Armenia: disenchantment with the CSTO

Description

Following Azerbaijan's attack on Armenian settlements in uncontested territory on 12 September 2022, Yerevan requested the activation of Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), to which Armenia belongs, on 13 September. Russian Colonel Anatoly Sidorov, Chief of Staff of the CSTO, immediately dismissed the idea of military intervention, preferring instead to call on "Armenia and Azerbaijan to resolve the situation by political and diplomatic means."

A landlocked state surrounded by powerful neighbors who make no secret of their hostile intentions towards it, Armenia has been in a permanent state of undeclared war with its Turkish-backed neighbor Azerbaijan for control of Nagorno-Karabakh since its independence in 1991. In 2020, the disastrous war between the two countries ended in a crushing defeat for Armenia and the loss of part of the enclave and the glacis surrounding it. These territories had been under Armenian control since the 1990s and had now fallen back into the hands of Azerbaijan. Since then, and more specifically from May 2021 onwards, Azeri incursions into the border villages of Siunik and Ghergakunik have continued to multiply(1). In September 2022, Ilham Aliyev's regime once again violated the sovereign territory of Armenia, launching a vast military offensive on several localities located in the uncontested territory (Goris, Sotk, Jermuk, Kapan, Vardenis, Artanich, and Ichkhanassar). With these military incursions, Azerbaijan sought to pressure Armenia into signing a peace treaty recognizing its territorial integrity without considering Armenian counter-proposals. In addition, from 12 December 2022, so-called Azerbaijani environmental activists blocked the Latchine corridor, the only road linking the 120,000 Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, putting thousands of lives at risk. By blocking this vital access route for the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, Baku was hoping that Armenia would grant it an extra-territorial corridor(2) linking Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhchivan, in south-west Armenia and beyond to Turkey, its closest ally. However, point 9 of the ceasefire agreement signed by Armenia and Azerbaijan under the aegis of Russia on 9 November 2020 does not mention any sovereign corridor but only a communication route open to goods and merchandise.

CSTO membership is seen as a guarantee of the country's security

Armenia first signed the Collective Security Treaty (CST) in Tashkent in 1992 and then the Military Cooperation Treaty on 16 March 1995 before joining the CSTO, a multilateral defense organization headed by Moscow. Until recently, Yerevan saw this membership as one of the main components of the country's security system. Conceived by Moscow in 2002 as a Eurasian equivalent of NATO, the CSTO brings together six former Soviet countries: Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The Organization's mission is to guarantee the collective security of the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), of which Armenia is a member, and to maintain peace, security, and stability in the region. Article 4 of the Treaty (equivalent to Article 5 of NATO) stipulates that in the event of aggression against one of the member states, the others must assist, including by military means(3).

Despite its status as a member state of the CSTO, the Republic of Armenia has never benefited from military solidarity. During the 44-day war (27 September – 10 November 2020), the non-recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh (including by Yerevan) as part of Armenian territory justified the Kremlin's exclusion of any military intervention. More surprisingly, when Azerbaijan repeatedly violated Armenia's territorial integrity, no mutual defense clause was activated under the CSTO. This lack of solidarity by the CSTO's partners led to a barrage of criticism in Armenia, especially as Yerevan did not hesitate to send 100 soldiers to Kazakhstan on 7 January 2022 under Article 4.

A diplomatic dilemma for the Kremlin

Armenia's appeal for help following the clashes sparked by the Azerbaijani army on the night of 12-13 September presented Moscow with a formidable dilemma. On the one hand, while Armenia sees itself as one of Russia's strategic partners in the South Caucasus, its refusal to apply the CSTO commitments, and therefore to come to Yerevan's aid, has contributed to undermining the credibility of Russia, already hard-hit by the setbacks it is accumulating in Ukraine. On the other hand, for Moscow to intervene would mean military opposition to Azerbaijan (a member of the CSTO from 1992 to 1999). Unlike Tbilisi, which maintains a pro-Western stance year in, and year out, Baku has never expressed any desire for Euro-Atlantic integration; the two countries are also linked by numerous cooperation agreements covering cross-border security, energy, the exploitation of Caspian Sea resources, and transport. Finally, the fact that Turkey, Azerbaijan's "sister" country and a member of NATO, has been trying to mediate in Russia's war against Ukraine for the past 18 months has prompted Moscow to exercise a degree of restraint. It is, therefore, understandable that Russia has no desire to alienate Azerbaijan, knowing that any further involvement would expose it to the risk of facing a hostile Turkish-Azerbaijani flank. Admittedly, the ambitions of the two states clash within an arc of crises stretching from North Africa to the Caspian Sea via the Levant and the Black Sea. Still, Moscow and Ankara do not cross the threshold of a proxy confrontation, as was seen in autumn 2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh. Busy with the war in Ukraine and anxious not to alienate Baku and Ankara, Russia maintains a cautious stance in the conflict, aware that it does not currently have the human or material resources to launch itself into a new conflict.

