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ARMENIA BETWEEN POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC MULTI-VECTOR

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Abstract. Since 2018, Armenia's foreign policy under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has led to a deepening rift between Moscow and Yerevan and an almost complete breakdown in understanding between the two countries. However, given the dynamics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, it is clear that strategic challenges do not always align with political ones. Following its defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in the Fall of 2020, Armenia has found itself in an exceptionally vulnerable and unstable position. Rebuilding its defense capabilities would be difficult even without the degradation of relations with its Russian ally. Post 2022, Russia had shifted nearly all its focus to the Western direction. The Special Military Operation in Ukraine has drained Moscow of its surplus of modern weaponry, which could hypothetically have been shared with Yerevan. In search of alternatives, Armenia turned to India and France. However, without direct support or solid military guarantees from Russia, the process of restoring Armenia's defense capabilities has run into what is known as a "security dilemma". Azerbaijan still maintains a significant military and technical superiority over Armenia and benefits from its alliance with Turkey. This, in theory, allows Baku to impose its preferred terms for resolving contested issues on a relatively weaker adversary, long before Armenia's newly acquired arms could correct the existing imbalance. This paper explores the crisis of Armenia's multi-vector foreign policy and attempts to draw a distinction between foreign policy causes and military-strategic consequences.

Keywords: foreign policy, Armenia, strategy, Azerbaijan, armed forces, the Second Karabakh War of 2020.

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АРМЕНИЯ МЕЖДУ ВНЕШНЕПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ И ВОЕННО-СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОЙ МНОГОВЕКТОРНОСТЬЮ

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Аннотация. После 2018 г. внешнеполитический курс премьер-министра Никола Пашиняна привел к нарастающему отчуждению и практически полной утрате взаимопонимания между Арменией и Россией. Однако в динамике армяно-азербайджанского конфликта стратегические вызовы не всегда тождественны политическим. Статья поднимает тему кризиса армянской многовекторности и представляет собой попытку разграничить внешнеполитические причины и военно-стратегические следствия.

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика, Армения, стратегия, Азербайджан, вооруженные силы, Вторая Карабахская война 2020 г.

INTRODUCTION

The Russian Federation's Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine has required such a degree of military, economic, and mobilizational exertion from Russia that virtually all other

directions of its foreign policy across the post-Soviet space have been pushed into the background. The South Caucasus is among the regions that the SMO has effectively "cast into shadow." The unpredictable and combustible situation there

poses, among other things, a real prospect of serious military and political complications for Russia. Since the Six-Week War of 2020, Yerevan's position has steadily deteriorated. In the autumn of 2023, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, long the focus of the entrenched Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute, was finally defeated. The Armenian population largely evacuated Karabakh. In the summer of 2024, Russian peacekeepers were withdrawn ahead of schedule from the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.

Azerbaijan's triumph on the battlefield did not exhaust the conflict, nor did it dull the mutual animosity. Despite Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's diplomatic manoeuvres, the anticipated peace treaty was never signed. Apparently, Ilham Aliyev's victory has elevated his military and political ambitions and territorial claims to a qualitatively new level. On January 7, 2025, the President of Azerbaijan gave an extended interview to national television. The statements Aliyev made publicly about a potential adversary, regrettably, left little room for ambiguity. "...When the border is clarified," he explained, "many factors must be taken into account. The existing provisional border between Armenia and Azerbaijan is, first of all, not a dogma, and our position has always been that it requires clarification." "We want peace and cooperation in the South Caucasus; we want the Armenians not to get in our way. We do not want them to act as a geographic barrier between Turkey and Azerbaijan. The Zangezur corridor must and will be opened. We cannot continue to be in this situation. Why should we travel to Nakhchivan, which is an integral part of Azerbaijan, by various other routes? We must have a direct link. They should not be irritating us, and they must understand that the right to speak here belongs to us." "Both Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur, and at the same time the not-so-distant Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic," Aliyev concluded, "must be transformed into a single, large space" [source 1].

