CRIMEA RUSSIA'S ARTSAKH

Posted on March 30, 2014 by Keghart

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Category: Opinions

Editorial, 23 March 2014

For more than two decades Artsakh's fate has hinged on two contradictory international principles: the territorial integrity of states versus the inviolable right of people for self-determination. These two key principles are enshrined in the United Nations charter and in a number of fundamental international documents. Armenians don't see a contradiction in the two schools of thought when it comes to the status of Artsakh because they believe that since Artsakh was illegally given to Azerbaijan, by Joseph Stalin in the early '20s, the territorial inviolability of Azerbaijan did not apply when the Armenians of Artsakh declared independence. They were merely exercising their right of self-determination.

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Thus when Russian-speaking Crimeans opted for self-determination and joined Russia, President Serge Sarkissian of Armenia recognized the Crimean referendum within a few days. And even if Armenia hadn't believed in the principle of a people's right to self-determination or there was no Artsakh issue, Armenia had no choice but to accede to Vladimir Putin's wishes. That Armenia is dependent on Moscow militarily, politically, and economically is no secret, especially to neighboring countries such as Ukraine. Thus Kiev's high dudgeon against Armenia is ingenuous.

Soon after Sarkissian recognized the Crimean referendum to join Russia, Kiev recalled its ambassadors from Yerevan and threatened Ukraine/Armenia relations were about to go south. One would have thought Kiev authorities, aware of Armenia's circumstances and of the centuries of friendship between the two people's would have been more circumspect in their condemnation. When Kazakhstan—a much-stronger state than Armenia and a Turkic country in sympathy with the Crimean Tatars—recognized the results of the referendum, why would Ukraine pick on tiny Armenia? As well, Kiev should remember that despite Ukraine's weapons sales to Azerbaijan, a country which regularly threatens to invade Armenia, Yerevan did not complain, let alone recall its ambassador from Ukraine.

It's too early to determine whether the Crimea development would buttress Artsakh's assertion of people's right to self-determination, particularly when so much of international politics depends on

who has the power to get what it wants. Russia can recognize Artsakh in a jiffy and cite the principle of self-determination. But since Russia is concerned in NATO's courtship of Baku, it sees no benefit in alienating Azerbaijan to please Armenia, a small country dependent on Moscow.

The West will play similar games of self-interest: It backed self-determination in Kosovo justifiably expecting that the mini-state would be a Western puppet and a constant irritant to hostile-to-the-West Serbia. Since an independent Artsakh or an Artsakh united with Armenia is of no perceived benefit to the West, it would let Artsakh's remain in suspended animation.

Whether Artsakh becomes independent or joins Armenia depends on Baku, but not in a martial sense. If Baku decides to go to bed with the West, Russia will at first try to abort that plan. If it fails, it will give up on the Azerbaijan's rulers and punish them be recognizing Artsakh.

The story line might also change if Russian/European Union commercial relations go into deep freeze and Germany, France, et al begin to look for an alternative source for natural gas which they now buy from Russia. A new natural gas source might be the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey pipeline. But the Azeri wells are now shallower than they were believed to be a few years ago. Would the Europeans invest billions of dollars when the well might go dry in ten to 15 years? A much richer source is Iran. It has the second-biggest proven natural gas sources. But Iran is in the bad books of the West, particularly that of the United States. If Iran and the West make peace, Iranian fuel can be exported to Europe through Syria's Mediterranean ports. If Iran and the West make peace, Saudi Arabia and Qatar would halt their support of the extremist Sunnis who want to topple Assad of Syria.

The next six months would be as unpredictable and suspenseful as a chess match between two grandmasters. In this case the chess board is three dimensional and the players a dozen or more. Armenia will be a pawn in the match, but being a pawn isn't necessarily a bad thing when you are on the side which says "Check mate."