

# MULTI-VECTORISM IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF POST-SOVIET EURASIAN STATES

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**Abstract:** Armenia's foreign policy is unique among the foreign policies of the post-Soviet states because it tries to balance the interests of all the great powers through a process of complementarity. Although similar to multi-vectorism, Armenia's complementarity draws on several unique resources in pursuing its foreign policy, including its diaspora around the world.

This article analyzes the dynamics of the foreign policies implemented by post-Soviet states during their two decades of independence. An essential feature of these foreign policies is how they address the main, pivotal, geopolitical centers of gravity within the post-Soviet space: Russia, the United States, the EU, and—especially in the case of Central Asia countries—China.

All post-Soviet states implement two main types of foreign policy: univectorism and multi-vectorism. A univectoral, Western-oriented, foreign policy predominates in the Baltic states, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine (during Yushchenko's tenure), and Moldova. Several Central Asian countries and Belarus have pursued a pro-Russian univectoral policy, at least until the early 2000s. In its pure form, the pro-Russian policy now prevails in three of four existing de-facto states (Abkhazia,

North Ossetia, and Transnistria, but not Karabakh) as well as in Belarus, though with some reservations.

The alternative foreign policy approach is multi-vectorism. This approach prevailed in the case of Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states (beginning from the late 1990s to the early 2000s). A version of multi-vectorism, usually described as complementarism, dominated Armenia's entire post-Soviet foreign policy. Complementarism is a non-official foreign policy doctrine that Armenia uses in order to balance the often conflicting interests of various players including Russia, the United States, Europe, and Iran.

This article will analyze the multi-vector foreign policies in comparison with complementarism. Additionally, the article will briefly compare and contrast Armenia's foreign policy doctrine with the one implemented by Finland during the Cold War in order to maneuver between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

### **Armenia's Complementarism—Twenty Years of Sitting on the Fence?**

Complementarism was the basis of Armenia's foreign policy from 1991 through the present. The essence of this policy, which was atypical for most of the newly independent post-Soviet countries in the early 1990s, was an attempt to combine and maintain a balance between the interests of all international and regional powers that are actively involved in the South Caucasus region. The idea was to avoid a pro-Western, pro-Russian, or pro-Iranian bias. According to the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia (adopted in 2007<sup>1</sup>), Armenia's strategic partnership with Russia, its adoption of a European model of development, mutually beneficial cooperation with Iran and the United States, membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and intensification of cooperation with the NATO alliance, all contribute to Armenia's policy of complementarity.

Despite increasing anti-Russian stereotypes in the West, Armenia—Russia's ally and a CSTO member—has never been regarded by the West as an exclusively pro-Russian actor. Over its first two years of independence, 1991 and 1992, Armenia's policies were the most effective manifestation of complementarism. During this period, Armenia was locked in a war over Karabakh and was able to take advantage of a unique foreign policy conjuncture. Yerevan received arms from Russia for military operations, funds from the United States for state building and to purchase arms, food from Europe, and fuel from Iran. Thus, the equidistance in

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter IV, "External Security Strategy," <http://www.mil.am/files/NATIONAL%20%20SECURITY%20STRATEGYeng.pdf>.

Armenia's foreign policy reached its greatest effectiveness during the first term of Levon Ter-Petrosyan's presidency and is the most illustrative phase of complementarism (although this term was only applied later).

The new stage of Armenian complementarism, when it became more balanced, began in the late 1990s, during President Robert Kocharian's term, and is associated with the name of its chief architect and ideologue, Vardan Oskanian, who served as Armenian foreign minister from 1998 to 2008. Since the late 1990s, Armenia, through incremental steps, turned complementarism into a balanced policy of "sitting on the fence." Moreover, in certain cases, complementarism made it possible not only to tactically counterbalance the excessive influence of Moscow in regional processes, but sometimes that of the United States or European institutions as well.

