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Russia, Eurasia, and Armenia in a Fast-Evolving Global System: An Alternative View

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The Putin team's construction and application of a "Russian National Idea" (RNI) is core to understanding the pursuit of Russian foreign policy and security interests in the wake of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.[1] The Russian National Idea not only represents a *weltanschauung* and derivative policy thrust that informs Russia's broader foreign policy. The product of over 20 years of public discussion by Vladimir Putin, with derivative policy development and application, the RNI helps structure the more focused and contextually specific relations Russia now constructs with various states, including a country long valued and appreciated by Russians: Armenia. An exploration of evolving Russian-Armenian relations, grounded in hundreds of years of rich interaction, can be helpful in further illuminating the logic and dynamic of the RNI. Indeed, with Armenia and the broader Caucasus situated at the epicenter of powerful geopolitical currents, past and present, Russia has historically found itself holding most levers of influence over the geopolitics of the region (Oskanin and Averre, 2019). Through a long and generally positive bilateral relationship, Russia and Armenia have constructed a strategic partnership that continues to be of value to both states (Yemelianova and Broers, 2020).

Russia and Armenia have had centuries of a constructive bilateral relationship; a relationship that has been, overall, well viewed by the overwhelming majority of both Russians and Armenians. Armenia has coped with the complex challenges of being located in a "difficult neighborhood," bordered by nations with which it has often struggled. Located in a sea of Muslim communities, Armenia – the world's oldest Christian country – has long looked for support to nearby Russia, a fellow Christian country with power interests that intersect with Armenian security concerns. Russia has usually constituted a reliable great power which protected – at times championed – Armenian national concerns. When we look at the dynamic post-Soviet 21st century, we find a Russian-Armenian bilateral relationship that, while overall continuing to be constructive and valuable for both actors, entails subtle – and not so subtle – complexities that challenge policy makers in both Moscow and Yerevan. The Putin-Sergei Lavrov foreign policy team must balance dozens of bilateral relationships with nearby Eurasian countries, with each relationship entailing its own mix of opportunities and challenges. While the world is focused on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, attention should also be given to the myriad of different bilateral relationships in which Russia is highly involved as Russia continues to reemerge as a major post-Soviet Eurasian power. The Russian-Armenian relationship stands in stark contrast to that of Russia and Ukraine, and to other multifaceted bilateral relationships

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(e.g., Russia and the individual Baltic states and Finland, Russia and Poland, and Russia and Kazakhstan) that understandably capture our attention (Casier, 2022). We focus on this old, important, and overall constructive bilateral relationship as we look for suggestive insights that illuminate Russian foreign policy thinking and behavior in the 2020s.

We contend that Russia's expressed assertiveness and mounting self-confidence in the face of Western economic sanctions and the Ukrainian conflict directly stem from a Russian National Idea that both directs and legitimates efforts for Russia to reemerge as a primary Eurasian power. Western observers' inattention to – or misunderstanding of – the 21st century Russian National Idea has confounded Western efforts to effectively counter Russia's power revival. Our intention here is both to (1) illuminate the all-important, Putin team "Russian National Idea," and (2) illustrate its "logic" and significance for Putin period Russian foreign policy behavior through an analysis of evolving Russian-Armenian relations. We contend there is merit in analyzing Russia's efforts at restoring its Eurasian leadership position through examining a relatively stable, pragmatic, and mutually beneficial bilateral relationship: that with Armenia. The collapse of the U.S.S.R., with the emergence of an independent Armenia and the freeing up of a Russian Federation better able to pursue its own parochial interests, occasioned an intriguing push-pull of forces that has driven a dynamic Russian-Armenian bilateral relationship for three decades. If, in the past, there have been moments when Russia's actions failed to meet Armenian expectations (e.g., during the 1915 Armenian Genocide), Russia has usually proven a reliable ally. We contend such reliability as an ally-partner has been fully true for the first decades of the post-Soviet twenty-first century.

The Russian National Idea, Eurasia, and the Global System

We approach the state of Russian-Armenian relations from the standpoint of Russian national interests, especially as structured by the logic of the political-programmatic-ideational policy thrust of the Putin team: what we term the Russian National Idea (RNI). We explore the Russian National idea elsewhere, in both published and in-progress writings, but suffice it to note here that the RNI constitutes a set of explicit goals based on interconnected institutional and policy arrangements that continue to be developed in the third decade of the Putin period Willerton, Beznosov, and Carrier, 2021). Especially important to us are the domestic political, economic, and societal components of the RNI that are essential to the full expression of Russia's Eurasian power imperatives. Russia reemerging as the Eurasian power is the fourth of the four interconnected RNI components, and this foreign-security policy component is critical as a consider Russian-Armenian relations.