Thus, even after retaking Karabakh, Azerbaijan is evidently not prepared to accept Armenia's existing borders. "Armenia is effectively a source of threat to the region," Aliyev proclaimed. "An independent Armenian state is, in essence, a fascist state. We border such a fascist state, and the threat

of fascism does not disappear. That is why fascism must be destroyed. It will be destroyed either by Armenia's leadership or by us. We have no other way out." "If Armenia does not want a peace treaty, then we do not want one either," the President of Azerbaijan summed up [source 1].

A few weeks later, Russian experts also spoke out on this formerly taboo subject. "The current Armenian leadership's renunciation of a multi-vector foreign policy, its withdrawal from full participation in the activities of the CSTO, and a decisive turn toward the European Union and NATO, with the consequent rollback of the deep economic and security interdependence that had formed between Armenia and Russia," stated the concluding section of the analytical report of the IMEMO, "brings the country to a point of historical uncertainty." If Prime Minister N. Pashinyan's government were to take still more decisive steps aimed at a final break in allied relations with Russia, this, as the report's authors suggested, would scarcely bring benefits even in the short term and could subsequently create strategic risks for Armenia's national security and for the existence of the modern Armenian state. "Underestimating the likelihood of decisive action by Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as overestimating the ability of the European Union and NATO to guarantee Armenia's security, could lead to the most fatal consequences" [source 2].

Armenia finds itself in an exceptionally vulnerable and unstable position. The task of restoring its defensive capabilities would have been difficult even without the deterioration of relations with its Russian ally. After 2022, Russia focused almost all its attention on the western direction. The SMO in Ukraine deprived it of surplus modern weaponry that could hypothetically have been made available to Yerevan; in seeking alternatives, Armenia turned to India and France. Without direct support and firm military guarantees from Russia, restoring Armenia's defense capabilities meant facing the so-called security dilemma, a characteristic paradox of international relations: the absolute invulnerability of one state implies the absolute defenselessness of its rivals. A state's efforts to build up its military and political power are viewed by its adversary as a challenge to its own position.

In a climate of acute confrontation and mutual distrust, unilateral strengthening can provoke unforeseen countermeasures by neighboring states and thus trigger a conflict that was not anyone's original goal. At the same time, reduced military capabilities disrupt the power balance and increase the likelihood of conflict, being perceived by the rival as a sign of weakness. Azerbaijan still significantly surpasses Armenia in military-technical terms and relies on its alliance with Turkey. Hypothetically, this allows it to impose an Azerbaijani scenario for resolving disputed issues on the relatively weaker adversary long before the weapons purchased by Armenia can correct the existing imbalance in military capabilities.

Strategy, as is known, is hierarchically related to foreign policy, and their interconnection is of a subordinative nature. A reliable military-strategic foundation is necessary to serve as a bridge toward the desired foreign policy solution [1, 2]. The authors of the aforementioned analytical report comprehensively revealed the negative consequences of the foreign policy chosen by Pashinyan. This article is devoted to the risks and dangers generated at the lower, strategically subordinate level of conflict dynamics. It summarizes the author's evaluative judgments regarding the effectiveness of the current vigorous military-strategic countermeasures undertaken by the Armenian leadership.

Depending on the context, the concept of multivectorism in domestic scholarly literature can carry either a negative or neutral connotation. In the former case, it refers to a model of foreign policy bargaining between the former Soviet republics and external powers competing for regional influence in the post-Soviet space. However, in our case, multivectorism should be understood literally, as a desire to diversify foreign policy contacts.

THE 2020 WAR

By the beginning of the 21st century, the Karabakh conflict had acquired such irreconcilable hostility and mutual hatred between the conflicting parties that, despite diplomatic rhetoric, it could, in essence, have no solution other than a military one. The 1993–1994 events represent-

ed the Armenian version of such a solution, while the events of 2020 and 2023 correspondingly represented the Azerbaijani version.

