



What Does the Russian-Armenian Joint Military Force Mean for Security in the South Caucasus?

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on Nov. 14, 2016 approving the creation of a joint Russian-Armenian military force. The decree allows for creation of a joint military unit made up of Russian and Armenian forces. It contains the following provisions:

- The joint military unit will patrol Armenia's land borders with Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, and Turkey.
- There is a mutual defense clause, so an attack on Armenia will be treated as an attack on Russia, and vice versa. The joint military force will be commanded in peacetime by Armenia's General Staff and in wartime by Russia's Southern Military District Command.
- Armenia will be able to purchase Russian military equipment at domestic prices.
- The agreement doesn't provide any protections to Nagorno-Karabakh.

The new defense policy has implications for the entire South Caucasus. That includes Georgia, which maintains positive ties with Armenia despite having no formal diplomatic relations with Russia. At the request of the Georgian Institute of Politics, a selection of experts from Armenia, Italy, Georgia, and the United Kingdom commented on the joint military force and its implications for security in the South Caucasus.

RICHARD GIRAGOSIAN, *Director of the Regional Studies Center, an independent think tank in Yerevan.*

Since the 2008 war with Russia, Georgia has monitored the Armenian-Russian security relationship with careful concern. Armenia has, for its part, consistently reassured Tbilisi that its security partnership with Russia would not threaten Georgia's security. Two recent developments have cast doubts on the value of those assurances.

The first factor driving these concerns came in April, when a large-scale Azerbaijani military offensive against Armenia succeeded in seizing territory in the first military victory for Azerbaijan since a ceasefire agreement was first reached in 1994. The broader ramifications of that military offensive are significant for Georgia, despite its neutral status in the conflict. More specifically, the April fighting not only confirmed that the "frozen" conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh had entered a new, more serious combat

phase, but also that it posed new risks for the delicate state of security and stability in the region, with Georgia caught in the middle.

The second development impacting security in Georgia and the wider region came in mid-November, when Russia announced plans to form a joint Armenian-Russian military command unit. After years of steadily mortgaging Armenia's independence in exchange for security guarantees from Russia, this move posed a new challenge to Armenian sovereignty and statehood.

Although the joint military unit could in itself be viewed as benign--and appears to be a logical component of both the Armenian-Russian security relationship and Armenia's membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)--it poses a deeper danger.

Russia's plans for the joint military unit could lead to a potentially disastrous outcome, allowing it to leverage its new role both to threaten Georgia and pressure Armenia. Such a scenario would involve attempts by Moscow to use this new command structure to interfere or intervene in Armenia's defense reform and self-sufficiency and/or eventually use it as a vehicle for deploying peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, which would have devastating effects on the security of both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

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President Vladimir Putin's approval of the proposal to establish a joint Russian-Armenian military force is a further step towards the consolidation of Russian power across the Caucasus. The move is likely to trigger a shift in the balance of power in the

volatile region and is yet another demonstration that Russia is determined to reassert its influence, both within its "zone of privileged interest" and on the world stage," and to protect its allies. The proposal reflects Russia's agreements with Georgia's separatist territories South Ossetia and Abkhazia: in the latter a Joint Group of Forces comprising Abkhaz and Russian forces has been established, while the 2015 Treaty on Alliance and Integration between Russia and South Ossetia envisaged the incorporation of South Ossetia's armed forces, security agencies and customs authorities into those of Russia, referring to the formation of a 'single space for defence and security.'

One of the most significant provisions to be found in both the Russian-Armenian joint force proposal and the treaty with South Ossetia is a clause stating that any aggression or armed attack against one party will be considered an attack against both, reflecting the charter of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which considers an attack on one member-state to be an attack on all and guarantees mutual military assistance if a member is attacked. Russia is Armenia's staunchest ally and Yerevan has sought a close relationship with Moscow to counterbalance what it perceives to be its vulnerable position between two hostile countries: Turkey and Azerbaijan. Moscow is determined to retain its influence in the South Caucasus and by maintaining weak states in its neighborhood that are dependent on it for political, economic and military support, Russia seeks to keep them within its geopolitical orbit and counterbalance the growing presence of Western actors. This latest development should act as a stark reminder of the need for greater international attention paid to the region and the imperative of negotiated settlements to its unresolved conflicts.