According to Richard Giragosian, an American policy analyst of Armenian origin:

Armenian foreign policy over the last decade has sought to bridge the inherently conflicting interests of Russia and the West, while also seeking to leverage its most significant asset—a significant Diaspora. This foreign policy, termed 'complementarity,' incorporates Armenia's strategic imperative of security through a reliance on its strategic alliance with Russia and a positive relationship with Iran, while simultaneously conforming to the parameters of its Western orientation. Moreover, this policy of complementarity, although seemingly contradictory, is in fact a natural result of Armenia's historical and geopolitical considerations.<sup>2</sup>

Armenian complementarism is based on the need to balance the interests of influential international actors. In many ways, it resembles the foreign policy approach used by Finland during the Cold War. Like Finland, which was forced to take into account the pragmatic geopolitical interests of the Soviet Union and the Communist Bloc on the one hand and the U.S.-led Western alliance on the other, Armenia also has been trying to profitably combine the interests of Russia, the United States, the EU and Iran, which often oppose each other on regional and global issues. During the Cold War, Finland played a unique role in European politics precisely because of the special trust it had with both the Soviet Union and the West.

In a similar manner, Armenia is of particular interest to the United States and European countries precisely because of its relations with both Russia and Iran. Having no direct geographical links with Russia,

<sup>2</sup> Richard Giragosian, *Toward a New Concept of Armenian National Security*, The World Bank, Washington, January 15-16, 2005, p. 20.

Armenia is still a beneficiary of major Russian investment, particularly in infrastructure sectors, a method by which Moscow remunerates Yerevan for its strategic cooperation in the military-political sphere. The image that Armenia is trying to achieve is one of a predictable partner implementing a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy, taking into account the interests of the world's leading actors and the dynamics of regional politics.

### **Complementarism vs. Multi-Vectorism**

The scope of this paper does not allow for analyzing the entire phenomenon of multi-vectorism within the post-Soviet space. There are many studies devoted to this notion. Offered here is a comparative analysis of the foreign policies of Armenia and other former Soviet Eurasian countries, such as the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan.

The important difference between Armenian complementarism and the multi-vectorism of other Eurasian countries lies in the stability and succession of policy implementation over the last two decades. For example, in contrast to Armenia, Azerbaijan (especially during President Abulfaz Elchibey's term and the initial stage of President Heydar Aliyev's tenure, until the mid-1990s) had a pro-West, unipolar, political orientation with a focus on Turkey as a proxy. Only after Azerbaijan's admittance to the CSTO and the simultaneous launch of oil projects involving Western companies, did Baku manage to balance this tendency.

Similarly, we cannot discern the existence of true multi-vectorism in the foreign policies of Central Asian countries until the second half of the 1990s, when Western influence in the region was minimal, Turkey and Iran had few resources there, and China caused only minor suspicion and fear. Only the amorphous nature of Russian foreign policy made it possible for the Central Asian countries to avoid a totally pro-Russian political orientation during the early 1990s. However, in the mid-1990s, the term multi-vectorism (especially in the case of Kazakhstan) emerged as a euphemism for a "distancing-from Russia-policy" by Central Asian countries.

Multi-vectorism in Central Asia is vulnerable to external political events. It can even be argued that its development is mainly associated with September 11, 2001, and the beginning of the U.S.-led operation in Afghanistan, rather than as a result of rational foreign policy choice. At the same time, we cannot exclude that after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, the parameters of multi-vectorism in Central Asia will vary considerably.

On the other hand, for the countries of Central Asia, multi-vectorism is mainly linked to security considerations. For example, because of the geographical remoteness of Central Asia, the EU wields little soft power influence and its position does not need to be taken into account in a

multi-vectoral policy. In contrast, for Armenia and even Azerbaijan, the prospect of European integration is a very serious soft stimulus to maintain multi-vectorism. From its origins, the phenomenon of multi-vectorism in Central Asia operates at different levels in different countries, ranging from the real multi-vector policy of Kazakhstan, through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan (taking into account the Iranian factor), to the self-isolated equidistancing of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which effectively has a neutrality policy. From these perspectives, we can argue that multi-vectorism predominates in Kazakhstan due to its energy resources, geographical size, and political influences. It exists to a lesser extent in Kyrgyzstan due to the country's specific geopolitics and the deployment of American and Russian military bases there.

