this are of geographic, strategic, economic and historic nature. Armenia is a land lock state with

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lack of natural resources and it has major problems with the two of its neighbors namely Turkey and Azerbaijan. For Russia, Armenia is a country where Russian troops can be stationed without a problem. Armenia has not challenged Russian attempt of regional domination and Russian influence to Armenia. There were also historical ties between Russians and Armenians.

In this paper, Russian-Armenian relations will be analyzed in the context of Russia's policy towards the Caucasus. The paper will evaluate that whether Russian-Armenian relations can be described as strategic partnership or whether the relations are based on Russian hegemonic domination. This paper will also examine how both states view each other and the implications of Russian-Armenian relations to the both states' interests and regional politics.

BASIC PARAMETERS OF RUSSIA'S CAUCASUS POLICY

Russian policy towards the Caucasus can be evaluated in three main periods. The first period started with the establishment of the Russian Federation in 1991 and continued until the end of 1992. The second period started in 1993 and continued until Putin's Presidency in 2000. The third period is being shaped by President Putin.

We will not go through the details of each period instead main features of the periods will be mentioned. Russian administration wanted to continue its influence in the former Soviet territories through the structure of the Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS) and the Russian military presence. However, in 1991 there was confusion within the Russian establishment about Russia's policy towards the former Soviet republics. Direction of Russian foreign policy was discussed in the context of the Russian identity. One group, called Atlanticists, argued that Russia is a Western state and the future of Russia is based on cooperation with the West. Russia's engagement with the former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia would prevent Russia to observe Western values. Therefore, Russia must avoid assuming a leading

role in the CIS.¹ Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev and Deputy Prime Minister Gaidar were the main supporters of the Atlanticist foreign policy, which dominated the Russian Federation until the end of 1992. Kozyrev's foreign policy aimed to liberate the Russian Federation from the burdens of the empire and to make Russia a part of community of democratic states. In that period, Russia's administration was concerned with transforming of the Russian economy into a genuine market and to integrate Russia with the Western system. As a result, Russia showed a lack of interest in its relations with the new Caucasian and Central Asian republics. However, Russian military continued its assertive policy towards the Caucasus, despite Russian Foreign Ministry's stand for a pro-Western orientation. As it will be discussed below, Russia directly and indirectly involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and intervened the domestic politics of Azerbaijan.

Russia could not overcome the economic and social problems and the Western support to modernize Russian economy was limited. As a result, the Atlanticists lost their popularity and Eurasianist view, dominated the Russian foreign policy, which argued that Russia should defend the Russian population and the Russian heritage in the former Soviet territories and Russian foreign policy should not ignore the Caucasus and Central Asia.² The Eurasianists produced the policy of "Near Abroad" ((blizhneeazarubezhe) according to which Russia should involve in the Caucasus and Central Asia politically and economically as well as militarily. Eurasianists introduced "the foreign policy concept" in 1993. The foreign policy concept envisaged a more active role for Russia in security and economic affairs in the "Near Abroad".³ Russia's policy towards the conflicts in the Caucasus indicated the Eurasianist view about the Russia's role in the "Near Abroad". Russia managed to extend its influence in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

¹ Robert H. Donaldson and Joseph L. Noguee, *The Foreign Policy Of Russia Changing Systems and Enduring Interests*, (London and New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 112-113.

² Mohiaddin Meshabi, 'Russian Foreign Policy and Security in Central Asia and the Caucasus', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1993, p. 188

Roy Allison, *Military Forces in the Soviet Successor States*, Adelphi Paper, 280, London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1993, p. 46. See also A. Kortunov, 'Russia, the 'Near Abroad', and the West', G. Lapidus (ed.), *The New Russia: Troubled Transformation*, Boulder: Westview, 1995, pp. 157-160.

³ Neil Malcolm, 'The New Russian Foreign Policy', *The World Today*, 1994, p. 31. See also Oleg Kovalev, *Foreign Policy Belief Systems of Post Soviet Russian Elites*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University Of Delaware, Summer 1996, pp.158-222.

