

Armenia, Russia in New Air Defence Deal

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Russia's desire to increase its military role in Armenian airspace may be connected to differences with Turkey on Syria.

Russian president Vladimir Putin has instructed ministers to negotiate an agreement with Armenia on a shared air defence system.

In late October, the Russian government approved plans for the creation of the joint air defence mechanism. The idea is to create an aerial "umbrella" on the southern border of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a wider regional defence alliance that includes Armenia, Russia, Belarus and three Central Asian states.

In the South Caucasus, Georgia and Azerbaijan are not CSTO members, and unless this changes, their airspace is not part of the proposed cooperation.

On November 11, Putin told the Russian defence and foreign ministries to go ahead with negotiations with Yerevan.

Armenia already collaborates with Russia on air defence, and it is not yet clear how the new system will differ, or whether it will function within the CSTO framework. But analysts in Armenia believe this will be the case.

Former defence minister Vagharshak Harutyunyan told IWPR that the current mechanism consists of a "unified command centre where information about the situation in the skies over the South Caucasus is processed and exchanged," he said.

The new agreement seems likely to integrate this with similar Russian arrangements with Kazakhstan and Belarus.

"Thus, it can be said that a united air defence system for the CSTO, of which these states are members, is being established," Harutyunyan said.

Defence expert Sergei Minasyan expects the upcoming treaty to lead to a more comprehensive regional air defence network. Apart from interceptor jets and S-300 surface-to-air missiles, it will probably incorporate detection systems and radars that are deployed in the Russian North Caucasus.

In practice, says Harutyunyan, Russian and Armenian air defence forces would work in sync, from the exchange of information to the launch of missiles and military aircraft, in the event of the threat of war or large-scale hostilities, for instance if the Nagorny Karabakh conflict reignited.

"This system includes Russia's ships on the Black Sea, its Caspian flotilla, detection systems, and aircraft squadrons in the North Caucasus, as well as the components of Armenia's air defence," he said. "If necessary, this system will work as a single unit providing coverage and reach for the Armenian defence forces in the skies over the region, from the Caspian to the Black Sea."

The leaders of CSTO states have discussed a common unified air defence system for several years. Putin first spoke of plans to build and strengthen the air defence "umbrella" at a 2013 awards ceremony for senior Russian army officers.

"We also plan to strengthen the unified air defence system with Belarus and to start forming such regional systems with Armenia and Kazakhstan," he said.

Some experts see air defence integration as a logical continuation of the long-term security relation between Armenia and its major ally. The Russians maintain ground forces and fighter jets in Armenia. A 2010 agreement extending Moscow's use of the Gyumri military base until 2044 includes a Russian commitment to defend Armenia against external threats.

Sergei Markedonov, a Caucasus expert in Moscow, says the forthcoming deal has nothing to do with the Karabakh dispute, which has been frozen since 1994 and has soured Armenia's relationship with Azerbaijan. Instead, he argues, it is only the latest in a long line of joint military initiatives.

"I don't see anything special or extraordinary about this decision on unified air defences," Markedonov told IWPR. "It would be fundamentally wrong to look for pitfalls in the expansion of joint air defences in the context of the Karabakh conflict."

Commentators also acknowledge, however, that Moscow and Yerevan are each acting in their own interests. Russia will be keen to reinforce the southern borders in the Caucasus in light of the ongoing civil war in Syria, and its own military engagement there.

Armenia, meanwhile, benefits from enhanced national security in an unpredictable region where the risk of renewed war over Karabakh is ever-present.

Azerbaijan has been using its oil revenues to spend large sums on weaponry, much of which it buys from Russia, to Armenia's chagrin. Moscow is thus acting as arms supplier to both protagonists, perhaps in order to maintain a balance of power in the region, but also to bind both countries closer to itself. (See **Energy, Arms Trade Clouds Armenia's View of Moscow.**)

The importance of an effective air defence system was felt on October 8 when Turkish helicopters twice entered Armenian airspace. Turkey is an ally of Azerbaijan, and has kept its border with Armenia sealed for over 20 years.

In Ankara, the incursion was blamed on bad weather conditions. In Armenia, however, it was seen as an indirect dig at Moscow in response to an earlier violation of Turkish airspace by Russian fighters engaged in hostilities in Syria. Russia attributed that incident, too, to bad weather.

Some analysts view the timing of the joint air defence announcement in the context of a sharply deteriorating Russian-Turkish relationship, caused by differences over the Syrian conflict.

Anatoly Tsyganok, head of the Centre for Military Forecasting at the Moscow Institute of Political and Military Analysis, told the Haqqin.az news site recently that the air defence „umbrella“ project was about Turkey, not Azerbaijan.

Talks on common air defence have been going on for more than three years, and it seems certain that their sudden acceleration is a result of the fast-evolving situation in the wider region.

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