We will not devote the required narrative to illuminate the critical importance of consolidating the strong state (with strong political executive) to the realization of Russian foreign and security goals, albeit this is the first, all-important, RNI component. Neither will we analyze the central importance of developing a thriving market economy, guided by the strong state, as a second RNI component that undergirds Russia's return as a (the) Eurasian power. Indeed, even the revival of the Russian social welfare system, undergirding regime-public relations, the third RNI component, cannot be evaluated here. But the importance of the consolidated strong

state, the flourishing state-led market economy, and the state-prioritized social welfare system to an ever-stronger Russia, located in the heart of Eurasia, should not be discounted. In fact, we contend the Russian National Idea is at the heart of Russia's reemergence as a regional and global power, with Russia's successes in withstanding the profound Western economic sanctions and in achieving its goals in the war in Ukraine constituting convincing evidence of Russia's strongly bolstered power position.

Russia's successful return as a Eurasian power necessitates a flexible and multifaceted foreign-security policy thrust that enables it to balance a confounding set of bilateral and multilateral relationships. Bordered by more than a dozen countries, and building off a historical legacy of compelling political-security relationships with dozens of Eurasian polities, Russia has crafted varied policy approaches in engaging the diversity of neighboring and related polities. No single set of characteristics, reflecting a single set of foreign policy approaches, can describe the diversity of bilateral relationships that have emerged over the past decades. Continuing hostile relations with the Baltic countries, and complexities in engaging Poland, are contrasted with strengthened relations with Belarus. Finland, a country with which Russia has had reliable cooperative relations since the late 1950s, now offers new challenges as it reverses its over-seven-decade course of neutrality to join NATO; the long-term Russian response is yet to be revealed, though Moscow has felt the need to respond with a major bolstering of its military capabilities in its northwest. The diversity of domestic realities, and the push-pull of forces within the individual Central Asian states, have occasioned alternative and more nuanced Russian policy efforts involving those five different polities. A sort of love-hate relationship with Georgia, entailing both the favored position of Georgia and Georgians within the Soviet polity, and the 2008 Georgian-Russian war, necessitates more subtle and cautious positioning (Kakachia, Minesahvili, and Kahhishvili, 2018). Finally, the awkward balancing of Azerbaijani and Armenian national-security interests, with the juxtaposing of important power-energy relations with Azerbaijan with a historical friendship with fellow Christian Armenia, results in very dynamic Russian balancing. Russia is simultaneously and energetically engaging all of these bilateral relationships, located within what Russia perceives as its traditional sphere of influence, the tenor of the relations ranging from hostile to cooperative (Goff, 2020, and Eichberger, 2022/23). We must factor in the impact of the war in Ukraine, a conflict which has shaken all regional actors, while concomitantly resulting in important rethinking on Russia's part as it remains committed to the RNI goal of returning as a consequential Eurasian great power. Any consideration of Russian-Armenian relations must be nested within these broader regional, and global, power conditions (German, 2022).

Factoring in the War in Ukraine

The Russian move into Ukraine in February 2022, following up on the February 2014 ouster of the Ukrainian government (including the ouster of the democratically elected President, purging of the Ukrainian Rada of pro-Russian elements, and the disbanding of the Constitutional Court which had ruled the removal of the Ukrainian President illegal), secession of Crimea and arrival of Russian forces, and outbreak of fighting in Donbas, profoundly impacted all former Soviet Union (FSU) and neighboring Eurasian states. Having sought long-

term guarantees about its own security position in post-Cold War Europe, Russia had approached the U.S. one last time in late 2021 for assurances regarding a new European security architecture. The Biden Administration, after signaling initial receptivity to engaging the Russians, rebuffed Moscow's efforts. Only weeks later, the February 2022 war commenced.

