

## **Armenia's Growing Paranoia**

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Ministers in Yerevan believe that Armenia is in danger of political and military isolation

Reports of a military alliance between Turkey and Georgia have set alarm bells ringing in neighbouring Armenia.

The news comes at a time when Yerevan's traditional ally - Russia - is demanding the repayment of old debts and forging new links with Azerbaijan.

The growing unease in Armenia is reflected in a recent interview with foreign minister Vardan Oskanian who said, "Military cooperation between Turkey and Georgia makes us very uneasy and could significantly upset the balance of power in the region."

He went on, "Georgia's dependence on Turkey grows every day. And there is always a chance that Georgia might be drawn into an alliance with Turkey and Azerbaijan aimed at isolating Armenia."

Georgia has been quick to calm Yerevan's fears. Oskanian's counterpart in Tbilisi, Irakly Menagarishvili, said, "I want to stress that any concerns Armenia may have over military and political relations between Turkey and Georgia are entirely unfounded."

And, on April 30, Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze told a press conference that Tbilisi had no intention of forming any military alliances. "Georgia has good relations with Armenia just as it does with its other neighbours. There's no reason to build new military alliances when we should be dissolving the old ones."

However, Vardan Oskanian was especially critical of Turkish foreign policy in the region, accusing Ankara of deliberately hindering the search for a peaceful solution to the Nagorny Karabakh conflict.

"We are convinced that, if Armenia and Turkey had enjoyed good relations over the last 10 years, the conflict would have been resolved," said the Armenian foreign minister.

He went on to warn that Turkey's stance had forced Armenia to consider "various options for its national security".

Over the past few years, Armenian officials have made no secret of the fact that the presence of Russia's 102nd Military Base on Armenian territory is a strategic response to the perceived threat from Turkey.

However, Oskanian made it clear that any changes in Turkish foreign policy could persuade Armenia to review its military and political strategy.

The independent analyst Gagik Petrosian commented, "It is likely that Oskanian is sending out a message to the United States which is currently attempting to smooth over relations between Armenia and Turkey."

"Today Armenia is considered a bastion of Russian interests in the South Caucasus but Yerevan is now hinting that it could change its foreign policy if Washington forces Turkey to enter into a dialogue with Armenia."

Oskanian has dismissed the idea of trilateral talks between Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan mooted by the Turkish foreign minister, Ismail Cem. He explained, "While diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia are suspended, while Turkey continues to blockade Armenia and maintains a pro-Azeri stance, such a meeting would be pointless."

Instead there are clear indications that Armenia is seeking to strengthen military ties with Russia.

Lieutenant-General Mikael Arutyunian, head of the Armenian General Staff, points out that Yerevan and Moscow have signed a pact sanctioning combined military forces in Armenia.

This grouping includes Armenian anti-aircraft units and the 102nd garrison which "will defend the territory of Armenia as well as the southern borders of Russia and the whole CIS."

The general commented, "We are protecting ourselves against possible threats which might result from various developments in the region." By "possible threats", Arutyunian was clearly referring to Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The 102nd garrison will shoulder the responsibility of defending Armenian airspace in early May, according to Colonel Alexander Drobyshevsky, head of the air force press office.

He went on to say that Armenia's readiness to help defend CIS airspace had enabled Russia to rearm and modernise local units, replacing the outmoded MiG-23 fighters for MiG-29s. The Russian military base in Gyumri had recently been equipped with S-300 ground-to-air missiles.

However, whilst counting heavily on Russia's military support in the region, Armenia has recently ruffled feathers in Moscow by excluding the Russian company Itera from the tender to privatise local energy distribution networks.

Moscow promptly demanded that Armenia pay off part of its debt to Russia - which currently stands at around \$114 million.

The Yerevan government has since presented a bill to the National Assembly proposing an initial payment of \$19.5 million raised from the sale of state property.

Aik Babuhanian, a parliamentary deputy for the Right and Unity faction, commented, "This points towards the total failure of Armenia's foreign policy."

And the Yerevan newspaper Azg wrote, "There are other countries in the CIS which owe Russia much more. In fact, the demand to pay off the debt can be seen as a slap in the face for the Armenian government."

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