OUR FRENEMY

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Editorial, 31 October 2014

In the 400-year-history of Armenian/Russian relations, the two nations have frequently helped each other and in countless ways. But unlike Russia, Armenia has not betrayed its friend. Moscow betrayed the Armenians as soon as the Tsarist armies marched into Armenia, in the 1820s, and drove out the Persians. The Russian "liberators" then proceeded to oppress Armenians and attempted to assimilate them. In the 1890s Russia's foreign minister said his country preferred an Armenia without Armenians. Three decades later the Soviets gave Kars and Ardahan to Turkey, and Nakhichevan/Karapagh to Azerbaijan. Despite the huge sacrifices Armenians made during WWII, soon after the war Stalin had designs to take away Armenia's status as a republic. During the Azeri pogroms Moscow didn't lift a finger to assist the Armenians. Instead, its soldiers rescued the Azeri armed forces thus guaranteeing that Getashen, Shahumyan and portions of Mardagerd would become part of Azerbaijan.

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Despite Russia's long "rap sheet", Armenia hugged the bear and put aside the memories of the bad Soviet periods when the USSR collapsed. Since then Armenia has signed various military, political, economic, and cultural agreements with Russia.

Yet every other week Russia seems to announce further weapons sales to Azerbaijan. And although Azerbaijan is armed to the teeth (Baku has a $4 billion defense budget per annum or equal to the total budget of Armenia), Russia keeps selling more sophisticated arms to Baby Aliev's fiefdom. The latter already buys weapons from 18 countries, especially high-tech equipment from Israel. In early September it was announced that Russia will probably deliver more than 100 T-90S tanks to Azerbaijan, although Moscow just completed the delivery of 100 T-90S tanks in April. One wonders what else Russia is selling in secret to the Baku petroclan.

The Kremlin policy of arming his ally's enemy is stunning and unprecedented in the annals of history.

It's breathtaking in its treachery. To arm your ally's aggressive enemy is a new one in diplomatic and military history. Even cynical Nicolo Machiavelli would have blanched at Moscow's blithe perfidy.

Does President Vladimir Putin reside in parallel worlds where he can be a friend of Armenia in one and foe in the other?

What's Moscow's explanation for its egregious sale of arms to Baku? The two-timing is "just business," the Kremlin says. Even Mafia hoods, who say "it's just business" when they kill, don't slay their partners.

Moscow claims it needs the money. Yes, it needs the few billion Azeri petrodollars when it forgave Cuba's $32 billion debt a few months ago. Yes, it needs the money when it spent close to $60 billion on the Sochi Olympics extravaganza.

Moscow says it sells weapons to Armenia at low prices, although it knows full well that even at those so-called low prices impoverished Armenia has a hard time coming up with the cash.

Perhaps taking advantage of the distance from Moscow, a few months ago President Serge Sarkissian finally blurted to "La Nacion" newspaper in far away Argentina: "It is a very painful subject and our people are worried that our strategic ally sells weapons to Azerbaijan."

Rather than stop the arms exports to Azerbaijan, Russia is now selling strategic and offensive rockets the equivalent of which Armenia doesn't have. Some 80% of the Azeri arsenal comes from Russia.

Why the blatant Russian treachery?

Russia wants to keep Armenia in a state of arrested development, and dependent on Moscow.

Although Azerbaijan is not a member of Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization (Armenia is), Russia considers Azerbaijan a potential strategic ally.

Russia believes that as far as Armenia is concerned, Moscow is the only game in town.

Russia believes the million-plus Armenians living in Russia (some send remittances to Armenia) are handy hostages if Armenia doesn't behave.

Russia takes Armenia for granted as it woos unreliable but petrorich Azerbaijan.

Stepan Seferian, who leads a newly established think-tank in Armenia, said of Russia's arming of Azerbaijan: "This is inadmissible. Armenia must hold Russia-Armenia consultations and demand explanation because in essence Russia is acting against the strategic partnership and the principles of conflict mediation."

But there isn't much to talk about. The Kremlin doesn't hide its treachery. Its two-timing is brazen and above board.

But there's the Israeli September Surprise which should make Kremlin think twice about continuing to arm Azerbaijan. In mid-September Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon met Aliyev at the Baku ADEX defense industry exhibition and demonstrated how the Iron Dome air defense system operates. The electronic system can intercept and destroy short-range rockets and artillery shells fired from a distance of 4 kilometer to 70 kilometer. It's possible that Baku would buy the Iron Dome. The Israeli system has twice shown its effectiveness against rockets (some of them Grad) launched from Gaza. It's possible that Baku would buy the Iron Dome. How long after that before Baku says "No, thank you" to Moscow? Israel, backed by the US, would meet Baku's voracious appetite for armaments and without strings. Baku would then do the Kiev-Tbilisi Trot and gaze west.

Finally, Moscow must consider the crazed ambitions of the Aliyevians. Frequently in the past year Baku mediacrats, bureaucrooks and assorted hired buffoons have declared that Armenia is part of historic Azerbaijan. If Azerbaijan beats Armenia Baku would establish a land bridge to Turkey, join NATO, and tighten even harder the choke-hold on Russia's southern "area of influence".