“The Bear and the Maiden Fair”: Why does Armenia side with Russia?

Árni Pór Sigurðsson & Alyson J.K. Bailes

Stjórnmálafræðideild

Ritstjóri:
Stefanía Óskarsdóttir

Rannsóknir í félagsvíisindum XVI. Erindí flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2015

Reykjavík: Félagsvíisindastofnun Háskóla Íslands
When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, it created a ring of newly independent states around Russia, of which the four smallest – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova – lay to the South-west. The first three, Armenia being the smallest with a population of around three million, form the historically turbulent region of the South Caucasus. Since independence they have all experienced major strains and conflicts, with Russia and/or with each other, including the struggle between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the latter’s province of Nagorno-Karabakh. While sharing broadly similar challenges of economic development and internal governance, the three nations have chosen markedly different courses in foreign and security policy. Azerbaijan and Georgia have sought to strengthen their ties to the West and disengage themselves from Moscow, even at the risk of facing Russian violence. Armenia, on the other hand, has aligned itself closely with Russia, and today belongs to two groups representing Moscow’s closest allies: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). It has recently supported, at least with lip-service, Russia’s widely condemned uses of force in Ukraine.

The theory of small states in international relations considers it normal for a small entity to seek ‘shelter’ from a powerful protector. The most often studied cases, however, are West-oriented or developing states that seek help from the main Western power centres including institutions like the European Union (EU) and NATO. Why has Armenia opted for a protector that most of the wider Europe’s small states today would see more as part of the problem than as part of the solution? What exactly is the nature and motivation of Yerevan’s relationship with Moscow? This article seeks answers against the background of small state theory and Armenia’s specific history, identity, and geo-political situation.

Small states and IR theory

The International Relations realm has traditionally been dominated by large states and their interests. However, there has been an increasing interest in studying ‘small states’ in this context, because they are playing an ever-increasing role in world politics – not least as a consequence of the Soviet Union’s break-up and new state creation elsewhere in Europe. The lion’s share of small state studies have been conducted in the last two decades (Neumann & Gstöhl, 2006). They have found that small states tend to seek shelter through alliances, ‘bandwagoning’, or cooperation with larger neighbouring states or regional organisations (Bailes & Thorhallsson, 2013), as the only way to protect themselves (Wivel, Archer & Bailes, 2014). That is not to say that small states do not need a strategy or policy of their own; on the contrary, they perhaps need it more than most states do. This is all the more so when they face a ‘spectrum of internal and non-military as well as traditional security problems’ (Bailes, 2009), which seems highly applicable in the South Caucasus cauldron.

The IR literature contains no single undisputable definition of what constitutes a small state. Different scholars use different elements or combination of elements in their definition, although one can perceive some connecting themes among them. Unsurprisingly, population size has been the most commonly used

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1 The CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) was founded in 1992 by Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and now also includes Belarus. See: "Organizacija Dogovora o Kollektivnoj Bezopasnosti," 1992.
2 The EEU is the successor to the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc): it was formed in 2014 by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, with Armenia joining in 2015 and Kyrgyzstan now in the process of acceding. See http://www.eaeunion.org/?lang=en. For the purposes of this article we will not distinguish between these two post-Soviet organisations.
3 Armenia was one of eleven states who voted against the UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262 on the territorial integrity of Ukraine.
criterion, often supplemented by land area and even economic factors, e.g. gross domestic product (Archer & Nugent, 2002; Crowards, 2002). With a population given in the 2011 census as roughly 3.4 million and an area of some 30,000 km², Armenia meets the basic standard for smallness. It is also small in relation to its most strategically significant neighbours – Turkey and Iran, as well as the Russian Federation. It is economically rather undeveloped with a (GDP) per capita estimated in 2014 as 6,441 USD. Based on these data, it is safe to define Armenia as a small state.

For present purposes, the interesting question is how and why a state like Armenia chooses its shelter. Traditional realist logic would answer that Russia is the closest strong state available; but the cases of Georgia and Azerbaijan show that this is not sufficient. As the newer theory of constructivism recognises, ‘state interests and security perceptions are socially constructed’ (Uzer, 2012), so that attitudes and systemic features within a state may also be decisive. However, Armenia is not notably similar to Russia in ethnic, linguistic and cultural terms but has a unique identity of its own. Its reasons for seeing Russia as a (relatively) benign partner must be sought elsewhere, notably in the constellation of other regional powers. Further, as we shall see, Armenia has been willing also to cooperate with Western and independent actors in a way that suggests it has no strong anti-Western orientation. This allows speculation over how permanent its current alignment with Moscow will prove.

