

COMMENTARY

Pashinyan Stiffens Armenia's Posture Toward Karabakh

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With the change in power in Armenia, enabled by the so-called “Velvet Revolution,” now essentially complete, the stage is set for shifts in the country’s foreign policy. These shifts are coming despite declarations to the contrary by the newly elected Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and members of his reformist team. The first such transformation to Armenia’s diplomatic posture—already underway—concerns the lingering conflict with Azerbaijan over the status of the latter’s breakaway region of Karabakh (which recently officially adopted its historical name, Artsakh).

As anticipated, following his May 8 election by parliament, the new Armenian prime minister paid a visit to Artsakh, on May 9, to celebrate the 26th anniversary of the liberation of the castle-town of Shushi. The trip was a deliberate signal that Karabakh holds top significance for Pashinyan and his team (News.am, May 9). The visit was also designed to dispel the long-standing narrative, consistently repeated by some supporters of former Armenian presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, that Artsakh will not remain secure unless Yerevan is led by someone with direct links to this region. And yet, Prime Minister Pashinyan, who is not from there, continues to unequivocally demonstrate a much tougher stance than his predecessors regarding the Karabakh problem. From Pashinyan’s perspective, Armenia’s foreign policy trajectory, including toward Karabakh, must be guided by principles of Armenia-centrism (or “Armenia First!”), which the new leadership conceptualizes as the starting point for an effective pursuit of Armenia’s national interests.

As such, the new prime minister announced Armenia’s new approach toward Karabakh during a news conference, symbolically convened in the regional capital of Stepanakert (in Azerbaijani: 2 Khankendi), following his talks with the unrecognized region’s president, Bako Sahakyan (Armenpress.am, May 9). Pashinyan made three bold points, which stand in stark contrast to the Armenian government’s policy under Serzh Sargsyan’s rule. First, while stating that the current negotiations format for resolving the Karabakh conflict is adequate, he nevertheless stressed that, as Armenia’s prime minister, he would solely represent Armenia in the talks, noting that “only the leadership of Artsakh can speak on behalf of Artsakh” (1in.am, May 9). In other



New Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan (Source: CNN)

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words, Armenia will no longer represent the interests of Artsakh, although it will retain its full commitment to the latter's security. Second, Pashinyan clarified that his government's policy toward the Karabakh resolution process represents a radical break from the previous regime. Specifically, he declared that "unless Azerbaijan reverses its militaristic rhetoric, threatening to annex Yerevan, Sevan, Zangezur and Stepanakert [Artsakh]," any dialogue with Baku on a potential consensus is pointless. And third, Pashinyan stated that "mutual concessions can be negotiated only if Azerbaijan gives a clear message that Baku is ready to recognize the right of the people of Artsakh to selfdetermination" (Armenpress.am, May 9).



To understand the rationale behind Pashinyan's approach to Karabakh, it is important to bear in mind that—contrary to the ruling regime he has replaced—the "Velvet Revolution" leader currently enjoys near-total support from a consolidated society. This gives him sufficient political legitimacy to confidently and forcefully respond to any sharp rhetoric coming from Azerbaijan. And in seeking to harden Armenia's overall posture, Pashinyan's ultimate strategic goal is to eventually see Artsakh internationally recognized as part of Armenia (1in.am, May 9).

During a radio interview approximately two years ago, Pashinyan—then an opposition member of parliament—outlined his personal views on the future of Karabakh and the eventual unraveling of Armenia's century-long dispute with Azerbaijan. In particular, he claimed that "Artsakh has its own" territorial grievances: namely, the Shahumyan region, part of Martakert district as well as the towns of Getashen and Martunashen, all claimed by Stepanakert but currently controlled by Baku. Therefore, "there is no land to hand over to Azerbaijan," he concluded, referring to the seven Azerbaijani regions now de facto part of Artsakh but that once surrounded the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast. Pashinyan firmly declared that "the territory we hold is of significance to our survival as a country" (YouTube, July 11, 2016).

During the "Velvet Revolution" rallies, Pashinyan at least twice touched upon the issue of Artsakh, calling for the revitalization of the "Miacum" agenda—the unionist idea that initially catalyzed and propelled the separatist movement in Karabakh, resulting in violent unrest there in 1988–1991. Speaking to the protesters, he declared that Artsakh would eventually become "an inseparable part of the Republic of Armenia" (Azatutyun.am, May 2). Such pointed rhetoric was not only an effort to politically revive the "Miacum" ideology, but also an attempt to undermine the idea of Karabakh as its own independent state, which entered Armenian political discourse in the early 1990s.

Meanwhile, Pashinyan and his reformist, new generation political allies now taking up the reins of power in Yerevan are seeking to capitalize on the results of the "Velvet Revolution" in order to repair Armenia's reputation on the international stage, which was gradually damaged under both Kocharyan and Sargsyan. In particular, they are seeking to rebuild their country's perceived status as an "island of democracy" in a troubled neighborhood. The new ruling team's goal is to boost Armenia's credibility in the eyes of Western stakeholder, all the while preserving its deep strategic alliance with Russia.

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The former government’s foreign policy was long characterized as mostly static in nature but marked by spontaneously reactive features divorced from any thought-out, long-term strategy. The dominant view in Yerevan was that Armenia’s foreign policy was sharply constrained by the 3 country’s persistent conflict with Azerbaijan over breakaway Karabakh’s final status as well as by Turkey’s border blockade, which left it highly vulnerable and reliant on security ties with Russia. And with the exception of last year’s signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the European Union, this was hardly seen as an effective foreign policy posture. In contrast to its neighbors Georgia and Azerbaijan, Armenia’s foreign policy-making has tended to be more passive and profoundly dependent on Russia, largely devoid of sustained efforts to try to diversify the country’s economic, political or security relationships.

The “Velvet Revolution,” however, has raised hopes domestically for a paradigm shift in Armenia’s diplomatic posture, reorganizing Armenian foreign policy from a reactive to a proactive course. And for Armenians, the new prime minister’s toughened stance on Karabakh is emblematic of that. But to achieve this ambition, Pashinyan’s government will first need to address chronic opportunity shortages for Armenian skilled professionals as well as nepotism and a widespread conformist mentality within society. To what extent he will be able to succeed, remains to be seen.



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