

## Russian pressure may limit Armenia's defence options

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Armenia's strategic options have been seriously limited by an unexpected policy shift, when President Serzh Sargsyan ended any hope of finalising an association agreement and free-trade area with the EU, opting instead to join the incompatible Russian-led Customs Union. Advocates of Armenia's pro-Western defence reforms are now concerned over a possible similar setback, should Russia again impose limits on Armenia's Western embrace and orientation.

### What next

In the short term, the abandonment of the negotiations for an association agreement and its related deep and comprehensive free-trade area may leave a similar Western orientation among defence reformers difficult and politically dangerous to sustain. Russian pressure would not only imperil several years of difficult and steadfast reform, but deepen ties with the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), limiting Armenia's options. Such a development would offer Armenia little if any alternative benefits, and lock it firmly within the Russian orbit, and leave it little option than to join Moscow's grand project of a 'Eurasian Union'.

### Analysis

For nearly four years, Armenia has been engaged in deep and difficult negotiations with the EU over an association agreement, designed to foster greater 'approximation' of Armenian reform to EU standards and values. In a sudden shift in policy, Sargsyan announced in Moscow on September 3 an end to that effort. He promised instead to align the country with the Russian-led Customs Union of former Soviet states (see [RUSSIA/CAUCASUS: West will gain as Moscow loses grip - September 5, 2013](#)), which currently comprises Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, and is believed to be the precursor to forming a Eurasian Union, a means of increasing Moscow's influence in the former Soviet space (see [RUSSIA: Moscow scrambles to sustain regional clout - December 5, 2011](#)).

### Threat to Western-style defence reform

The abrupt 'U-turn' in strategy by the Armenian president has triggered new fears in Armenia that Moscow may draw a similar 'line in the sand' regarding Yerevan's long-standing embrace of Western reforms in the defence and security sectors. For the pro-Western reform team led by Defence Minister Seyran Ohanyan, this concern would be well founded, should Moscow seek to halt the deepening of Armenia's ties to NATO and its pursuit of Western-style defence reform and modernisation. Since Armenia is the only member of the CSTO in the South Caucasus, Moscow may exert greater leverage and intensified pressure on the course of its defence reform and specifically target its pro-Western reformers.

### Impact

- Russian pressure on Armenian defence policy would place it more firmly within Moscow's orbit.
- By turning its back on Western-style defence reform, Armenia would roll back the modernisation of its armed forces.
- In the longer term, it would undermine pro-Western reformers under the defence minister and bolster conservative pro-Russian elements.

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**Armenia's sudden surrender to Moscow over closer EU ties leaves the future of defence reform suddenly much more fragile**

More specifically, Armenia's impressive strides in defence reform may be at risk. It has sought to bolster combat readiness, improve defence capabilities and expand civilian oversight of the armed forces (see ARMENIA: 'Hazing' could subvert military reform - February 3, 2012). Yet Russia may seek to constrain Armenia's Western- and NATO-backed military education reforms and even block its operational contributions to peace-keeping deployments abroad, which have included missions under Western command in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. The planned expansion of peace-keeping operations in Lebanon and Mali may now be seen by Moscow as too much, too soon for the small Russian ally.

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Participation in Western-led  
peacekeeping may end

### Balance of power within ministry

The net loss for Armenia from such a reaction would include an obvious setback to defence reforms and a weakening of the position and power of the defence minister. This would strengthen the 'old guard' of conservative, pro-Russian rivals within the Armenian Ministry of Defence. On a larger scale, any such Russian pressure would further subvert Armenia's hard-fought position as a contributor to regional security and not just a mere consumer of security.

### Relations with NATO

As Russia's 'reliable ally', driven and defined by the fact that Armenia is the only country in the region both to host a Russian military base at Gyumri (see ARMENIA/RUSSIA: Moscow will try to stop Karabakh war - March 22, 2012) and to be a CSTO member, Russia may bid not just to halt EU engagement but impose new limits on Armenia's defence options. It may become even more keen to prevent Armenia's procurement of Western arms, limiting its options and potential partners, and hindering its pursuit of interoperability with NATO standards (see ARMENIA/RUSSIA: Joint arms industry may deter Baku - November 15, 2012).

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Russian could eliminate arms  
sales rivals

These concerns were raised in a recent meeting with a visiting NATO official. During his visit to Yerevan on October 17-18, at meetings with senior Armenian officials including the president, NATO's special envoy to the South Caucasus and Central Asia, James Appathurai, stressed the need to continue the deepening of ties with NATO, through the Partnership for Peace, as an essential and integral foundation for defence reform. Yet such concerns stem not from any need to convince Yerevan or Brussels, but rather from the possibility that a shift may be coming in Moscow's view of the acceptability of continuing NATO-Armenian relations.