### Historical context and Nagorno-Karabakh

2015 marks the centenary of the 1915 genocide by the Ottoman government, widely believed to have resulted in the killing of up to 1.5 million people, which has set its brand on the Armenian consciousness ever since. The label ‘genocide’ is not uncontested, as the Turks claim that ‘Armenians also perpetrated atrocities against the Turks’ (Coene, 2010); but the event is accepted as genocide by many states (Cohan, 2005) including Russia, France, and Germany, as well as the European Parliament and the Council of Europe.

As a consequence of the 1917 Russian Revolution ‘the fortunes of the Armenian people were linked with Russia’ (Kurkjian, 2014). Following the 1918 Turco-Russian Friendship Treaty, the Turks were emboldened to start a war with the Armenians, accusing them of crimes against the Turkish population in the Armenian provinces. Though formerly recognised by Moscow as independent, Armenia was driven to enter the Soviet Union as a dictate of sheer survival. For decades it shared in the purges, wars and other vicissitudes of Soviet existence but never lost its specific national identity, including antagonism towards its Turkic-speaking neighbours in Azerbaijan.

The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant the end of the ‘Soviet identity’ that had been ‘instrumental in attenuating and mitigating conflicts between the people of the Soviet Union’ (Cornell, 2001). Even before the end, the small town of Stepanakert, the capital city of Nagorno-Karabakh with its largely Armenian population, had requested in 1988 that the border of the region should be redrawn and the area transferred from Azerbaijan to Armenia. This minor event not only ‘helped destroy the Soviet Union’, but ‘caused a regional war’ (de Waal, 2002, 2010). Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika eased the (re)emergence of ethnic antagonism between Armenians and Azeris, and ‘self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh emerged as the core element of a new, vibrant Armenian nationalism’ (Giragosian, 2006). With the constraining framework of the Soviet Union gone, open violence followed in the early 1990s and Armenia succeeded in occupying Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Soviet government had tried to mediate between the warring neighbours in the 1980s and the Russian Federation initially followed this approach, but the ‘mother state’ proved incapable of resolving the dispute (Zürcher, 2007). Together with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), it supported instead the achievement of a ceasefire (for an indefinite period) in the spring of 1994. Despite the continued, and still ongoing, efforts of an OSCE-backed ‘Minsk group’ of mediators, no more complete settlement for the Nagorno–Karabakh issue has ever been reached and the dispute must at best be considered ‘frozen’. It has been characterised as the ‘most volatile’ situation in the wider Caucasus region, and a major factor in the area’s ‘security deficit’ (Boonstra & Melvin, 2011; Cornell, 2005).

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4 See also discussion on ‘small states’ in (Knudsen, 2002; Wivel, 2005).
5 This figure is based on Purchasing-Power-Parity (PPP).
For Armenia, which ‘won’ the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the sense of practical possession, any solution that would concede the region as belonging to Azerbaijan is impossible. Likewise, Azerbaijan cannot accept any solution that entails its losing the region (which formally remains under its sovereignty) to Armenia altogether. Given the elements of psychology and identity strongly colouring the dispute, there is no common basis of understanding’ (Freitag-Wirminghaus, 2008) between the two countries. At the same time, Armenia’s ‘victory’ in Nagorno-Karabakh has been dearly bought. Not only has it resulted in ‘catastrophic rates of emigration’, leading the best-educated Armenians to leave the country to try their luck in Russia and the United States in particular (de Waal, 2002); but it has driven Yerevan to look to Russia, still ‘the principal power’ in the region (Torbakov, 2010), for support against Azerbaijani attempts at reconquest. Since the mid-1990s Armenia has received large amounts of military aid and equipment from Russia, boosting an arms race with Azerbaijan which looks West for its supplies. It has given Russia long-term access to a military base at Gyumri, while Russian border guards patrol the Armenian frontiers with Turkey and Iran.

It is a moot question how far the ‘frozen’ state of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict serves Armenia’s best interests. It is easy for Yerevan, with de facto control of the province, to assume that time is on its side and that ‘Azerbaijan would have to carry the major burden of concessions’ in any solution (Freitag-Wirminghaus, 2008). However, the unresolved conflict with its wider regional ramifications creates the main obstacle to normal economic development and to any prospect of a truly independent strategy for Armenia (Bremmer & Bailes, 1998). Russia gains more obvious benefits from a continued impasse, which by weakening Azerbaijan and perpetuating Armenia’s dependence helps to entrench Moscow’s influence in the region (Bremmer, 1999). Torbakov also argues that any settlement would reduce Russia’s influence and ‘Moscow would immediately lose a crucial geopolitical leverage it currently has with both Yerevan and Baku’ (Torbakov, 2010).