The other CSTO member states would also be reluctant to consider military intervention in Armenia, each country having its security priorities(4). Belonging to the Turkic-speaking sphere (except Tajikistan) and predominantly Sunni Islam, the countries of Central Asia tend to favor Turkey's growing influence in the region. At the same time, their anti-Russian sentiment and mistrust of China continue to grow. Establishing bilateral strategic partnerships and increasing Turkish investment indicates Ankara's growing influence in Central Asia. The Organization of Turkic States (OTS), set up in 2009, includes Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan among its members. Against this backdrop of rapprochement with Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Azerbaijan, the reluctance of the Central Asian countries that are members of the CSTO to activate the mutual defense clause is evident, especially as they are facing several challenges on their territories. As for Belarus, in the process of being absorbed by Russia, its room for maneuver to put forward an opinion of its own is now more than limited.

An Armenia with no natural alternative?

Against this backdrop, anti-Russian sentiment is beginning to spread in Armenia, with the population increasingly skeptical of Russia as the guarantor of the country's security. On 18 September 2022, during a visit by the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, several hundred residents of Yerevan staged a demonstration in Liberty Square to demand that Armenia leave the CSTO and join NATO. Similarly, during the summit of CSTO members held in Yerevan on 23 November, residents of the capital gathered in the square, carrying flags of Ukraine, the United States, and France and anti-Russian placards(5). This summit should have allowed Vladimir Putin to reassert his role as referee and show that he was retaining his influence in the South Caucasus. However, accusing the Moscow-led regional structure of ineffectiveness in managing the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Armenia refused to sign the summit's final declaration. In his opening speech, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pachinian noted, "*Armenia's membership of the CSTO has not deterred Azerbaijan from aggressive actions, and the Organization's inaction on this issue is causing great damage to its image.*"

Incredibly disappointed by the Kremlin's inability to guarantee its security on its territory, along its borders, and among the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia is now increasingly turning to the West to preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity: joining forces with the West to ensure the country's security would offer Armenia "other possibilities" than Russian patronage, according to the pro-Western news website *Lragir*(6). Armenia and Azerbaijan held talks in November 2022 in Washington under the aegis of the United States. If, during the war in Nagorno-Karabakh in the autumn of 2020, the Western powers were sidelined by Russia and Turkey, contenting themselves with minimal condemnations, they acquired a new role following Azerbaijan's military incursions into

uncontested Armenian territory after the quadrilateral meeting on 6 October 2022 between President I. Aliyev, Prime Minister N. Pachinian, President Emmanuel Macron, and European Council President Charles Michel, the European Union deployed an observation mission to the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan for two months. On 20 February 2023, at the request of the Armenian government, the EU launched a second civilian mission comprising around 100 staff. However, caution prevails in relations between Armenia and these players, while in July 2022, the EU signed an exceptional agreement with Azerbaijan on gas deliveries to break its dependence on Russia in this area; this agreement undoubtedly contributes to reducing the EU's room for maneuver.

Moreover, a shift to the Western camp would not be without risk for Armenia. Russia, which wants to maintain its influence in its "near abroad," does not hesitate to activate economic, but above all, political and security levers to "punish" states with Euro-Atlantic aspirations. For example, in response to Georgia's assertion that it wanted to join the EU and, above all, NATO, the Russian army immediately invaded South Ossetia and Abkhazia and recognized their "independence." Similarly, signing an association agreement, followed by a complete and deep free trade agreement between Ukraine and the EU, resulted in the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas, with the dramatic consequences we know today(7). Well aware of the risks, Armenia has no choice but to adopt a geopolitical balancing act.

No doubt the latest crises (popular uprising in Belarus, renewed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijani military incursions into Armenia, tensions in Kyrgyzstan, etc.) left unanswered by the CSTO have revealed the organization's limited capacity for action. For now, however, the Armenian authorities find it difficult to envisage leaving the CSTO. Nevertheless, the repeated violations of its territorial integrity are prompting it to reflect urgently on a new defense doctrine, which requires a multidimensional foreign policy.

Notes:

(1) Tigrane Yégavian, *Géopolitique de l'Arménie*, Paris, BiblioMonde, 2022.

(2) This is the Zanguezour corridor, the Azerbaijani name for the Siounik region.

(3) Official website of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

(4) "Chest odinotchestv" (Six lonelinesses), *Golos Armenii*, 24 November 2022.

(5) "Outchastniki mitinga v Erevane potrebovali vykhoda Armenii iz ODKB" (Participants in Yerevan rally demand Armenia's withdrawal from CSTO), *Kavkazskii Ouzel*, 23 November 2022.

(6) "Vmechatelstvo SChA stalo whansom vybratsia iz plana 9 noiabria i vernout protsessy na pravovye relsy" (The American intervention has become a chance to get out of the 9 November plan and put the process back on a legal footing.), *Lragir*, 20 October 2022.

(7) Laure Delcour, « Les réponses de la Russie aux politiques de l'UE, sources d'insécurité dans leur voisinage commun ? », *Revue de Défense nationale*, vol. 802, n° 7, 2017, pp. 130-134.

Thumbnail: Meeting of CSTO Defense Ministers, Minsk, 25 May 2023. Source: odkb-csto.org.

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Link to the French version of the article

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