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Russia and Armenia have continually strengthened relations since Yerevan joined the Moscow-led Eurasian Customs Union in 2013. In October, 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin submitted to the State Duma a Russian-Armenian agreement on creation of the Caucasus Unified Air Defense System. More recently, Russia and Armenia further upgraded their security relationship by establishing a combined Russian-Armenian army group.

This decision poses challenges for Georgia and for security in the South Caucasus in general. There are several reasons for regional actors to be concerned: First, according to the agreement, Russia will patrol Armenia's borders with Turkey, Iran, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. In case of an attack on Armenia, the entire army of Russia's Southern Military District will support its territorial defense.

Second, in peacetime, the joint force will be commanded by Armenia's General Staff. However, during wartime, Armenian forces will be subordinated to the Command of Russia's Southern Military District, in what appears to be Armenia's total capitulation to Russia on military affairs. Third, this agreement puts an end to Russia's claim to be impartial in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. On the other hand, the Kremlin claims that under the agreement Russian troops cannot be used in conflict zones and Nagorno-Karabakh will be defended by Armenian armed forces only.

In any case, the decision to establish a joint Armenian-Russian military group could motivate a counterreaction from Azerbaijan. Baku could abandon its balanced foreign policy and seek to upgrade military relations with Ankara. All these developments would

lead to extensive military mobilization in the South Caucasus and eventually to escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

***DR. RICK FAWN**, Professor of International Relations, University of St. Andrews.*

Russian President Vladimir Putin's 14 November statement on creating a joint Russian-Armenian military force raises five primary points. First, despite renewed reference in the US presidential election campaigns and in NATO actions in eastern Europe to Russia's current actions in Ukraine and its invasion of Georgia in 2008, the move received scant attention in the West.

Second, the measure is hardly a surprise; rather, it's consistent with past policy. Armenia has been the most enthusiastic member of the otherwise atrophied 6-member CSTO--it has two extra-regional observers and has lost three signatories. Armenia hosts the organization's only information office outside Russia. It enjoys deep, existing military cooperation with Moscow, most notably having subsumed its air defences under those of Russia. A joint anti-aircraft defense system was introduced earlier in 2016. These actions have predictably affected the tinderbox of Armenia's long-standing conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. The CSTO itself is an organization of questionable motives and abilities. It is primarily a Russian initiative. This latest move is an attempt to make Russia (first) and the CSTO in general (second) more relevant in the former Soviet space.

Third, though not a qualitative shift from existing practice, the new Russian-Armenian military cooperation is ominous for Azerbaijan. It makes more clear what was already known: that Russia supports Armenia in its conflict against Azerbaijan.

That speaks further about the questionable nature of Russian intentions. It has long been wondered how Russia can arm both Armenia and Azerbaijan and still present itself as a neutral mediator.

Fourth, the measure poses a danger to regional stability and is intended to confirm Russia's wider interest: military posturing, including toward NATO and its allies in the post-Soviet space. The message will still be limited; as among CSTO members Armenia is the most logical country to accept such a measure. And spillover to Georgia particularly remains unlikely. After all, Russia already exerts enough threat capacity there through its post-2008 expanded military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Fifth, and last: the implications for Georgia. Georgia cannot affect the pact and is not directly affected by it. Counterintuitively, the Russian-Armenian military initiative is potentially beneficial to Georgia - it increases the need for a neutral mediary between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Georgia can also demonstrate to the region and to the lamentably few around the world who follow the region, that it can act constructively as a platform for dialogue and understanding. Those attributes will grow even more important given recent developments in the South Caucasus.

GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

