WHAT ARMENIA WANTS FROM AMERICA

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Category: Opinions

Areg Galstyan, The National Interest, 5 June 2016

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In turn, Armenia's Defense Minister Seyran Ohanyan stressed the importance of a number of projects in the context of this partnership. They are held in order to enhance the level of joint training interoperability and devise a professional sergeant system. The current visit of the U.S. military to Armenia is of particular importance due to the recent escalation on the Karabakh-Azerbaijani border.

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The development of military cooperation with the United States, both unilaterally and in the framework of NATO, is one of Yerevan's key priorities. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Armenia, blockaded by Turkey and Azerbaijan, is in constant danger of war and is forced to develop a multi-vector foreign and defense policy. Moreover, official Armenian military doctrine states that the expansion and strengthening of the strategic alliance between Turkey (a NATO member) and Azerbaijan is considered as a threat to national security. On this basis, the Armenian side will consistently expand its cooperation with the United States, which has political and military leverage

against Turkey and Azerbaijan, and with NATO, which plays a significant role in ensuring global security.

Of course, we are not talking about strategic cooperation. One can hardly find a politician or a military servant in the Armenian elite who would consider the United States and NATO to be a guarantor of security. Even if Washington wanted to give such assurances, the factor of Turkey, which is one of the largest and most important military allies of America, would still remain. In matters of external security guarantees against Turkey, the defining role is played by Russia. These guarantees are expressed in specific actions: the presence of a Russian military base in the Armenian city of Gyumri, Armenian and Russian border guards monitoring the Armenian-Turkish border area, and the provision of weapons at preferential prices by Russia. Moscow also has commitments to Armenia within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In turn, Azerbaijan, focusing on its strategic relationship with Turkey, is seeking to deepen military cooperation with the United States and NATO. On this basis, Yerevan's cooperation with Washington comes from the need to establish a balance in relations with Azerbaijan. If the Armenian side does not consistently increase the pace of military cooperation with America and NATO, Turkey will lobby the interests of Azerbaijan, using the alliance's mechanisms against Armenia's interests.

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With the support of the United States and NATO, Armenia has seen certain reforms in the spheres of military education and the involvement of civil services in emergencies. They are conducted by the parties in the framework of the "Individual Partnership Action Plan." The format of relations with the Alliance involves consultations on issues such as regional security, the formation of the security strategy, the development of Armenia's military doctrine and the improvement of the defense and budget planning process. Members of NATO and the U.S. Department of Defense noted the efficiency of Armenia's participation in the program called
"NATO Partnership for Peace" and appreciate the participation of Armenian troops in peacekeeping missions under the auspices of the UN in Afghanistan, Kosovo and Iraq. Armenia also takes part in the "Action Plan" partnerships to fight terrorism, which means that the country is sharing intelligence data and analysis with NATO.

Within the framework of bilateral relations with the United States, official Yerevan, through the Armenian lobby in Washington, aims to reduce the volume of U.S. foreign military spending on Azerbaijan. Over the past ten years, the White House has maintained parity on military assistance to Armenia and Azerbaijan. In 2016, America still keeps a balance between Yerevan and Baku among its foreign military financing. However, according to the United States' external operations budget, the total amount of the United States' allocations to Armenia accounts for $23 million, against only $11 million for Azerbaijan. Thus, Yerevan received $1.2 million for projects labeled "International

Military Education and Training" and "Stabilization Operations and Security Sector Reform." At the same time, just $566,000 went to Azerbaijan.

The White House is mindful of the fact that Azerbaijan's military budget has increased several times over the last few years. Many members of Congress, accepting the budget for external operations, take into account such factors as bellicose statements made by Azerbaijani leadership and the worsening situation of human rights in the country. In addition, Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act is still in force (though individual items were suspended in 2001), which greatly limits military technical cooperation between Washington and Baku.

Russia has been sympathetic to the position of the Armenian authorities for a long time. It was important for Moscow that Yerevan, on an official level, emphasized the importance of the Russian military factor and did not consider potential NATO membership. However, the crisis in U.S.-Russian relations and the suspension of Moscow's dialogue with NATO could change Russia's attitude toward Armenian cooperation with the United States and NATO. Many Russian experts claim that America is using NATO mechanisms and tends to lessen the Kremlin's influence on Armenia. Despite the potential difficulties, for the Armenian side it is extremely important to prevent the complete abolition of Section 907 as well as any increase in U.S. military aid to Azerbaijan.

To achieve these goals, the efforts of the Armenian lobby are not likely to be enough. What is required is a direct and active dialogue between the foreign affairs agencies of Armenia and the United States.

Areg Galstyan, PhD, is a regular contributor to the magazines Russia in Global Affairs and Forbes.