After Nikol Pashinyan assumed the office of Prime Minister of Armenia as a result of the April Velvet Revolution of 2018, the republic's international contacts noticeably intensified. A significant portion of its political elite regarded membership in the EAEU and the CSTO as a temporary and forced measure. In their imagination, Armenia's future was associated exclusively with a pro-Western vector of development.

Armenians overestimated the strength of their army, internalized a haughty and disdainful attitude toward their Azerbaijani adversary, and apparently considered their 1994 victory final. Intensive economic and cultural engagement with Western Europe and the United States, coupled with strengthened ties with the large Armenian diaspora, created in Yerevan a deceptive illusion of security. Meanwhile, to maintain the Karabakh conflict in a frozen state, the republic needed either relative military parity with Azerbaijan or the support of a powerful ally capable, at a critical moment, of exerting not only moral pressure on Baku. Although Armenia was not isolated, intensive international contacts were strategically unfruitful from a military-strategic perspective, neither attracting reliable allies to its side nor noticeably increasing its defensive power. Not every exchange of formal diplomatic courtesies can have strategic consequences. Attempting to juggle a large number of foreign policy "balls" simultaneously, the Armenian leadership under Pashinyan often multiplied entities unnecessarily.

By placing excessive reliance on the lobbying capacity of the Armenian diaspora and treating Western Europe and the United States as meaningful actors on the chessboard of the Karabakh conflict, Pashinyan demonstrated dangerous strategic shortsightedness. In reality, only two factors carried weight in the external-political dimension of the Six-Week War: first, Turkey's active support for Azerbaijan; second, the absence of direct intervention by Moscow. When Azerbaijani rocket artillery struck Stepanakert, the United States and the European Union chose to overlook

the armed conflict. The pandemic and the U.S. presidential election pushed the South Caucasus to the periphery of the global news agenda.

As for Russia, the frozen conflict in Karabakh from 1994 to 2020 suited it primarily because of its ambiguity. Moscow established allied relations with Armenia through the CSTO while simultaneously continuing to regard Nagorno-Karabakh as an integral part of Azerbaijan. The scope of Russian security guarantees remained deliberately vague. Under the specific conditions of autumn 2020, defending the status quo and exerting pressure on Baku would have required disproportionate efforts from Moscow. The informal Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance compelled Russia to act with utmost caution in seeking a ceasefire. In other words, the Russian Federation lacked any overriding motivation to, regardless of the international environment, implicitly fix Karabakh's status as an Armenian protectorate. At a critical moment, Moscow chose to interpret its security guarantees to Armenia literally and not extend them to disputed territories.

The Armenian formula for resolving the Karabakh issue and consolidating the victory of 1994 remained viable only insofar as the Armenian army could, by its own efforts, deter Azerbaijan from seeking military revanche. Without the readiness to fight and win again, even if all of Yerevan's allies turned away, Armenian claims to Karabakh were meaningless.

Between 2018 and 2020, repeated hints by Pashinyan and his inner circle that the republic allegedly held Karabakh and the adjacent Azerbaijani districts by right of conquest served as a form of domestic political signaling. The pinnacle of this rhetoric was the slogan "Artsakh is Armenia, period," pronounced by Pashinyan during his visit to Stepanakert in August 2019. That misplaced arrogance cost Yerevan dearly. By depriving Aliyev of the option to save face through ostentatious disinterest in negotiations, the Armenian prime minister effectively forced him into a corner.

One might have expected that tiny Armenia, poor in resources, geographically isolated, and bearing a tragic past, would adopt a realist approach in foreign policy. Yet, in the view of a concerned Western observer, Armenian state

governance turned out to be a blend of dangerous overconfidence and naïve sentimentality [3].

"That states seek to maximize their power in the interest of self-preservation," reminded M. Reynolds, an American historian and specialist on the modern Middle East, "is a central tenet of the theory of realism. Armenia's example perhaps suggests that historical trauma, coupled with limited experience of sovereignty, can lead states voluntarily to pursue self-destructive policies" [3]. A bleak present and no coherent vision for the future led to an emotional overinvestment in the past.

