

ARMENIA TRIES MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY

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PART I

✘ **Keghart.com Editorial Board**, 17 March 2013

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✘ state and its consequent involvement in conflicts between the East and the West. The ✘

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More than 2,500 years after these dynastic duels of the empires began, there seems nothing is new under the sun. In 2013 Armenian rulers face foreign policy challenges which are identical to the ones their forefather kings had to tackle two-and-a-half millennia ago.

After the 70-year Soviet sojourn, when Kremlin-ruled Armenia was not in the international diplomatic push and pull, Yerevan is back in the great game. While Soviet Union has sunk into the dustbin of history, Russia remains a superpower in the post-Cold War world and justifiably feels threatened by NATO. To fend off Western encroachments, post-Soviet Moscow engineered the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for the Commonwealth of Independent States (some of the former Soviet republics). Armenia is a CSTO partner. The military/political bloc guarantees the security of Armenia, particularly from Turkish encroachments.

To further buttress its shrinking areas of influence around its perimeter, Moscow in recent years,

promoted a new entity called Customs Union. President Vladimir Putin would like to see the Customs Union evolve into a closely-knit Eurasian Union (EU) of the former Soviet republics (not be confused with the European EU). The Russian ruler exerted tremendous pressure on Armenia to join the Customs Union. To "persuade" Armenia to join the Customs Union, Russia also threatened to use its gas as geopolitical weapon, courted Turkey, and sold weapons to Baku. But Yerevan resisted Putin's blandishments and made overtures to the European Union. A mid-March Sarkissian and Putin meeting didn't bear any fruit. In fact, no statements were issued following their discussions.

Armenia considers the Eurasian Union an arcane political model of a new—and shaky--Russian empire. If it joins the Customs Union-Eurasian Union, Armenia would also violate its constitution, limit its sovereignty and likely become a vassal of Moscow. Only Belarus and Kazakhstan have joined the Customs Union.

Armenia has made no secret to Russia that it wants to establish a new relationship based on hard strategic and diplomatic interests, rather than on the sentimental historical ties and the medals Armenian soldiers won during WWII. Not to be caught in Russia's embrace--or more likely in the Russian bear's choke-hold, Armenia has been negotiating with the European Common Market. Yerevan wants to retain the security its CSTO partnership provides, but at the same time to integrate with the European Union and develop closer ties with the United States. European Union spokesmen such as Security Chief Catherine Ashton have stated that Armenia's desired integration with the EU is incompatible with any involvement in Moscow's efforts to cobble together a band of ex-Soviet friends.

Armenia now holds regular meetings with the European Commission for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy, Armenian diplomats frequently meet the various European integration committees and Yerevan is expected to sign, later this year, an association agreement on the establishment of trade zones with the EU. Armenia is also negotiating a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement (DCFTA) with the European bloc. A few months ago President Serge Sarkissyan announced that following the recent presidential elections he would enact the reforms the DCFTA requires.

While about 40% of Armenia's trade is with the former Soviet Republics (with Russia responsible for the lion's share), nearly 60% is with Western Europe. Signaling which way Yerevan is headed, at a European People's Party gathering last year, Sarkissian said: "The Armenian people, with their history, culture and modern aspirations are an indivisible part of the European Civilization."

Keeping its options open, Armenia has also been building closer ties with the United States and NATO. Armenia and the US have signed a memorandum of energy cooperation which some observers consider a milestone for their relations. While it has reduced economic and humanitarian assistance to Armenia, Washington has made a commitment to ensure the security of the ancient and perhaps vulnerable Medzamor nuclear power plant for the next 10 years. There's also talk that

the US would provide funds for the construction of a second power plant and boost trade and investment. Of course, one can say Washington is concerned in the safety of Medzamor because its ally—Turkey—has complained that a Medzamor accident could send toxic emissions to Turkey. American Ambassador John Heffern, who in December, pulled a diplomatic gaffe during a tour of US Armenian institutions when he said “Armenia is a long way to nowhere”, has announced that Washington would push major US high-tech companies to invest in Armenia and to work with Armenian high-tech companies.

Armenia has also curtsied to the West by sending soldiers to Iraq, Afghanistan and to Kosovo, and by attending NATO meetings. A few months ago NATO's Secretary-General Anders Røgh Rasmussen visited Armenia. Acknowledging Armenia's delicate diplomatic balance, last year Erik Rubin, deputy state secretary-assistant, said: “The United States is not against Armenia's cooperation with Russia, but on the contrary would like cooperation and the development of multinational relations.” Adding a footnote to Rubin's statement, Ambassador Heffern was quoted as saying that a country can have more than one partner. Other US voices have echoed the same sentiments by saying that the US is not trying to create a platform in Armenia equal to that of Russia's. Ahem.

So far Armenia has managed to be on friendly terms with three major political-military-economic blocs. Perhaps Armenia has been successful because of the dexterity of its diplomats. Perhaps it has been successful because Armenia is Russia's only friend in the South Caucasus and because the West doesn't want to get into a fight for a tiny and impoverished country which, since independence, has lost perhaps 25% of its people to emigration. Perhaps the US doesn't want to push Armenia already aggrieved over Washington's refusal to acknowledge the Genocide or Hillary Clinton's high-handed shenanigans to force Armenia to sign the notorious Protocols. And perhaps the US is not leaning on Armenia for its close ties with Iran because it realizes Yerevan has no option, and Armenia has to rely on Iran because Turkey—America's ally--continues to blockade Armenia while engaged in far greater trade with Iran than Armenia does.

If anything, international politics is a permanent cauldron. Today's friend is tomorrow's enemy, and the reverse. Strategies can change within days and diplomatic-economic-military necessities can make strange bedfellows. Armenia is forced to play a multi-board military-political-economic chess game on geographically separated boards. As a nation of chess champions, this is game Armenia can play as well as anyone. The people responsible for Armenia's multi-vector foreign policy face a four-dimensional M.C. Escher drawing every working day. The question is how long can they remain in the multi-dimensional game and win. Turkey and Israel have been playing the same game for decades, but Armenia doesn't have an understanding Uncle Sam or Uncle Ivan in its corner. Perhaps the best way to walk the tri-rope is to increase its value to the big powers. Turkey literally gets away with murder and isn't rebuked by Washington because Ankara is perceived to be an important ally. Switzerland, which has negligible resources, is one of the most prosperous countries in Europe because the world finds the tiny Alpien country useful.

Making itself an asset to the East and West is a tall order for Armenia, but it has to be done.

Otherwise, "remote", landlocked, and small Armenia will remain poor and embattled: a permanent basket case. That, after the Turkbaijan belligerence, is the biggest challenge the Armenian government's foreign policy faces.

Armenia has to devise a unique preposition which will end Armenia's isolation. It could be the establishment of an Armenian Silicon Valley, on pharmaceuticals, on manufacturing high-end medical equipment, on research and development in the nanotechnologies. In all these areas, the Diaspora can play an important role. There's multi-billion-dollar talent pool in the Diaspora, in addition to knowledge about international business. Armenia has to tap this "natural" resource. An international conference in Yerevan where Armenian scientists and businessmen from the Diaspora and Armenia can meet to devise a grand economic revival plan would go a long way to bring Armenia out of its shell and stop the destructive emigration. We have to believe that we are a ONE NATION and that Armenia is our homeland whether we live in the shadow of Ararat or hang the glorious mountain's photograph in our living rooms thousands of miles away from Hayastan.

(To Continue... Part II: [Eastmania](#), [Westmania](#), [Armenia](#))