Suzanne Crow, 'Why Has Russian Foreign Policy Changed?', *RFE/RL Research Report*, 1994, pp. 2-4

In 2000, Vladimir Putin became the President of the Russian Federation. A new era opened for Russia. Although Putin's foreign policy has many similarities with the Eurasianist approach, it is difficult to put Putin's foreign policy in one category. On the one hand, as the Eurasianists suggested, Putin strengthened Russia's ties with the former Soviet republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Putin was a hardliner in terms of Russia's struggle in Chechnya and, as it will be discussed below, Russia strengthened its military presence in Armenia during Putin's Presidency. Russia introduced the new National Security Concept and Military Doctrine when Putin was acting President. The National Security Concept emphasized the significance of military force in international relations. In the new National Security Concept, Russia expressed concern about the weakening of the integration process in the CIS. The National Security Concept also stressed that transnational terrorism threatens stability in the world and has grown in many countries, including the Russian Federation.⁴ On the other hand, despite the fact that the National Security Concept emphasized the importance of military force and integration process in the CIS, Putin tried to develop Russia's relations with Europe and the US. During Putin's era Russia's relations with the NATO developed considerably and at the NATO Summit in Italy on 28 May 2002, the NATO-Russia Council was established, which provides a mechanism for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision, and joint action for the member states of the NATO and Russia on a wide spectrum of security issues in the Euro-Atlantic region. The NATO-Russia Council allows Russia to join the NATO's decision-making process for the first time.⁵ Development of Russia's relations with the West was particularly obvious after 11 September terrorist attacks. While Russia's support of the US's actions against international terrorism helped Russia to develop its relations with the US and Russia had freehand in Chechnya, however, the terrorist attacks and following US operations in the Caucasus and Central Asia resulted in an increase in the US influence in the region. For example, the US soldiers stationed in Georgia and Uzbekistan.⁶

⁴ Jyotsna Bakshi, 'Russia's National Security Concepts and Military Doctrines: Continuity and Change', *Strategic Analysis*, October 2000, pp. 1278-1281.

⁵ 'NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality', <http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/b020528r.htm>

⁶ Jean Christophe Peuch, 'Caucasus: Russia To Reluctantly Agree To US Military In Georgia', *RFE/RL*, 28 February 2002. Ewen MacAskill, 'From Suez To Pacific, The US Expands Its Presence Across Globe', *The Guardian*, (8 March 2002). Kamer Kasım, '11 Eylül Terör Eylemlerinin Rusya'nın Kafkasya Politikasına Etkisi', *Selçuk Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi*, Vol. 9, Issue. 3-4, 2001 pp. 53-65.

ARMENIA AS RUSSIA'S PARTNER IN THE CAUCASUS

As discussed above Russia gave special importance to the "Near Abroad" particularly after 1992. Russia followed a policy of controlled destabilization in Georgia and Azerbaijan. For Russia's strategy, Armenia was in central position. In the case of Georgia, Russia used Abkhazia and Ossetia to put pressure on Georgia. In fact due to the conflict with Abkhazians, Georgia had to accept the membership of the CIS and Russian military stations in its territories. Georgia has also an Armenian minority in its Javakheti province where Armenians established organizations like Javak Movement, Parvents and Virks. These organizations particularly the last one demands autonomous status to be given to the province. Russia's influence in the Javakheti province appeared in Ahalkelek, the capital of the province, where Russia has a military base, which provides job for the province's population. Armenian population of the province mostly trades with Armenia and they also wanted Russian military presence in Javakheti.⁷ Russia wanted to keep the military base as a tool for making pressure on Georgia.⁸

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Russia's ties with Armenia and its strategy to use Armenia to put pressure on Azerbaijan were evident during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict started before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1988 with the demands of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, which was an autonomous region of Azerbaijan, to be put under the Armenian jurisdiction. In 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan became independent states and conflict was transformed from an inter-state conflict to a regional conflict in which independent states involved. For Russia, Armenia was more favorable than Azerbaijan, since Armenia became a member of the CIS and Russian military bases were stationed in Armenia. In contrast, the Parliament of

⁷ Katia M. Peltekian, 'Javakheti Armenians Refresh Calls For Maintenance of Russian Base', *ArmenPress News Agency*, (13 May 2002).

⁸ Hasan Kanbolat and Nazmi Gül, 'The Geopolitics And Quest For Autonomy Of The Armenians Of Javakheti (Georgia) And Krasnodar (Russia) In The Caucasus', *Ermeni Arařtırmaları/Armenian Studies*, June-July-August, 2001, pp. 193-202.