Armenian society proved unprepared both to make concessions and to fight a major war. The April 2016 and July 2020 clashes showed that Armenian forces in Karabakh could mount a vigorous response to even large-scale border incidents, yet they could not withstand a prolonged campaign involving the main forces of both armies.

Regardless of the difficult political legacy inherited by the Armenian leader, he bore direct responsibility for the defeat. To explain mobilization and operational unpreparedness solely through exogenous factors is a mistake; their roots almost always lie within a nation's own military system, not outside it; something fully borne out by the Armenian example.

In autumn 2020, Azerbaijan's president skillfully exploited a window of opportunity created by the alliance with Turkey and by Russia's non-intervention. For his opponent, foreign policy miscalculations and the factor of mobilization unpreparedness reinforced one another, leading Armenia to strategic bankruptcy.

COLLAPSE

The defeat in the autumn of 2020 stunned Armenia. Optimistic expectations regarding the capabilities of Armenian military power, the goodwill of the West, and Russia's patronage were not fulfilled. The opposition, however, directed its anger not at Pashinyan's reckless foreign policy, but solely at his decision to capitulate [3]. Despite the fact that the Armenian prime minister accepted the imposed terms of the ceasefire

only when standing on the brink of catastrophe, he was showered with accusations of treason; the outraged public found in this a psychologically self-preserving outlet for accumulated resentment. In the end, Pashinyan managed to neutralize the protest impulse, skillfully substituting issues in the debate over responsibility.

Between 2020 and 2023, Russia's ability to fulfill its security guarantees to Armenia with real strategic substance gradually diminished. Having won the Six-Week War, Azerbaijan initially refrained from encroaching on Armenia's internationally recognized borders, thereby indirectly acknowledging Russia's peacekeeping efforts. By late 2021, taking advantage of the fact that the crisis in Russian-Ukrainian relations was entering its terminal phase, Baku began testing Moscow's reaction to border incidents more aggressively. On November 16, 2021, a six-hour battle broke out for two checkpoints on the Goris axis. Both positions were ultimately seized by Azerbaijani forces, but the shooting stopped after calls by then-Defense Minister S.K. Shoigu to Baku and Yerevan [source 3]

Shortly after February 24, 2022, fighting on the front of the SMO in Ukraine, as is well known, became protracted. In light of unfolding events, Russia no longer had surplus modern weaponry that it could otherwise have transferred to Armenia. Moreover, adapting the domestic defense industry to sanctions pressure and ensuring that the threat of international isolation did not take on dangerous military-technical dimensions critically increased Moscow's dependence on Turkish neutrality. Russia's attention fixed on the West automatically broadened Ilham Aliyev's perception of the limits of the possible in the South Caucasus. In September 2022, Azerbaijani forces struck Armenian positions not in Karabakh, but near the cities of Vardenis, Goris, Sotk, and Jermuk. Then, in December 2022, Azerbaijan blocked the Lachin corridor [4]. The heavy fighting on the Ukrainian front prevented Russian interference; the symbolic value of the CSTO had to be sacrificed for more pressing strategic interests.

On September 19, 2023, after a nine-month blockade of the Lachin corridor, Azerbaijan launched its long-anticipated operation to elim-

inate the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic once and for all. It lasted barely a day. Realizing they could not hold out inside a tightly sealed operational pocket, Karabakh Armenians laid down their arms. On September 28, 2023, it was announced that the NKR would legally cease to exist by January 1, 2024. By October 3, 100,000 people, more than 80% of the region's 120,000 Armenian residents, had become refugees. The Armenian government and Russian peacekeepers, six of whom were killed, did not intervene in the final act of the unfolding tragedy [source 4].

The urgent need to rebuild military potential, combined with the impossibility of securing active assistance from a Russian ally deeply bound by the war in Ukraine, pushed Pashinyan toward seeking alternatives. The mistake lay not in this forced measure, but in the habitual tactlessness toward the Kremlin that accompanied Armenia's sharp military-political pivot. By publicly denouncing the CSTO's inefficiency, Pashinyan once again underscored Russia's lack of effective levers to influence the situation in the South Caucasus.

