

ARMENIA: EYE IN THE STORM

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 **Team Keghart** Editorial, 28 February 2010



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Thus the much-ballyhooed peace dividend never materialized as the U.S. increased its military budget rather than reduce it. After undergoing an economic earthquake due to the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia recovered sufficiently to boost its military arsenal but Moscow's investment in military hardware significantly lagged behind that of Pentagon's. Taking advantage of Russia's perceived military and strategic decline, the U.S and NATO intensified their encroachments on the Soviet Union's former turf in Eastern Europe, in the Caucasus and in the Middle East. Washington strategists remained avid students of Sir Mackinder.

In January the U.S. ambassador to Bulgaria, James Warlick, said that Washington is entering into negotiations with Bulgaria to station interceptor missile facilities, probably in one of the three military bases the Pentagon has established there. A week earlier the Romanian President Traian Basescu had announced that his country—where the U.S. has four bases—would host land-based U.S. interceptor missiles. About the same time Poland revealed that a U.S. Patriot Advanced Capability-3 anti-ballistic missile battery will be stationed 35 mile from the Russian border. Meanwhile the Czech Republic has stated that it will provide sites for a new-generation U.S. radar.

Georgia is also expected to offer bases for new U.S. missiles. Already U.S. airmen have been stationed at the hugely expanded and modernized Krtsanisi National Training Centre in Georgia. U.S.

Marines are training Georgian soldiers and have held at least one war game not far from the Russian border. America's number one ally in the Middle East—Israel—is providing aerial drones to Tbilisi and is delivering large amount of arms and ammunition to Georgia.

Azerbaijan, Armenia's neighbor, is clamoring to join NATO. America sees that country as an ideal launching pad for an attack on Iran. Since as many as a quarter of Iran's population is believed to be ethnic Azeri, Baku may also be deployed by the Americans to destabilize Iran. Further south, America is building land- and sea-based interceptor missile capabilities in the Persian Gulf.

The Washington claim that the missiles in Eastern Europe are intended to defend against Iranian and Korean missile threats is so patently a falsehood that it doesn't deserve to be contradicted.

In the past few years we have heard the almost daily threats of U.S./Israeli attacks on Iran. While Iran is in itself an important country to have in the Western camp, it's also important to Washington as the last link in the encirclement of Russia.

One doesn't have to check the map to realize that Armenia is in the centre of this strategic and military chess game. We are, in fact, the eye of the storm.

Georgia in our north is embroiled in conflict with our long-time friend Russia. Iran, our southern neighbor, is facing regular threats from the world's mightiest nation. The Baku regime in the east is trying to persuade Washington that it's a reliable ally which would provide the West with oil and gas at reasonable prices. The price of that courtship is, of course, Western pressure on Armenia to hand Artsakh to Azerbaijan. And let's not forget the heavily-armed genocide-denying neighbor which occupies most of historic Armenia.

So far Yerevan has managed to stay out of the American strategy to constrict Russia. We have remained friends with Moscow, Washington, and Tehran. This might seem like a miraculous tightrope walk. It isn't.

While Yerevan has played its cards well, Moscow, Washington and Tehran understand that tiny Armenia—caught between a rock, a hard place, and another harder place—has to stay friendly with the three major parties. Like the Armenian community during the Lebanese Civil War, Armenia has wisely chosen the path of positive neutrality.

But to remain in Washington's good books in the long term, Yerevan needs the concentrated support of American-Armenians. If someday the push comes to shove and militarists in the Pentagon tell Armenia "you're with us or against us", Armenia will need deft lobbying from the American-Armenian community. Rather than chase fires as they blaze here and there, our lobbyist should have in hand a robust and clearly-enunciated argument to convince Washington that it is not in its interest to push tiny Armenia.

Whether it sides with Moscow or Washington, in case of conflagration, Armenia would evaporate faster than one can say "Ayp, Pen, Kim". Some Lebanese Arabs—on both sides of the warring

factions—initially expressed their disapproval, if not hostility, when Armenians decided to opt for positive neutrality during that country's Civil War. But eventually, the warring sides honored the Armenian position. We hope Washington and Moscow demonstrate similar wisdom and sophistication and not try to drag Armenia into their dangerous war games.