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Azerbaijan did not ratify Azerbaijan's membership to the CIS and Russia did not have military bases in Azerbaijan. In the Elcibey era, Azerbaijan followed a more pro-Turkish policy and strongly supported the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline project for the transportation of Caspian oil to the world markets.⁹ Russia supported Armenia in the Nagorno-

Karabakh conflict in order to bring Azerbaijan into the Russian orbit. In fact even before Elcibey's presidency of Azerbaijan, Armenian forces captured Khojali and killed many civilians. There were wide spread allegations that Russian regiment of 366 involved in the Khojali massacre.¹⁰ Russian Minister Aman Tuleev accused former Russian military leaders of supplying arms to Armenia and even a list of weapons was sent to Armenia was given by General Lev Rokhlin.¹¹ After Aliyev became the President of Azerbaijan with a Russian back coup, Russia followed relatively balanced policy in the conflict. In fact during the peace process in 1996 OSCE's (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Lisbon Summit, Russia also supported a proposal, which called the withdrawal of all occupying Armenian forces from Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas of Azerbaijan.¹² Despite Russia's relatively balanced stand during the peace process of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, Russia is viewed by Armenia as a natural protector with its military presence in Armenia. However, as it will be discussed below Armenia's Presidents both Ter-Petrosian and Kocharian tried to reduce Russia's influence on Armenia and to follow a multi dimensional foreign policy. Russian-Armenian relations might be viewed as hegemonic domination

⁹ Kamer Kasım, 'The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Caspian Oil and Regional Powers', Bülent Gökay (Ed), *Politics of Caspian Oil*, (London: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 182-184.

¹⁰ See Kamer Kasım, 'The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict From Its Inception To The Peace Process', *Armenian Studies*, Issue 2, June-July-August 2001, pp. 172-173. See Khojali massacre in the international press, The New York Times, 'Massacre by Armenians', (3 March 1992). Thomas Goltz, 'Armenian Soldiers Massacre Hundreds Of Fleeing Families', *The Sunday Times*, (1 March 1992). *Time*, 'Massacre In Khojali', (16 March 1992). *The Washington Times*, 'Armenian Raid Leaves Azeris Dead Or Fleeing', (2 March 1992).

¹¹ Vitaly Naumkin, 'Russia and Transcaucasia', *Caucasian Regional Studies*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, 1998. <http://po-li.vub.ac.be/publi/crs/eng/0301-02.htm>

¹² Kamer Kasım, 'The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict From Its Inception To The Peace Process', *Armenian Studies*, Issue 2, June-July-August 2001, pp. 178-179

rather than strategic partnership between the two states. Hegemony can be described as one state's control over another, whether by physical force, cultural leadership or other methods.¹³ Hegemonic stability theory argued that the overwhelming dominance of one country was necessary for the existence of an open and stable world economy. Theory also argued that the decline of a hegemonic power leads to instability.¹⁴ The Soviet Union was a global hegemonic power in the bipolar world. However, the Russian Federation, the successor of the Soviet Union can be considered as a regional hegemon. Russia tried to establish control over former Soviet territories. In the Caucasus, Russia was particularly successful to establish its control over Armenia through special military and economic relations with Armenia. The question to be asked is that whether Russia's domination over Armenia based on mutual consent of both states or Russia forced Armenia to accept its domination. There are two ways to investigate this question. One is to examine Russia's Caucasus policy. Another approach could be to look at Armenia's foreign policy. As it was discussed above, Russia with the influence of the Eurasianists wanted to establish its control in "Near Abroad" and Russia showed Near Abroad policy during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Abkhazian-Georgian conflict. It might be argued that Russia's Caucasus policy required Russia to be stationed military bases in all Caucasian states. However, Russia had difficulty in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Azerbaijan rejected Russian military presence and Russian military bases also in the process of closure in Georgia. In contrast, Russia has military bases in Armenia with the consent of the Armenian government.¹⁵ Although Armenian administrations' logic is that Russian military presence provides security for Armenia, the same military presence and Armenian's extreme dependence on Russia also prevents Armenia from following a multi dimensional foreign policy and establishing constructive relations with its neighbors. It

¹³ Gramsci used the term hegemony as one social class (or a fraction of a class) exercises leadership over the other classes by gaining their active consent through ideological, moral or cultural values. The concept of hegemony was the central, most original idea in Gramsci's social theory and philosophy. See William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy-Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996). John Ikenberry, 'Getting Hegemony Right', *National Interest*, Issue 63, Spring 2001.