Azerbaijan and some Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and partly Uzbekistan) have an important resource that supports multi-vectorism: hydrocarbons. For example, by virtue of its oil and gas revenues, Baku, unlike Yerevan, does not have to align its foreign policy with the interests of the West, Russia, and Iran. Similarly, in contrast to the Central Asian countries, it does not seek to use relationships with the West or China to compensate for its excessive dependence on Moscow (and vice versa). On the contrary, Baku even tries to exploit the contradictions among the powers. It engages Turkey in this game, as demonstrated, for example, in October 2009, during the Armenian president's visit to Turkey, when Baku signed a gas contract with Moscow in spite of Ankara. It is obvious that energy projects and revenues are the main resources of Azerbaijan in its "strategy of keeping the balance" policy.<sup>3</sup> However, we must clarify that the implementation of Azerbaijan's multi-vectorism on the regional level is limited by the presence of Armenia, which traditionally has better relations with the West, Russia, and Iran than Azerbaijan.

A very important factor in Armenian complementarism is the pluralism in its domestic politics and the existence of a relatively free media. In contrast to Azerbaijan and Central Asia, these domestic dynamics create a serious public discourse in Armenia on the directions of the country's foreign policy. In Central Asia and Azerbaijan, multi-vectorism is driven by the existence of problems with democracy, significantly increasing the importance of Russia during any kind of *force majeure* to balance criticisms by the West. The second specific feature of Armenian complementarism is that it is a major resource for the implementation of the Armenian policy of military deterrence and political containment regarding the Karabakh conflict and its confrontation with Azerbaijan.<sup>4</sup> This is an atypical strategy

<sup>3</sup> See Anar Valiyev, "Finlandization or Strategy of Keeping the Balance? Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy since the Russian-Georgian War," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No.112, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> For additional information, see Sergey Minasyan, "The Quest for Stability in the Karabakh Conflict: Conventional Deterrence and Political Containment," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No.188, September 2011.

of military-political conduct among post-Soviet countries, the theoretical origins of which date back to the Cold War period. Finally, the most important difference of Armenian complementarism is the simultaneous presence of the Armenian diaspora in Russia, the United States, and Europe. There are also very influential Armenian communities in Iran and in several countries of the Middle East (Azerbaijan and Central Asia only have influential diaspora communities in Russia). This Armenian diaspora factor plays a highly significant role in the effective implementation of complementarism as an advocacy resource and a source of political and economic aid to Armenia.

### **Conclusion**

Many of the peripheral (or buffer) states situated along the perimeter of the former Soviet Union adopted foreign policies in favor of cooperation with the West and confrontation with Russia. Many Eastern European post-Communist countries have made such a choice, as have post-Soviet countries, such as the Baltic states, Moldova, and Ukraine (under Yushchenko). Georgia embarked on this kind of policy after the accession of President Mikheil Saakashvili and the failure of his predecessor, Edvard Shevardnadze, to sustain a balance between Russia and the West. Although such a policy of univectorism has obvious advantages (such as strong political and economic support from the West), confrontation with Russia entails a serious security threat, as shown by the August 2008 war.

From the beginning, Armenia chose a different approach. It tried to reconcile the seemingly contradictory interests of Western countries and Russia, and even Iran. Granted, Armenia does not have much room to maneuver (particularly where confrontation with Azerbaijan and Turkey is concerned) and in this context, Armenia's current policy of complementarism—combining the interests of the West and the East—is more reminiscent of Finland's Cold War balancing act between the Warsaw Pact and the NATO.

Despite the similarities between Armenian, Central Asian, and Azerbaijani multi-vector policies, the actual balancing has in many cases worked quite differently, especially given that Armenian complementarism has deep historical and ideological roots—from the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were regional geopolitical rivalries between Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Western powers—whereas in most other post-Soviet states, these trends are fairly recent. Lastly, in contrast to other multi-vector countries, Armenia has a specific resource that helps it implement its complementarist approach: the powerful and united Armenian diaspora.