

Armenia: gradually moving away from Russia

Description

Armenia and Russia share a long history of strategic alliance, marked by decades of military, political, and economic cooperation. However, recent geopolitical developments and changes in regional dynamics have led to Armenia gradually distancing itself from its traditional allies, favoring Europe and the United States.

The ongoing process initiated by Yerevan and fuelled by growing disillusionment with Russia's ability to guarantee Armenia's security results in a series of political decisions and strategic reorientations. With persistent external threats from Turkey and Azerbaijan and opportunities to diversify its international partnerships, Armenia is exploring new ways of ensuring its sovereignty and economic development. This transition represents a crucial turning point in Armenian-Russian relations, raising questions about the future of Russian influence in the Caucasus and the region's stability.

A historic alliance that is now modest

In 2013, during his visit to the Russian military base at Gyumri in Armenia, Vladimir Putin declared, *"Russia will never leave here and that, on the contrary, it will strengthen its positions."* At that time, the two nations were linked by a friendship, cooperation, and mutual support treaty signed in 1997, a significant milestone in their relationship. Today, Russia's position in Armenia and the region seems more fragile than ever. The idea of joining the European Union is gaining ground in Armenia, and measures against the Russian presence have begun to be taken. For example, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has already started removing the Russian customs service, which has been present at Yerevan airport since the 1990s.

The 102nd base in Gyumri, the country's second most populous city, is the most extensive Russian military base in Armenia. Located close to the Turkish border, this base historically played a defensive role against the Ottoman Empire and, later, during the Cold War. The town of Gyumri has always played a strategic role as a defensive bastion against foreign empires. During the Cold War, it was one of the few places where the Soviet Union shared a direct border with a NATO country, Turkey. Today, this base is supposed to be a guarantee of security for Armenia against its Turkish neighbor. However, due to the obsolescence of the equipment and the limited number of troops, this guarantee is increasingly being called into question. According to Levon Barseghian, Professor of Economics at Cornell University, this border with Turkey is the *"last piece of the Iron Curtain."* However, the equipment at this base is decades old, with T-72 tanks, S-300 air defense systems, and MIG-29 fighter planes. According to military analyst Leonid Nersisian, [the limited Russian forces are symbolic](#).

The tipping point

Confidence in Russian security began to crumble in 2020 when [the second war with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region](#) broke out. Although this territory was internationally recognized as Azerbaijani, many Armenians perceived Russian inaction as a betrayal. After the war, Armenia tried to strengthen its military alliance with Russia. In February 2021, Defence Minister (November 2020 – July 2021) Vagharchak Harutiunyan even declared that Armenia would welcome an expansion of the 102nd Russian base and deploying troops on the border with Azerbaijan. Russia maintains a battalion group in Goris to support the 2,000 Russian troops deployed in Karabakh under the 2020 ceasefire agreement. However, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, tensions between Armenia and Russia escalated. Azerbaijan then began incurring territories supposedly secured by Russian troops, including Armenia. Yerevan argued that these attacks should have triggered the mutual defense provisions of the Russian-led Collective



Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Yet Russia proved unwilling or unable to repel these attacks.

Armenian Prime Minister Pachinian criticized the military alliance, calling it a “strategic error” and claiming he did not see the advantages of the Russian military base at Gyumri. These statements provoked reactions from Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who threatened to review Russian-Armenian relations if Armenia continued to turn towards the West. Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Russian Security Council, accused the West of [seeking to destabilize the South Caucasus region](#).

Rejection of the Russian presence

Armenia’s change of perspective towards Russia was accentuated after the invasion of Ukraine. Russia, busy on another front, confirmed its inability to honor its defense commitments to Armenia. Azerbaijan’s incursions into Armenian territory, in particular, led to real disillusionment in Armenia.

While symbolic, the dismissal of the Russian customs officers from Yerevan airport is a significant marker of Armenia’s changing relationship with Russia. This act, however small, carries a weighty message.

On 29 May 2024, Armenian officials officially suspended the Russian television channel Channel One broadcasting because of unpaid bills to the Armenian agency that controls broadcasting frequencies. However, no one doubts that this suspension was also a response to the arrogance of specific Russian television programs that had strongly criticized N. Pachinian’s governance.

As a further important step, on 12 June 2024, the Prime Minister officially announced Armenia’s forthcoming withdrawal from the CSTO. The visit to Ukraine (particularly to Boutcha) by the Armenian ambassador to Ukraine, Vladimir Karapetyan, and the head of the Nor Nork district in Yerevan Tigran Ter-Margaryan provoked a strong reaction from Russia. While they supported Ukraine, aligning Armenia with Western positions, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova described the visit as *“an openly unfriendly act on the part of Yerevan.”* She added that the Kremlin had sent a protest note to Armenia, reflecting Moscow’s displeasure. In mid-June 2024, Armenia also participated in the first Peace Summit organized in Switzerland to find a just and lasting peace formula in Ukraine.

New horizons

Despite one of the lowest levels of public confidence (only 17%, according to the International Republican Institute), the Armenian Prime Minister seems determined to pursue his strategy and explore new options and alliances to guarantee the country’s security and economic development. Diversifying economic and military partnerships is becoming a key strategy. Trade relations between Russia and Armenia are increasing, reaching €7.3 billion in 2023, largely thanks to the circumvention of sanctions against Russia via Armenia since the war in Ukraine.

As part of his turn towards the West, N. Pachinian is sending out more and more signals to the EU. While he refused several invitations to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) meetings, [the Prime Minister visited the European Parliament](#) in Strasbourg in October 2023, where he met Ursula von der Leyen. On 13 February 2024, [the EU-Armenia Partnership Council](#) met for the 5th time in Brussels, providing an opportunity to take stock of reforms and economic cooperation and to launch a dialogue on visa liberalization. The EU has pledged to invest €550m in Armenia and to mobilize €5.5m in support of the displaced Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. On 16 May 2024, N. Pachinian received the European Commissioner for Trade and Vice-President of the European Commission, Valdis Dombrovskis.

Regarding defense partnerships, Armenia is looking to Greece, France, Iran, and India to diversify its sources of military equipment and strengthen its defense capabilities. Only 10% of the country’s military equipment is purchased from Russia, compared with 96% previously.

Despite these efforts, the threat from Azerbaijan remains a significant concern, perceived as an imminent threat against which Armenia knows it risks finding itself alone and isolated.

Thumbnail: Yerevan Opera House (photo by Céline Bayou, October 2022).

* Eliot Khubulov is a 2nd year student at the Institut Libre des Relations Internationales (Paris).

[Link to the French version of the article](#)

To cite this article: Eliot KHUBULOV (2024), "Armenia: gradually moving away from Russia," *Regard sur l'Est*, 1 July.



[Back to the top of the page](#)

date créée

01/07/2024

Champs de Méta

Auteur-article : Eliot KHUBULOV*