The defeat in 2020 was accompanied by devastating material losses. Fire from Azerbaijani drones alone destroyed 40 tanks, 15 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, more than 30 artillery pieces, and one multiple-launch rocket system. During the fighting, Armenian forces lost up to 110 tanks and 100 light armored vehicles [5]. Much equipment was abandoned during the retreat. By the time the ceasefire was signed, approximately two-thirds of Armenia's 40 air-defense systems had been destroyed, and nearly half of its 400 tanks were lost. Artillery losses were similarly severe [6].

According to Armenian experts, when Moscow failed to fulfill the terms of the 2021 military-supply agreement, Yerevan was forced to seek other sources of arms imports. These turned out to be India and France [source 5, p. 160]. After the 2020 defeat, only about one hundred T-72A and T-72B tanks remained in service, along with roughly 140 BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles and 170 BTR-60 armored personnel carriers [source 5, p. 178]. As a result, Armenia urgently needed to modernize, or, in many cases, rebuild

from scratch, virtually all key elements of its military materiel base. This task was complicated by a range of negative circumstances. First, Russia was not the only one suffering from the consequences of the war in Ukraine. What had previously seemed like almost limitless stockpiles of Soviet-era weapons in Eastern European arsenals were transferred to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In a manner somewhat reminiscent of the situation in 1938–1939 [7, p. 613, 620], the supply of arms on the European market was dramatically reduced. Second, in Western Europe, Yerevan could count only on purchasing a fairly limited range of weapons systems. Armenia's still-modest financial capacity remained a constraint. Although a record USD 2 billion had been allocated for arms imports since 2020, this was still insufficient to meet even the most critical needs and, within a compressed timeframe, reduce the military-technical gap with Azerbaijan. Third, Azerbaijan had already entered this material contest with a significant advantage, as well as far greater financial resources to widen that lead.

Between 2021 and 2025, Armenia's military spending increased by 252%, while Azerbaijan's grew by 127%. Yet in absolute terms, Yerevan continued to lag behind [8]. In 2022, Armenia's defense budget (population: 2.97 million) amounted to USD 781 million; in 2023, it rose to USD 1.29 billion; in 2024, to USD 1.37 billion; and for 2025, USD 1.6 billion was planned. Azerbaijan's military budget (population: 10.6 million) was USD 2.64 billion in 2022; in 2023, it increased to USD 3.13 billion. To retain its established advantage, Baku additionally allocated USD 1 billion from the State Oil Fund to defense. According to Armenian projections, it was expected to reach USD 5 billion in 2025 [source 6, pp. 168-169].

Toward the development of its armed forces, whereas Azerbaijan's is proportionally distributed across various services and agencies. Of the planned USD 5 billion for 2025, the armed forces were expected to receive only USD 1.57 billion; the rest was allocated under other budget lines. Roughly USD 2.7 billion was earmarked for arms and military equipment imports. Since 2020, Azerbaijan has continued active military-technical cooperation with Israel, Turkey, Pakistan, Serbia, and Slovakia. From Serbia, it or-

dered 48 *Nora B-52NG* 155 mm self-propelled howitzers for USD 329 million; from Slovakia, 70 *Dita* 155 mm self-propelled howitzers. From Pakistan, 16 *JF-17* fighter jets were acquired for USD 1.6 billion; from Turkey, *Bayraktar Akinci* UAVs; from Israel, the *Barak-8* air-defense system in the *LR-SAM* configuration [source 5, p. 160]; and from Italy, *C-27J Spartan* military transport aircraft. In partnership with *Turkish Aerospace Industries*, Azerbaijan continued modernizing its fleet of *Su-25* attack aircraft [8].