By contrast, Cornell maintains that Russia would support and benefit from a solution of the longstanding conflict in this region, which is crucial for Russia’s own security, also because of its closeness to the problematical internal regions of Chechnya and North Ossetia. It was not by Moscow’s will but as a direct consequence of the Soviet collapse that the Armenia-Azerbaijan relationship ‘developed into a zero-sum game in which both states aimed at receiving outside support for their war effort towards the other’ (Cornell, 2001). Instability and insecurity tend to draw in other interested powers, and should open conflict start again, Russia could not count on controlling it or dictating an acceptable outcome. Against this, it could be argued that a lasting peace might also allow Armenia to diversify its alliances and create a new route for Western influence into the region – which brings us to the question of the small nation’s wider diplomatic strategy.

Armenia’s Diplomacy since 1991

Aside from the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, Armenia suffers from its location as a land-locked country, sharing borders with its main adversaries to the east and (south)west, and Georgia – which tends to side with Azerbaijan and Turkey – to the north. The only Armenian borders that are open for trade are those with Georgia and Iran.

Since independence in 1991, Armenia has pursued a foreign policy concept described as ‘complementarity’ (Popescu, 2014). While aligning with Russia on life-and-death issues as already described, it has simultaneously sought rapprochement with Western states and institutions, and enjoys a cordial and friendly relationship with Iran. This corresponds well to a model of small state behaviour that combines ‘bandwagoning’ with ‘balancing’, but it also reflects the fact that most of Armenia’s non-military needs are better met from sources other than Russia. Astonishingly, Armenia is the only member of the CSTO structure that has strong relations to NATO and conducts up to three quarters of its trade with non-Russian partners. However, the Russian economic relationship is still crucial in key sectors such as energy imports and transport, and the extensive Armenian diaspora in Russia adds a further element of dependence (Freitag-Wirminghaus, 2008; Petros, 2003). On the other hand, there is also a large diaspora in the United States and France, which has undoubtedly contributed to the extensive support shown for Armenia,
particularly in the US, making Armenia one of the largest receivers of US economic support per capita. In what follows we shall discuss in more detail Armenia’s relations with Russia and post-Soviet neighbours; Turkey and Iran; and the West, in that order.

Relations with Russia and post-Soviet organisations

The tendency for Armenia to side with Russia as an existential protector has been seen as going back in history ‘well before Soviet power’ (Willerton Goertz & Slobodchikoff, 2011). Russia has been involved in the Caucasus for centuries (Suny, 2010), seeing the region as part of its ‘privileged interests’ (Oldberg, 2010), and its policies have provided the major determining factor for other actors there for 170 years (Cornell, 2001). Accordingly, Russia’s influence in Armenia has roots too deep to be compared with any other foreign state (Gevorgyan, 2011). From Armenia’s viewpoint, memories of genocide and the perception of NATO-Turkey as an ‘enemy’ are combined with the calculation that a Russia alliance deters Azerbaijan from starting a war again over Nagorno-Karabakh. The provisions of the CSTO treaty would allow other member states of that organisation to assist Armenia in such an event (Freitag-Wirminghaus, 2008), and even if the Central Asian states were hesitant, that does not mean that Russia would abstain from some kind of intervention (Nikitina, 2012).

Russia, for its part, has obvious vested interests in balancing its relations with all three Caucasian republics. However, the last two decades’ developments in Azerbaijan and particularly in Georgia have made them clear antagonists for Moscow, leaving close cooperation with Armenia as the only viable option, also for securing Russia’s rear vis-à-vis Turkey and Iran. In turn, Russia has been – and still is – a ‘guarantor of security’ for Armenia (Asatryan, 2002; Huntington, 2011) and their relations have been rather stable (Minasyan, 2013). Alexei Arbatov summarises this mutual dependence:

Armenia is our only classic military-political ally ... Armenia will not survive without Russia and, without Armenia, Russia will lose all its important positions in the Caucasus ... Even though Armenia is a small country, it is our forepost in the South Caucasus. I would say that Armenia is more important to us than Israel is to the Americans’ (Suni, 2010).