Armenia, like all FSU and neighboring Eurasian states, had an array of domestic influences at play as the Ukraine conflict began. Armenia is among the countries that show strong support for Russia globally. While it has backed Russia in various international forums and decisions, Armenia, under relatively pro-Western leadership since the 2018 revolution, also seeks to engage with the West without abandoning its ties to Russia ("History of Russian-Armenian Relations," 2018). The Armenian population expresses a diverse range of opinions, with some supporting Russia and others favoring a more pro-Western stance. Additionally, Armenia has seen demonstrations both in favor of and against Russia's actions in Ukraine, and it has become a destination for people opposing the Russian government and its actions (Yevstratov, 2022). Yet even if there were disappointments in Yerevan in the ways Russia balanced its Armenian relationship with that of Azerbaijan, a longer-term confidence in Russia as a great power bulwark of support, combined with Moscow assurances to the regime, left both the Armenian elite and broader public broadly confident of Russia's reliability. Nikol Pashinyan's government may not have publicly supported Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) when Russia moved into Donbas in 2022, but a year later Pashinyan was one of the few foreign leaders who chose to attend the May 9, 2023, Victory Day celebration in Moscow. If Pashinyan had come to power in May 2018 with the reputation of promoting a pro-Western policy agenda, since the beginning of the SMO his government struggled to maintain a balanced foreign policy stance that did not fundamentally offended Russian sensibilities (Yevstratov, 2022 and 2023), at least not until summer 2023.

In March 2023 and February 2023 demonstrations in support of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine took place near the Russian embassy in Yerevan. Participants in the demonstrations arrived at the embassy with Russian flags and posters expressing support for the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Armenian-Russian friendship. These events were organized by members of the "In the Name of the Motherland – My Armenia" movement, who also delivered a letter of gratitude to the Russian embassy, thanking Russia for its centuries-old friendship and protection of Armenia as a fraternal state. They also expressed their gratitude to Russian border guards guarding the Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Iranian borders, as well as to the personnel of the 102nd Russian military base in Armenia and the peacekeeping contingent in Karabakh ("In Yerevan there occurred an action in support of the Russian special military operation," 2022 and 2023). But Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan adopted a different posturing, stating that Yerevan is not an ally of Moscow in the conflict in Ukraine. He made this announcement in June 2023 in an interview with the U.S.'s CNN Prime News; according to Pashinyan, Armenia was concerned about Western countries holding a different opinion regarding Yerevan's stance on the war, and potential misunderstandings of the Armenian position could negatively affect all aspects of the country's relations with the West ("Armenia rejected the alliance," 2023). Pashinyan's summer profiling certainly diverged from the traditional Armenian posturing, elite and citizen responses varied, but it would take

time – and time past the dramatic events involving Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 – to determine how lasting would be this new, Pashinyan-initiated, hostile-to-Moscow, posturing.

Legacy of Historically Cooperative Russian-Armenian Relations

We contend that Armenia is a valuable illustrative case in considering how the Putin team National Idea thinking relates to 21st century world policies. Among FSU states, Russian-Armenian relations have been especially stable and pacific. Today, a diversity of forces, both in Moscow and Yerevan, reflect the complexities that overwhelm Russia's engagement of Eurasia and the global arena.

Armenia's and Russia's constructive bilateral relationship of mutual gain extends back to at least the 1826-28 Russian-Persian War, after which much of Armenia was ceded to Russia. This is not to say Russian power interests did not make their way to the Caucasus in preceding centuries, as conflicts brought territories and a strengthening Russian regional power position. In a complicated region with profound national-religious tensions, Russia stood as a protector of Christians, including those of Armenia. Most of what constitutes today's Armenia was part of the Russian Empire for more than 90 years. When the Empire collapsed with the 1917 Russian Revolution, the First Republic of Armenia briefly emerged, but by 1920, Armenia was incorporated into the new Bolshevik-led Russian state, and Armenia became a founding member of what would eventually become the USSR (formally constituted in 1922). During the years of Soviet power, if Armenians found themselves dominated by Soviet Russians, they were among the most privileged nations among the over 100 nationalities found in the USSR. Throughout the period of Soviet power, Armenians evinced generally positive feelings toward Russians. It was hardly surprising that in June 1990, near the end of the period of Soviet power, when Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev visited California, he was warmly welcomed by that state's sizable Armenian expatriate community.

The contemporary independent Armenian state emerged with the 1991 collapse of the USSR, with Armenia having earlier boycotted the March 1991 USSR-wide federation preservation vote. Russia's long-term tradition of supporting Armenian national interests was ultimately, cautiously, expressed in its behind-the-scenes support of Armenia by the end of the 1988-94 First Nagorno-Karabakh War. Yet even in this more recent manifestation of long-standing regional rivalries, the complexities surrounding Russia as a protector-guarantor of Armenian interests were evident. Early on, there was evidence that the USSR had inclined toward the more populous – and arguably more influential – Azerbaijan. In the past, there had been moments when Armenians could question Russian reliability as an ally: notable was Russian posturing during the 1915 Armenian genocide, and the 1921 Bolshevik agreement with Turkiye that partitioned Armenia. During the Soviet period, the decision had been taken to include Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhichevan in the Azerbaijan SSR, and Moscow appeared to be playing both sides as the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict broke out in the 1980s. Yet in the end, the Yeltsin regime did come to carefully support Yerevan in that First Nagorno-Karabakh War.