Armenia allocated an unprecedented USD 2 billion for importing military equipment, thanks to which, already in 2020, an order was placed in India for four counter-battery radar stations. Soon afterward, Armenians purchased 90 Indian 155 mm towed *ATAGS* howitzers and 72 155 mm *TC-20 MARG* self-propelled howitzers. In 2022, 24 launchers of the 214 mm *Pinaka* multiple-rocket system were procured. Deliveries began in 2023, but as of December 2024, only six units had reached the customer. Since, without serious air-defense reinforcement, Armenian forces would face another massacre by *Bayraktars* in a future war, 15 *Akash* air-defense missile systems [source 7] were purchased for USD 720 million [source 5, p. 160].

Under a 2023 contract, Armenia purchased from France three *Ground Master 200* radars, 50 *Bastion* armored vehicles, and 36 *CAESAR 6×6 Mk I* self-propelled howitzers. Delivery of the French howitzers to Armenia is expected during 2025 [source 8, p. 42]. In addition, significant funds were directed toward constructing defensive fortifications along the border with Azerbaijan [8].

On the Russian–Ukrainian front, the *CAESAR* has already proven itself an effective and formidable system. Even more important was that, at the moment of signing the contract, the French howitzer was in full-scale serial production. By the end of 2024, 607 units had been produced, including 391 for foreign customers [source 8, p. 42]. This gave hope that the ordered systems would be delivered within the agreed timeframe without major delays.

Unfortunately, the current needs of the Armenian armed forces are far from being limited

to artillery. Europe, constrained by the necessity of supplying the Ukrainian army, could not offer Yerevan tanks, multiple-rocket launchers, or large quantities of 155 mm ammunition under acceptable conditions for building the required mobilization reserves. Turning to India was, to a significant extent, a compelled choice. In the global arms market, products from India's defense industry still remain somewhat of a mystery in terms of their true operational and combat characteristics. Moreover, questions remain about the Indian defense industry's ability to fulfill export contracts within agreed timelines

The nominal strength of the Armenian Ground Forces in peacetime is around 40,000 personnel. The army's organizational backbone is considered to be the command structures of the four army corps. In practice, these function as territorial commands, with motorized rifle regiments, tank battalions, and artillery units subordinated to them in various combinations [source 6, pp. 179-180]. The armored vehicle fleet of Armenian motorized rifle units continues to rely on hopelessly outdated and extremely worn *BMP-1* infantry fighting vehicles and *BTR-60* armored personnel carriers [source 6, p. 168].

By contrast, the Azerbaijani Ground Forces comprise about 58,000 personnel in peacetime, organized into the command structures of five corps, between which are distributed four mechanized and 13 light motorized infantry brigades. Azerbaijan has at its disposal up to 500 tanks and roughly 1,000 light armored vehicles [source 5, pp. 179-180].

The functions of the army corps differ between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, corps primarily function as headquarters with specific geographic responsibilities, coordinating brigades and supporting assets. In Armenia, by contrast, corps are regarded as operational-tactical formations with a fixed, rather than flexible, combat composition. In practice, however, Armenian corps resemble territorial commands more than independent, balanced operational-tactical headquarters. Geographically, they remain tied to areas where Soviet-era weapons stockpiles are stored. Thus, their deployment reflects the locations of the former 15th, 127th, and 164th motorized rifle divi-

sions, as well as the 7th and 9th fortified regions of the former 7th Army of the Transcaucasian Military District of the USSR¹, whose positioning followed Cold War logic rather than the realities of Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation [9, pp. 533-534].

SECURITY DILEMMA

The ongoing rearmament of a weakened but still unbroken adversary is interpreted by Azerbaijan as a direct challenge. "Armenia cannot compete with us in the arms race," President Aliyev emphasized in an interview on January 7, 2025. "Armenia," he continued, "must take the outcomes of the Second Karabakh War and the anti-terrorist operation very seriously. The ongoing rearmament process in Armenia is undoubtedly a new threat to the South Caucasus. We cannot remain passive observers. Those who today seem to support Armenia and incite it to new provocations against Azerbaijan will, most likely, not stand by it in the end, just as they failed to do in 2020 and the subsequent period." "Armenia," the Azerbaijani leader demanded, "must immediately halt its rearmament. France and other countries supplying it with weapons must cancel and annul these contracts. Weapons already delivered to Armenia must be returned. This is our condition" [source 1].