¹⁴ Helen Milner, 'International Political Economy: Beyond Hegemonic Stability', *Foreign Policy*, No. 110, Spring 1998.

¹⁵ Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian stated that the presence of Russian military base on the territory of Armenia is one of the most important factors for safeguarding the security of the country. Katia M. Peltekian, 'Armenia, Russia Agree on Mutual Assistance, Russian Military Base', *Mediamax News Agency*, 24 May 2002

Ter-Petrosian aimed to reduce Armenia's dependency on Russia, which also fit the Armenian National Movement's (ANM) ideology

might also be argued that Armenia's foreign policy caused dependency on Russian military presence in its territory. Armenia followed an uncompromising foreign policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which had a negative affect on Armenia's relations with two of its neighbors; Azerbaijan and Turkey. Turkey is especially important for Armenia's economic development. However, there is no diplomatic relations between the two states and no direct trade relations. Armenia's first President Levon Ter-Petrosian tired to establish constructive relations with Turkey. Ter-Petrosian aimed to reduce Armenia's dependency on Russia, which also fit the Armenian National Movement's (ANM) ideology. To reduce Armenia's dependency on Russia required Armenia to normalize its relations with the neighbors. For this, key step would be the solution for the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. Peace process in the Nagorno-Karabakh problem continued after the cease-fire in 1994. Ter-Petrosian was about to accept OSCE's peace proposal in 1997, which required Armenian forces' withdrawal from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan outside Nagorno-Karabakh and return of refugees. But Ter-Petrosian was forced to resign by what his advisor Libaridian called the "Karabakh Party". During his Presidency Ter-Petrosian struggled against diaspora parties, particularly, the Dasknaks (the Armenian Revolutionary Front) and Armenian diaspora organizations all over the world. For Ter-Petrosian, Dashnak's foreign policy strategy was unrealistic and dangerous for the Armenian national interests. Being a land lock state Armenia needed to establish normal relations with its neighbors for its economic prosperity and political stability. In order to normalize its relations with Turkey, Ter-Petrosian did not bring Armenian genocide allegations in the international arena. However, he did not take necessary steps for the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem and Armenian occupation of the territory of Azerbaijan continued. As a result, Armenian dependence on Russia even increased, because no war-no peace situation prevented stability and the possibility of resumption of war caused security alert in Armenia.¹⁶

¹⁶ See Kamer Kasim, 'Armenian Foreign Policy: Basic Parameters of the Ter-Petrosian and Kocharian Era', *Review of Armenian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2002, pp. 90-103.

After Ter-Petrosian, Robert Kocharian became the President of Armenia. Like Ter-Petrosian, Kocharian also wanted to reduce dependency on Russia. Kocharian's strategy was to improve Armenia's relations with the US and Europe. Kocharian attended the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of NATO in Washington in 1999 during the time of tense relations between Russia and the West. Unlike Ter-Petrosian, Kocharian had good relations with most of diaspora organizations in the US and they wanted Armenia to distance itself from Russia.¹⁷ During the discussions about a Russia-Belarus union, Kocharian stated that he was against Armenia's joining to the possible union between Russia and Belarussia.¹⁸ However, Kocharian was also not successful to follow a multi-dimensional foreign policy. The Nagorno-Karabakh problem continued and unlike Ter-Petrosian era, the supporters of Kocharian represented the uncompromising stand in the peace process. Putin's Presidency in Russia and the new President's assertive policy towards the Caucasus did not leave Armenia much room to maneuver.

Armenia's dependency on Russia is evident in economic and military fields and this increased in the last two years. Russian President Putin visited Armenia on 14-15 September 2001, which strengthens Russian military presence in Armenia, since an agreement was signed for the legal status of the Russian military personnel.¹⁹ Armenia's economic dependency on Russia is also obvious, since 60 per cent of Armenia's budget revenue comes from Russia in the form of loans. Armenia's food and fuel dependency on Russia is even higher.²⁰ Armenia's debt to Russia is 100 million US dollars. Armenia and Russia reached an agreement in September 2001, according to which, key Armenian enterprises will be handed over to Russia and joint ventures set up between the two states in return of Armenia's debt to Russia.²¹ Russia will have Hrazdan electrical central, one electronic

¹⁷ Kamer Kasim, 'Diasporanın Ermenistan'ın Dış Politikasına Etkisi', *2023 Dergisi*, April 2002, pp. 42-45.