<u>Russia and the Intractable Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict</u>

The Nagorno-Karabakh struggles, and Russia's relationships with conflicting Armenia and Azerbaijan, have an importance that fully match the geostrategic importance of the region itself (Coyle, 2021). The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian-Azerbaijani struggle, on more than one occasion, had set out stress tests for the Soviet Union, and they were an important – if not the most important – contributor to the disintegration processes that ultimately overwhelmed the USSR in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While involved in various Caucasus struggles, Russia's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was and still is fundamentally different than its role in areas such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Russia's role as a mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh struggle is recognized by both sides. This conflict, which had begun as an inter-communal and inter-republican confrontation, was ultimately transformed into a movement for secession from the USSR. Secessionist sentiments first arose in Armenia, but after the tragic January 1990 events in Baku, spread to Azerbaijan. Ultimately, national independence became a strategic goal in both Armenia and Azerbaijan as both countries tied their own independence with the ability to favorably resolve the national-territorial conflict on their own terms. Meanwhile, if the Soviet federal state proved unable to resolve the mounting conflict, the Russian Federation (one-time Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, RSFSR) expressed its own special interest, separate from the federal state, in addressing Nagorno-Karabakh. The RSFSR government of Boris Yeltsin expressed the desire to find a better managerial solution, setting out a broader policy perspective that also included other ethno-nationalist challenges that were emerging throughout the USSR (e.g., Chechnya and Tatarstan).

Efforts of the Yeltsin government, during the late Soviet period and the first decade of the post-Soviet period, set the foundation and parameters for Russia's engagement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Armenia that have since been true. The September 1991 joint meditation mission of Presidents Yeltsin and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, if not ultimately yielding a solution to the conflict, did signal Russia's emphasis on securing a ceasefire as the profound basis for negotiations. Russian interests were in laying a foundation, through addressing of the conflict, for a more cooperative Armenian-Azerbaijani bilateral relationship, with the desire to foster integrating ties and realizing a final solution to the ethno-political conflict. These mediation efforts did eventually yield an agreement on a longer-term ceasefire (signed May 1994), with a follow-up 1995 agreement intended for an indefinite ceasefire. President Yeltsin's constructive personal relations with both Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders were important to Russian mediation successes. The Putin government followed up on these efforts, Putin made the first visits of a Russian president to Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2001, with 8 visits and 7 visits respectively to the two countries through 2022. In November 2008, the Presidents of Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan signed an inter-state declaration, the first such document realized since 1994, to resolve the conflict.

The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh significantly evolved after the signing of the inter-state declaration in November 2008. It necessitated cautious Russian balancing between the warring parties. The period after the 2008 declaration was characterized by intermittent ceasefire violations, occasional clashes, and diplomatic efforts to reach a peaceful resolution. Negotiations were primarily mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chaired by Russia, France,

and the United States. In April 2016, there was a significant escalation of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, resulting in casualties on both sides. A ceasefire was eventually restored, but the underlying tensions persisted. The most significant change in a simmering conflict zone and these bilateral relations occurred in September 2020, when a large-scale military conflict erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan, again over Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict resulted in significant casualties and destruction and lasted for several weeks. In November 2020, a ceasefire agreement was brokered by Russia between Armenia and Azerbaijan, effectively ending the fighting. As part of the agreement, Azerbaijan regained control of several territories previously held by Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. In 2021, Russian peacekeeping forces were deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh to monitor and enforce the ceasefire agreement; this move generally stabilized and prevented further hostilities (Askerov and Ibadoghlu, 2019, and Avdaliani, 2019).