No matter how strategically appealing Pashinyan's pivot toward the West may have seemed, from a military-strategic perspective, it cannot provide Armenia with additional resilience. Naturally, as long as the war in Ukraine continues, Russian military guarantees in the South Caucasus, as in any other post-Soviet region, largely remain a strategic fiction. Meanwhile, Armenia's vulnerability lies in the fact that, at the moment of a likely confrontation, any other foreign guarantees could also prove empty.

Analysts at IMEMO linked Yerevan's approach to the critical moment with the final rupture of Russian-Armenian ties within the CSTO framework and the potential withdrawal of the 102nd base. "Only France, Greece, and Cy-

¹ Accordingly, these were the areas of the cities of Yerevan, Kirovakan (Vanadzor), Leninakan (Gyumri), and Echmiadzin.

prus, connecting Azerbaijan's actions to Turkey's interests, assist in rearming the Armenian army and demonstrate a willingness to politically support Armenia. It is clear," the report notes, "that in the event of a direct Armenian-Azerbaijani military clash, these states cannot serve as reliable guarantors of Armenia's security. Their actions only convince Ankara and Baku of their ability to resolve the Armenian issue by force if favorable circumstances arise. The preconditions for this may develop if Armenia officially exits the CSTO and Russian military presence in Armenia is eliminated in the coming years" [source 2].

This forecast requires only one clarification: the mere existence of the 102nd base, considered in isolation from the situation on Russia's decisive western front, cannot serve as insurance against a potential military crisis in the Zangezur corridor. The base in Gyumri, as is well known, has no direct land connection with Russia. It is located in the western regions of Armenia, roughly 500 km from Meghri, through which the proposed Zangezur corridor would pass. The Russian troops stationed there possess only outdated and heavily worn Soviet-era equipment from the 7th Army and the 31st Army Corps of the former Transcaucasian Military District [9, pp. 527-528, 535-536].

Cooperation with India and France, amid obvious misunderstandings with Moscow, creates a classic security dilemma. For Pashinyan, it comes down to the fact that his country cannot afford not to prepare for war, yet at the same time, by beginning rearmament, it risks provoking Azerbaijan into decisive countermeasures. Armenia's strongly expressed intention to end its own armed helplessness may push Aliyev to seize the available window of opportunity to resolve Armenian-Azerbaijani disputes by force. What will Pashinyan do if Azerbaijan attempts to force its way through the Zangezur corridor, completely disregarding the 102nd base, just as it ignored the presence of Russian peacekeepers during the final stages in Artsakh in 2023? Can the numerically and technically inferior Armenian army withstand combat using only remnants of Soviet-era stockpiles until the newly acquired French-Indian weaponry is delivered and operational?

Deliveries of foreign combat systems are expected to take four to five years, meaning they will not arrive before the final months of 2027 at the earliest. It is reasonable to assume that India will treat this large Armenian contract as a test of the maturity of its defense industry, giving it the highest priority. In any case, considerable time will pass before the weapons purchased from India and France are delivered, integrated into the armed forces, and thereby transformed from a provocative signal into a stabilizing factor, partially balancing the unfavorable power ratio for Yerevan.

Notably, even once the Armenian army receives the full volume of foreign arms ordered, this will not correct the military-technical imbalance between the opposing sides. However, it will undoubtedly push the critical threshold further away. The risk of military confrontation will persist, but it will no longer be existential; that is, it will no longer inherently threaten the loss of territorial or state sovereignty.

A separate question concerns what exactly restrains Aliyev from immediate decisive action and inclines him toward patience. Between 2001 and 2020, the Azerbaijani president established a reputation as a prudent and extremely cautious ruler, devoid of any traces of military-political adventurism. His decision to retake Karabakh was made under unprecedentedly favorable conditions and carried the risk of irreparable personal discredit had he failed to act. Clearly, in regional affairs, the Azerbaijan-Turkey alliance cannot openly ignore the United States. Yet it works in their favor that the South Caucasus remains far from the center of American interests.

