

ARMENIAN MILITARY & SECURITY POLICY: REGAINING A STRATEGIC BALANCE

Richard Giragosian*

Introduction

For much of the past few years, Armenia has surprised many observers by significantly deepening military and security ties with the West. While Armenia has long served as an important Russian ally in the South Caucasus region, the country has also steadily implemented a sophisticated policy realignment, integrating the country with Western security structures and organizations. This orientation has been based on a much closer, and more active, relationship between Armenia and NATO, matched by a concerted expansion of bilateral military cooperation with key Western countries, including the United States, France, Germany and Italy.

In this context, Armenia has gradually and steadily restored much more of a strategic balance in the military security sector, most notably as an energetic contributor to Western security and peacekeeping operations in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, however, Armenia has only continued to reaffirm its role as a reliable security partner for Russia, and as a key member of the Collective Security Treaty Organizations (CSTO).

More Strategic Options

Moreover, in terms of defense reform, Armenia continues to deepen ties with the West, expressed through two main directions. First, on a bilateral level, Armenia has greatly expanded the range of its strategic options, forging bilateral agreements with a number of key Western security partners, and even going beyond the West by engaging China as well. On a second, more multilateral level, Armenia has also bolstered its institutional cooperation with NATO through its Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. But equally vital for Armenia, as the only member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in the South Caucasus and as the only country in the region to host a foreign (Russian) military base, Armenia has simultaneously maintained its strategic military and security relationship with Russia.

This trend in military and security reform has fostered a degree of “*complementarity*,” modeled on a policy of balancing the inherent contradictory impulses of a “strategic alliance” with Russia with a pro-Western orientation, which has helped to enhance Armenia’s strategic significance to the West while also elevating its value as Russia’s reliable regional ally. Although Armenia remains reliant on Russian arms and discounted weapons stocks obtained through the CSTO, in terms of operational training, doctrine and modernization, Armenian defense reforms have adopted a more professional, modern, and firmly pro-Western perspective.

Defense Policy Prudence

For his part, Armenian Defense Minister Seyran Ohanian has been careful not to trigger Russian concern over Armenia’s apparent Westward shift, however, and has repeatedly ruled out any aspirations for full NATO membership and consistently reiterated the country’s firm commitment to maintaining the Armenian-Russian strategic relationship while maintaining active participation within the CSTO. Although Moscow seems confident of Yerevan’s overall commitment and reliability, there is a danger of a possible Russian reaction when and if it Moscow perceives a lessening of Russian influence. But at least for now, Armenia remains determined to cement its balance between Russia and the West. And Armenia is also clearly committed to furthering defense reform, whereby, any and all assistance, both from the West and from Russia, is viewed by Yerevan as a welcome and important contribution to modernization.

In the broader area of defense reform, Armenia is now approaching an important threshold, as the armed forces now need to initiate a “third generation” of reform. More specifically, the initial period of “first generation” of reform focused on building a modern and capable armed forces, and succeeded in winning the Karabagh war. The post-war period of improving combat readiness and building an even bolder military superiority then constituted a “second generation” or military reform. During that “second generation” of defense reform, as an institution, the Armenian armed forces were additionally strengthened by the introduction of democratic reform as well, with civilian oversight of the military representing a crucial, fundamental achievement.

The Need for a “Third Generation” of Military Reform

But at this point, in order for Armenia to sustain its military advantages of readiness and superiority of force, it is time for a new “third generation” of reform. This imperative for a next stage of reform must center on tackling and overcoming internal problems within the armed forces, however, especially by overcoming the plague of non-combat deaths and “hazing” abuse within the military. For this unacceptable situation, the challenge is to restore discipline and to impose a new “zero tolerance” policy within the ranks. Although Defense Minister Ohanian and his team have initiated important measures to remedy the situation and to root out the specific officers responsible for such unacceptable abuse, involving the injury and deaths of conscripts, significantly more needs to be done. For example, the defense ministry’s priorities of military education and the expansion of the non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps need to be expanded and accelerated, aimed at bolstering efforts aimed at modernizing and professionalizing the armed forces.

And, more specifically, three relevant policy reforms should be adopted. First, the reform of military education needs to be expanded, which will help to forge greater awareness of the unacceptable nature of hazing and abuse from the very start of officer training and preparation. Second, a comprehensive reform of the internal system of promotion is necessary, so that the promotion and assignment of senior officers will be based on present performance, achievement and accomplishment, rather than as a reward for past performance. Third, the adoption of a modern series of physical and psychological tests for serving command officers is also necessary, based on modern standards for command fitness and merit.

Clearly, the challenge of non-combat deaths and hazing-style abuse will test and determine the effectiveness of this “third generation” of military reform. It may also become more of a direct challenge to the personal leadership of Defense Minister Ohanian and his team of reformers within the Armenian ministry of defense. Yet the defense minister and his reform team are quite capable of passing such a test, especially as the transparency and openness that exposed these problems within the military were introduced by Ohanian himself, as an important element of the country’s defense reform program. Moreover, the overall number of non-combat deaths and instances of hazing-related abuse within the armed forces is actually less than in previous years. But the as the abuse is no longer hidden from public view, a more effective response is required.

Thus, as Armenia has steadily regained a strategic balance in its military and security sector, it has also graduated from its past role as a simple security consumer, to a dynamic contributor to both regional and international security and stability. But in order to maintain this balance and sustain its enhanced significance and strength, the imperative for Armenia is to now focus on internal challenges, and to embark on a new “third generation” of military reform.

* Richard Giragosian is the director of the Regional Studies Center (RSC), an independent think tank in Yerevan (www.regional-studies.org).