ARMENIA AND THE TENSION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND TURKEY

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It has been four months since the downing of the Russian Su-24 warplane and the crisis since then between Turkey and Russia doesnt seem to calm down. The incident drew strong reaction from the Russian side and led to several measures against Turkey.

Following the plane incident, Russia announced that it suspended military communications with Turkey and began to make a display of might in Syria. Russia began to reinforce its contingent in Syria, the most significant ones being the deployment of warships off the Syrian coast and air defense systems to its Khmeimim airbase. Moreover, despite Turkeys opposition, it began to support the Syrian branches of the terrorist PKK in the Syrian conflict. Since Syria is perhaps currently the worlds top hot spot, these moves by Russia in retaliation to Turkey draw the attention of the general public.

However, Syria is not the only place where Russia has been active recently. Armenia, as well, has been a scene for Russias military build-up. Since the beginning of the crisis, Russia began to reinforce its military presence in Armenia. For instance, Russia deployed helicopters and fighter jets to its air base in Armenia.[1] It is also reported that Russian jets will perform patrol flights in Armenia, possibly along Armenias border with Turkey, starting from March 2016.[2] Additionally, it was announced that Russia and Armenia had agreed on creating a joint regional air defense system.[3] All of these took place amid a period of high tension between Turkey and Russia.

Furthermore, Russia recently revealed details of its arms shipment to Armenia under 200 million dollar loan agreement signed with Armenia last year. This sudden move to reveal the weapons list is considered to be linked with the tension between Turkey and Russia and a means to pressure Turkey.[4]

It must be noted that Russia and Armenia have strong military relations. Russia and Armenia are both founding members of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is considered to be a rival of NATO. Furthermore, Armenia is under the umbrella of the Joint CIS Air Defense System. Armenia hosts the Russian Erebuni Airbase and the 102th Military Base in Gyumri (located 15 km from the Turkish border), which is believed to hold approximately 4000-5000 Russian military personnel. It must be also noted that Russian troops guard Armenias border with Turkey.

These facts, coupled with its very close economic and trade relations with Armenia, leave no doubt that Russia has a strong presence in Armenia. Furthermore, it is no secret that Russia has a strong influence over Armenia to the extent to justify to label it as a satellite.

Given Armenias very close ties with Russia and historically strained relations with Turkey, one would have expected a strong reaction from the Armenian government. However, the government was rather quiet. The most significant reaction came from the Armenian Defense Minister Seyran Ohanian.

Seyran Ohanian condemned the downing of the Russian jet, adding that Armenia and Russia are strategic partners. However, he said, I think we should wait and see further developments. [World] leaders will make appropriate decisions, and indicated that the international community had to make efforts to prevent escalations.[5]

This tone suggest that there are concerns in Armenia regarding the tension between Turkey and Russia. Many articles reveal that there are concerns that Armenia, in which Russia has a strong presence and has military bases, could be drawn into a potential armed conflict between Russia and Turkey.

Naira Hayrumyan, an Armenian political commentator, in her article,[6] asks: Russian border guards defend the Armenian-Turkish border, which are a subdivision of the Russian Federal Security Service. Now the relations between Turkey and Russia are not friendly, and recently the Syrian Kurds have opened a representation in Moscow. Who is going to define the actions of the border guards of the Russian-Turkish border in a state of emergency, the Russian FSS or the Armenian defense ministry?

This is a legitimate question. There is possibility of an increasing tension between Russia and Turkey due to Turkeys tougher stance against the PKK and therefore, the PYD and YPG, the Syrian extensions of the PKK, after the recent Ankara bombing by the PKK which cost the lives of 29 people. Hayrumyan draws attention to Russias presence in Armenia and the possibility of Russia using Armenian territories in a possible conflict with Turkey, and questions whether Armenia have enough power to have a say in perhaps preventing this. Pointing out that many Kurds live in Eastern Anatolia (she calls it historical West Armenia), she expresses her concern that Kurdish refugees may flow to the Armenian border as a result of Turkeys military operations against the PKK.

Daniel Ioannisyan, project coordinator of a non-governmental organization, answering a question in an interview[7] whether the Russian move to reveal list of weapons under the 200 million dollar agreement is linked with the Russian-Turkish tension, he states: It is possible that Russia has issues with Turkey and is trying to develop pro-Russian moods in Armenia. Evidence to this are these publications, propagandistic mechanisms reaching Armenia, including information that Putin will return Mount Ararat and the treaties of Kars and Moscow will be repealed. All this is propaganda which intends to develop pro-Russian sentiment in Armenia, to involve Armenia into the Russian-Turkish conflict.

However, there are also those in Armenian who see the confrontation between Russia and Turkey as an opportunity. Indeed, the recent tension between Russia and Turkey let to

talks in Armenia about opportunities regarding Western Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, recognition of the 1915 events as genocide etc.

Armenias former deputy minister of defense Vahan Shirkhanyan claims that a potential conflict between Russia and Turkey may be a historic chance, and Armenia must be prepared. He adds: Armenia is Russias strategic partner and, if needed, it must act as a strategic partner.[8]

Vardan Voskanian, an expert in Eastern Studies at Yerevan State University, said that Russian politicians trumpeting Armenian issues fits into the logic of realpolitik and we [Armenia] have to take advantage of it. Voskanian stated that Armenia now should push its own demands and set the bar for Russia as high as possible, namely, by recognizing the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan, criminalizing genocide denial, and supplying the Armenian military with latest-generation weapons.[9]

However, there are even concerns among those in Armenia that think that Armenia should seize the opportunity. Ara Papyan, a former diplomat, said: the influence of Russia-Turkey confrontation on region is quite a good chance in terms of foreign policy, but a grave domestic situation, especially in terms of economy. Regrettably, internal weakness does not allow us to make use of our foreign policy opportunities.[10]

Ultimately, it is seen that there are two major opinions in Armenia about the recent developments regarding Russia and Turkey: the first one is that Armenia should stay away from a conflict between Russia and Turkey, and the second one is that Armenia should not remain neutral and seize the opportunities this conflict presents. However, it is seen that the first opinion is more dominant. Indeed, even though an armed conflict between Turkey and Russia seems to be a far-fetched possibility, considering Russias presence in the country and Armenia having in effect become Russias border to Turkey, Armenia presents the potential to be a stage to such a conflict between Russia and Turkey.

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