Moreover, by 2020-2023, Aliyev had already achieved the main state objectives for his country. Exceeding this maximum of military-political success is simultaneously tempting and risky. Forcing a passage through the Zangezur corridor, let alone realizing the *Megali Idea* of creating Western Azerbaijan, would be almost impossible to legitimize under international law, especially if doing so results in the irrevocable destruction of previously good-neighborly relations with Iran and Russia.

Thus, in Azerbaijan's case, it is more productive to analyze capabilities rather than intentions. The latter belong to the realm of subjective judgment, while the former can be expressed quantitatively. The window of opportunity for implementing irredentist projects in the Zangezur corridor and Western Azerbaijan is measured by the timeline for the end of the war in Ukraine and the completion of Armenia's military reconstruction program. Here, the exogenous Ukrainian factor significantly outweighs the endogenous Armenian one. Hypothetically, if Russia were to achieve victory and, as early as tomorrow, cease allocating almost all its military resources to the Ukrainian front, redirecting even a portion to the South Caucasus, the window of opportunity for Azerbaijan would close, regardless of the successes of Armenian defense development. No matter how Moscow personally regards Pashinyan, the universal logic of great-power competition in each other's strategic backyard, coupled with the natural desire to curb further Turkish influence in the border region, will likely override even the most intense personal antipathy toward the Armenian prime minister.

CONCLUSIONS

In the realm of international conflict, unlike in a school arithmetic class, changing the order of the terms can indeed alter the sum. While Pashinyan was free to base the alignment of Armenia's foreign-policy priorities on his subjective perceptions of what was desirable, possible, and expedient, strategic decisions were far more constrained by the dictates of external circumstances. After 2022, Russia, fully absorbed by its own military concerns, could no longer play its former role for Armenia, neither in terms of security guarantees nor military-technical cooperation. Consequently, the tacit formula adopted in the Russian narrative ("Armenia turned away from Russia, and therefore got into trouble") is valid only at the upper, foreign-policy level of the conflict dynamic. At the lower, strategic level, it must be read in reverse: "Armenia got into trouble, and therefore turned away from Russia." In this way, foreign-policy multidirectionality was not equivalent to military-strategic multidirectionality, and the cri-

sis in each sphere must be measured on its own unique scale.

Initial Kremlin distrust of Pashinyan evolved over the years into irritation and estrangement. However, even if this factor influenced the process, it did so only indirectly. For Russia, for obvious reasons, the Western front took priority over the South Caucasus. The scale of the SMO exceeded all conceivable forecasts; it demanded extraordinary military-economic and mobilization efforts, unprecedented since 1945. Virtually no resources remained to support allies, whether Armenia or the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. This vacuum allowed Aliyev, in December 2022, to first close the Lachin corridor and firmly blockade Karabakh, and then, in the autumn of 2023, to eliminate it.

For Armenia, converting billions of dollars into cumulative defense capability requires far more effort and time than in neighboring Azerbaijan. At a minimum, across the European continent, the SMO has effectively collapsed the commercial arms market. Even Aliyev, whose army is in significantly better technical condition, conducts military imports selectively, as evidenced by Azerbaijan's recent contracts with Serbia and Slovakia.

A hypothetical return of Armenia to foreign-policy multidirectionality, as a condition for regaining lost geopolitical stability and restoring partnership relations with Russia, would require skilled diplomatic maneuvering and an inexhaustible reserve of patience under a threatening time crunch. For a statesman with Pashinyan's temperament, reconciling decisiveness with caution while simultaneously achieving a harmonious synthesis of political and strategic goals is far from easy. Multitasking, keeping multiple parameters of a complex politico-strategic problem in view at once, has historically not been his strength. Between 2018 and 2020, it was precisely the sequence of poorly considered steps by the prime minister that made an already probable war with Azerbaijan not just inevitable, but imminent. Steering events onto a more controlled and safer trajectory will require Pashinyan a considerable measure of luck, which, alas, is neither a political nor a strategic category.

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