¹⁸ Asbarez, 11 June 2001.

¹⁹ Vladimir Socor, 'Armenia's Reliance on Russia Increase After Putin's Visit', *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, Vol. VII, Issue 171, 19 September 2001. Nazmi Gül ve Gökçen Ekici, 'Stratejik Ortaklar Arasında Bir Sorun mu Var? Putin'in Ermenistan Ziyareti ve Moskova-Erivan İlişkileri', *Stratejik Analiz*, Vol. 2, Issue 19 November 2001, pp. 32-38.

²⁰ Dmitri Trenin, 'Russia's Security Interests And Policies In The Caucasus Region', Bruno Coppieters (Ed), *Contested Borders In The Caucasus*, Chapter III, (Yub University Press, 1996).

²¹ Ara Tadevosian, 'Armenia Leans East?', *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, <http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau-200110-104-1-eng.txt>, 6 November 2001.

Armenia's increasing economic dependency on Russia was criticized by the opposition parties and some sections of the press in Armenia

company called Mars and two research institutes. Russia also wants to have the administration of Metzamor nuclear central, since Armenia has 26 million US dollar debt for the central's fuel.²² Armenia's increasing economic dependency on Russia was criticized by the opposition parties and some sections of the press in Armenia. For example, daily Aykakan Zhamanak, argued that "Russia is demanding the wholesale giveaway of our assets instead of Armenia's debts. Except for Kocharian and Putin's handshakes and smiles, it is difficult to find evidence of anything strategic in Armenian-Russian relations."²³

In 2001, the trade volume between Russia and Armenia was approximately 180 million US dollars and Russian direct investment in Armenia was 29 million US dollars.²⁴

Armenian dependency on Russia raised the question about the future of the sovereignty of Armenia. Russia came in a position where it can interfere Armenian foreign policy and domestic politics of Armenia. Armenia's policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh problem prevented Armenia to develop its relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. As a result, Armenia felt insecure politically, which turned Armenia for Russian military presence and Armenia also became depended on Russia economically. As it was discussed above this economic dependence reached a stage in which Armenian enterprises were handed over to Russia. Russian-Armenian relations have also regional implications. Regional blocs, that opposed each other, are being established due to the political and strategic reasons. Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia cooperated in economic and security fields and the US also as a non-regional actor looked a part of this bloc. On the other hand, Russia, Armenia and Iran seemed to establish another bloc, that might encounter Turkey and/or US led bloc. The only thing might reduce the rigidity of these blocs is the development of relations between Turkey and Russia particularly in the field of energy. Having

²² Fikret Ertan, 'Ermenistan-Rusya İlişkilerinde Yeni Bir Boyut', *Zaman*, (8 August 2002).

²³ Ara Tadevosian, 'Armenia Leans East?', Institute for War and Peace Reporting, <http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau-200110-104-1-eng.txt>, 6 November 2001.

²⁴ Arm info, <http://www.arminfo.am/political-issue6.htm>, 29 January 2002

considered the developments of Turkish-Russian relations, it would be rational for Armenia to follow a multi-dimensional foreign policy rather than just being dependent on Russia.

CONCLUSION

The direction of the Russian-Armenian relations mainly was shaped by Russia's Caucasus policy and Russian desire to exert influence on the former Soviet republics of the Caucasus. Armenia was a natural partner for Russia, since Russian military presence was not objected by the Armenian administration. Russian-Armenian economic relations have also developed. It might be argued that Russian-Armenian relations started as a strategic partnership and then turned into the hegemonic domination of Russia over the small state of Armenia. Armenia became the pawn of Russia for Russian strategic interests in the Caucasus. After Israel, Armenia receives the highest amount of the US foreign aid on per-capita basis. However, this does not prevent the Armenian administration made Armenia dependent on Russia in military and economic fields. With this policy Armenia might increase its security for the expense of Armenia's sovereignty. It is the choice of the Armenian politicians to follow multi-dimensional foreign policy as the former President Ter-Petrosian tried to take some steps towards it or to continue to be depended on Russia for security and economic survival. Cooperation in the Caucasus will increase the security of regional states and stability might be established after that. It might be argued that the first step for regional cooperation should be taken by regional powers in the Caucasus, namely, Russia, Turkey and Iran. The structure of the Russian-Armenian relations and particularly the Russian military presence in Armenia can only be understood in the context of lack of understanding and competition among the regional powers of the Caucasus.