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, Armenia at the outset decreased its ties to Moscow so as to demonstrate its sovereignty and independence. However, Russia’s role as a regional power soon asserted itself, making it a natural choice for Armenia to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1992 and later become a member of the CSTO. As the incumbent Armenian president, Sargsyan, explained in 2005 (when he was Defence Minister), “Russian troops are in Armenia at the request of Armenia and “are component of our national security and their presence is contingent on Armenia’s relations with Turkey which is still hostile to us”” (Suni, 2010). It is clear that Armenia does not consider Russia’s interests in the Caucasus as a threat or contradictory to its own security interests, but rather as a security ballast against the neighbouring adversaries. The economic underpinning of the relationship has already been noted and includes a substantial flow of migrants which ‘significantly contributes to the Armenian economy’ (Delcour, 2014).7

Russia has initiated the establishment of several intergovernmental organisations in the post-Soviet space, most notably the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) which aim to strengthen cooperation between member states in the areas of security and economy respectively (Cameron & Orenstein, 2012). Armenia was a founding member of the former in 1994, but enjoyed an observer status in the latter from 2003, and ultimately became a member of the Union as of January 2nd 2015. Armenia today is thus one of only a handful of states – and the only one with under 5 million inhabitants - to belong to all Russian-led institutional structures in the post-Soviet space (Delcour, 2014). The establishment of these organisations has provided Russia with potential added leverage vis-à-vis the relevant states, and is a factor also influencing internal political development (Cameron & Orenstein, 2012). In practice the CSTO

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6 According to Kotanjian, approximately 1/3 of the entire Armenian population in the world live in Armenia, see: (Kotanjian, 2004)

7 According to the CIA World Factbook ‘Refusnata from expatriates working in Russia are equivalent to 45% of GDP and partly offset the country’s severe trade imbalance’, see: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/am.html
and EEU are alliances of (hybrid) authoritarian governments, where the leaders are committed to prop up each other’s regimes as much as to pursue mutual security interests.

How far Russia would actually go to protect its interests on other neighbours’ territory is a question of pressing current concern following the violence in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine since 2014. Moscow’s ‘privileged interests’ – as defined by President Medvedev in 2008 – in the former Soviet zone imply a general right to intervene in the CIS states’ internal affairs as well as a will to minimise other great powers’ involvement in the region (Kramer, 2008). Suny maintains, however, that

Russia’s Caucasian policy revolves around its long-term interest in re-establishing its regional hegemony in the so-called Near Abroad, and [...] is not a program of imperial control, however, but rather a determined effort to contain or even roll back the influence of other powers, most importantly, the United States and NATO in the regions closest to Russia’s borders (Suny, 2010).  

Turkey and Iran

Turkey is an important power player in the Caucasus region, ‘facilitating Azerbaijan in all spheres’ and conducting ‘a policy of blackmail, isolation, and blockade with regard to Armenia’ (Asatryan, 2002). The most important issue in Armenia’s relations with Turkey is obviously the 1915 atrocities, which Armenia has repeatedly urged Turkey to recognise as genocide as a sine qua non for normalising relations. The few reconciliation efforts have however stalled – in some people’s view aided by Azerbaijani interference – and there are no signs of changing attitudes. In the anniversary year of 2015, President Erdoğan of Turkey actually condemned countries who recognised the atrocities as genocide, including Germany, France, Russia – and the Pope.  

Iran has strained relations with both Azerbaijan and Turkey, and this situation has pushed Iran into ‘rapprochement with Russia and into a recognition of Armenia’ (Asatryan, 2002). From a neorealist viewpoint it may seem that Iran’s policy toward Armenia is understandable, in spite of their different political and religious ideologies, because Iran has sought to preserve ‘its national sovereignty by quieting ethnic Azerbaijani who called for the unification of a “greater” Azerbaijan’, and because Iran’s economic interests were challenged by ‘Azerbaijan’s Caspian Sea oil and gas revenues’. As an act of counterbalance Iran therefore has aligned itself with Armenia and Russia (Gresh, 2006), and this is not likely to change in the foreseeable future.

Armenian-Western relations

Close relations with Russia notwithstanding, Armenia has also endeavoured to enhance its relations with Western players, the EU, NATO and the US. This binary policy of partnership both with Russia and other actors has (as noted above) been labelled ‘complementarism’. It reflects common elements in history and culture – Armenia having been, for instance, one of the world’s first Christian kingdoms – as well as Armenia’s practical need for Western aid.

