



Moscow's Role in the Karabakh Conflict After the 'Velvet Revolution' in Armenia

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OE Watch Commentary: On May 17, the “president” of the separatist occupied Republic of Abkhazia, Raul Khajimba, received representatives of the foreign ministries of the Russian Federation and three separatist territories in the former Soviet space—the “Republic of South Ossetia” (Tskhinvali Region), the “Pridnestrovia Moldova Republic” (Transnistria) and the “Republic of Artsakh” (formerly known as “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic”). Hikmet Hajiyev, the press secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, denounced Russia’s role in this event and its willingness to meet with separatist Karabakh officials. In response, the Russian foreign ministry stated, “Mr. Hajiyev knows that [Moscow’s position regarding Karabakh] has never implied the refusal to participate in specific international events simply because there might be the possibility of inadvertently meeting with Karabakh’s representatives”. Significantly, these tensions along the Baku-Moscow axis arose against the background of potential escalation in the confrontation between Baku and Yerevan, following the change in Armenia’s government due to the “Velvet Revolution” that erupted there this spring.

Even before those developments, the new Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s statements regarding the Karabakh conflict as well as the responses from Azerbaijani officials hinted that positive outcomes in negotiations going forward would be unlikely, at least in the short term. According to Washington-based South Caucasus expert Thomas de Waal, “The danger here is that if an Armenian leader openly asserts sovereignty over Nagorny Karabakh [sic] and says that the Azerbaijani lands around it, which Armenian forces captured in 1993–1994, cannot be returned, there is nothing left to negotiate about with Baku, and the two sides are back on the road to war.”

In such a situation, Russia could continue to orchestrate escalation and de-escalation phases of the conflict, depending on its interests at the time. Meanwhile, the new Armenian government has resolved to continue bolstering its country’s strategic relations with Russia. During his recent meeting with President Vladimir Putin, Pashinyan underscored Russian-Armenian strategic-level ties and stressed the importance of further strengthening relations, including military cooperation.

In recent weeks, military clashes between the two South Caucasus adversaries have shifted toward the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev visited military bases in the Nakhchivan exclave, on May 16, and stated that the Armed Forces there are equipped with modern weapons to prevent enemy provocations and to be able to launch counterattacks. Several days later, Armenia’s defense and foreign ministers visited bases located near their country’s border with Nakhchivan and instructed commanders there “to strictly thwart any attempts of the adversary.” Subsequently, on May 20, an Azerbaijani soldier was killed along the same frontline. That same day, the Armenian defense ministry announced that the Armenian Army expects to receive from Russia Tor-M2 short-range air-defense systems within a few months. It is worth pointing out that after the realization of arms deliveries connected to a 2015 Russian preferential military loan for \$200 million, Yerevan was offered a second loan—for \$100 million. For Moscow, improving the regional military balance is less important than buying influence in the region.

Russia has recently put pressure on Azerbaijan by raising the possibility of decreasing future arms exports to this state. Hence, Azerbaijan is intensifying efforts to diversify its arms imports beyond Russia. Recently, the Russian newspaper Kommersant announced that, in 2018, Azerbaijan will be one of the first importers of the Belarusian-produced (and co-developed with China) Polonaise multiple launch rocket system. Additionally, the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex announced that Azerbaijan might purchase several of its JF-17 Thunder multi-role combat aircraft in 2019. Furthermore, Azerbaijan has also deepened its military cooperation with China.

Not only is Russia suspected of having played a silent kingmaker role in Armenia’s revolution, it also seems to have stepped in to prevent Azerbaijan from militarily attempting to regain control over its Armenian-occupied regions during the protests in Yerevan. Notably, as the “Velvet Revolution” unfolded, Sergey Naryshkin, the head of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service, suddenly traveled to Baku, almost certainly to discuss the situation in Armenia with Azerbaijan’s political leadership. It is worth noting that Azerbaijan lost control over Karabakh and its adjacent regions in the 1990s under similar conditions of domestic political turmoil. Even the first president of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, urged his country’s new leadership and the public not to repeat the mistakes Azerbaijan and Georgia made in the 1990s—allowing internal political upheaval to result in de facto territorial losses.

Thus, in all probability, there will be little or no tangible progress over the coming years in settling the Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. And in fact, additional short-term military clashes are likely. Under these conditions, Moscow will continue to exert control over both sides of the conflict by exploiting the Karabakh issue. It seems that not even the popular revolt against corruption and cronyism that replaced the government in Armenia can be expected to positively influence the resolution of the conflict, at least for now. **End OE Watch Commentary (Aliyev)**

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Source: “Լեւոն Թեր-Պետրոսյան: Մոտալուծողական վտանգը վտանգավոր դրությունը (Levon Ter-Petrosyan: the dangerous situation threatening statehood),” *Armenpress*, 17 May 2018. <https://armenpress.am/rus/news/933812.html>

The first President of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, published an article on website ilur.am, where he talks about the situation threatening statehood... “...one important circumstance is not considered: today Pashinyan is the Prime Minister of Armenia, whose most important function is provide for the normal function of government bodies...”

...“This is the most dangerous situation for any country...it is enough to remember the situation of Georgia and Azerbaijan in the early '90s....”