Although the US recognised the independence of Armenia and the other Caucasus countries, it focussed more particularly on them only in 1994: due not least to pressure from the extensive Armenian diaspora which succeeded in securing US support on Nagorno-Karabakh. This one-sided support for Armenia changed, however, as the US sought to steer Azerbaijan away from close relations with Iran. During President Clinton’s second term the Caucasus and Caspian Sea regions were declared ‘strategically vital’, and at the same time the oil lobby counterbalanced the Armenian diaspora’s influence (Cornell, 2001). Therefore, ‘it is no coincidence that US policy in the Caspian became increasingly assertive from the second half of 1996’ (Cornell, 1999). The Armenian diaspora’s influence may also have been exaggerated, or at least very difficult to evaluate, as shown by Zarifian (Zarifian, 2014). At any rate, the result was to rule out any idea of the US’s becoming an alternative primary protector for the Armenians.

8 [Emphasis in original; omission here]

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Armenia remained interested to cooperate with NATO as a whole, however, and its armed forces started participation in NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme soon after the initiative was launched in 1994 (Kotanjian, 2004). From NATO’s perspective, a strengthening of its relations with Armenia would improve regional security by deepening Armenia’s integration with Europe. Also, NATO does not necessarily see Armenia’s close relations with Russia as contradictory to Armenia-NATO relations: both could meaningfully contribute to resolving the conflicts in the region (Tonoyan, 2013). Armenia’s President Kocharyan made clear in 2006, however, that Armenia would never consider actually joining NATO.

Armenia has also participated in the EU’s Eastern Partnership, and the EU has responded with support including considerable financial grants (Demirag, 2004). However – and this came as a surprise – the Armenian President decided in September 2013 not to sign an EU Association Agreement that had been under preparation for years. Instead, he decided to join the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) and prepare for entry into its successor the EEU, thereby making a drastic turn towards Russia and away from integration in Western structures.

Despite the surviving elements of cooperation with Western structures, the limited progress of conflict resolution attempts over Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia's pull-back from closer EU cooperation, including on the region's energy transit corridor (German, 2012) have brought an overall deterioration in Armenia’s security situation (Delcour, 2014). Armenia’s public espousal of the Russian line over Crimea and Ukraine has both highlighted Armenia's dependence on Russia, and reduced the chance of any mitigation of it in the near to medium term.

Conclusion

This article has examined the relations between Armenia and Russia, two post-Soviet states with huge disparities in their size and in general political, economic, and military power. We set out to test the finding of small state studies that small states tend to seek shelter with one or more stronger actors. The question raised was why Armenia has chosen to align with Russia, whereas the two other Caucasian post-Soviet states, Azerbaijan and Georgia, have chosen a different path.

In Western discourse, it is not uncommon to hear expressions of (at least) some wonder as to why any state chooses to rely on Russia, instead of aligning with the West: Russia is often depicted as the ‘bad guy’ on the international scene, and the West as the ‘good guy’ and model that all should seek to follow. Such categorisations are often unconsciously built into academic IR studies, which after all were largely developed in the West. It is legitimate to question how meaningful such a distinction is, and whether the West is too egocentric in its judgement when dealing with other cultures and standards.

We have seen that Armenia has endeavoured to pursue a balanced policy, referred to as ‘complementarism’, implying strong relations with Russia and simultaneously fostering and developing close relations with Western structures. Armenia’s main security concerns, however, are grounded in its deep-seated, ethnic as well as strategic antagonism with its neighbours Azerbaijan and Turkey, both of which have cultivated close cooperation with – and drawn military support from – the West. For Armenia, Russia has served as a principal security guarantor because it briddles these two opponents, while Armenia’s membership of CSTO most likely prevents other states from threatening Armenia, let alone waging war with it.

It has recently been argued that Armenia’s policy of ‘complementarity’ has proved short-lived (Delcour, 2014), and the decision to become a member of the EEU from January 2015 – coupled with Armenian support for Russia on the Crimea – could be the final nail in its coffin. The underlying reality is that Armenia has tilted further towards Russia because its security concerns cannot be mitigated without Russia’s support. Western countries and alliances have never offered Armenia a viable alternative; and indeed, have failed to protect the countries to whom they did offer more – Georgia and Ukraine – when the chips were down. All this does not mean that Armenia will abandon its relations with the West or seal off all prospects of a more independent strategy, but its principal path has been firmly laid out. As long as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is unresolved, this policy will in all probability remain unchanged: in fact the Armenian (and Azerbaijani) ‘ultimate geopolitical orientation largely depends on the solution of this issue’ (Torosyan & Vardanyan, 2015). With this conflict still alive, moreover, the odds against any rapprochement with Turkey
are heavily increased. From Armenia’s viewpoint, therefore, based on the discussion in this article, accepting the Russian bear’s embrace is no hazard but rather the surest way to survival and integrity.

Bibliography