The OSCE Minsk Group, originally formed in 1992, and co-chaired by Russia, had involved one forum used by the two warring parties and outside powers to try to constrain and even resolve the conflict. After the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, and especially after the 2022 Ukrainian conflict took off, all parties judged this Group of no continuing value, especially as co-chairs U.S. and France walked away as they distanced themselves from Russia. In truth, both Russia and Armenia have evinced complex posturing that, at times, suggested vacillation and even uncertainty as to the full ramifications of an actual resolution to the conflict. For Russia, the conflict had afforded the opportunity to be highly involved in security and mediation efforts, while the war itself posed no threat to Russia in regard to any dangers to its own territorial integrity. Were the conflict to be fully resolved, Russia would be forced to withdraw its military contingent from Armenia and would concomitantly see its position in the South Caucasus diminished. In a similar spirit, there had been reasons for Armenia to forego a speedy settlement of the conflict, as the conflict brought in Russian resources while permitting Yerevan to play off Russian and Western interests. But there is a tradeoff with the potential resolution of the conflict, there would be tremendous economic benefits for Armenia, the investment climate would improve, and transportation and energy projects could more rapidly move from the planning to the implementation stage. Overall, the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh continued as the primary foreign policy challenge for Armenia and its relations with Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh likewise stood as a dynamic challenge always threatening Moscow's mediation efforts and attempts to balance the two conflicting South Caucasus countries (Gafarli, 2019).

Meanwhile, Moscow's energetic and complicated efforts at balancing relations with rivals Armenia and Azerbaijan entail a multifaceted Russian-Azerbaijani relationship which cannot be explored here. We contend that in the context of the Russian National Idea and consolidation of Russia's power position in Eurasia, Russia has been, and continues to be, committed to a careful and calibrated balancing of relations with these rival states. For purposes of contextualizing Russia's relationship with Armenia, suffice it to note Azerbaijan is a strategic partner, interconnected energy, economic, and security (and terrorism-related) concerns compel cooperation from both Moscow and Baku, albeit each has serious concerns about the full intentions of the other (Bedford, Mahmudlu, and Abilov, 2021). Cross-border cooperation is important, with profound progress realized in September 2010 – after years of tension – as

the two sides agreed on the border's delimitation and demarcation. Not unlike Russian-Armenian bilateral relations, which are arguably firmer, there is a Russian-Azerbaijani balancing of actions, for instance as Azerbaijan's purchase of Russian arms is a solid financial compensation to Russia for Azerbaijan's economic and trade linkages with the West involving energy and infrastructure projects. Russia's cooperative relations with Turkiye and Iran further consolidate the Moscow-Baku link, albeit these relations complicate Moscow's dealings with Yerevan.

Russian-Armenian cooperation with continuing complexities

We contend that strong and long-term interests by both Moscow and Yerevan in effectuating a solid and reliable Russian-Armenian relationship transcend individual regimes and passing global and regional developments. Armenian elites and officials of the past decades have been dominated by the contrasting power and policy interests of three very different leaders: Robert Kocharyan (President, 1998-2008; independent), Serzh Sargsyan (President, 2008-15; party of power), and Nikol Pashinyan (Prime Minister, 2018-present; non-ideological, pro-Western forces), but Russian-Armenian relations throughout these leaderships, at least up until the dramatic developments of summer 2023, could be described as entailing continuities rather than powerful change. Interconnected Russian-Armenian security, economic, and infrastructural interests – combined with a legacy of Russia as an Armenian protector – generally trump the idiosyncratic political concerns of officials. We see the Russian-Armenian relationship as a strategic partnership. While there may be no direct geographical or transportation link between Armenia and Russia, Russian-Armenian interests, thinking, and policies have been interrelated. Meanwhile, this thinking and these actions are grounded in common desires for regional Caucasus stability, bilateral security, compelling economic interests, with all of these built upon longer-term historical-cultural linkages. For all post-Soviet Armenian governments, there has been broad consensus to realize national security, ensure regional economic cooperation, and establish friendly relations with immediate neighbors; Russia could play a significant role in accomplishing all of these ends.

Armenia's proximity to three Muslim countries (i.e., Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkiye), and unresolved conflicts with Azerbaijan and Turkiye, have resulted in closed borders and economic isolation from the latter two neighbors. Iranian-Armenian relations have been cooperative for some time, but Azerbaijan and Turkiye constitute considerable and ongoing challenges. The Karabakh conflict compelled Armenia to develop a four-part foreign policy concept that was intended to permit it to respond effectively to national security challenges in the shortest time possible. It was imperative that Moscow be brought into this national security approach, and while having misgivings, Moscow did. The foundational first part of the national security concept was the reliable Russian-Armenian relationship with strategic partnership. Closely tied with this was a second part, Armenia's participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), with CSTO membership balanced with Armenia's participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE; the third part). CSTO membership was also balanced with the fourth part of the national security plan, Armenian-American military cooperation, which began in earnest in the late 2000s. Armenia balanced both Russian and

Western efforts, though the former was the first cornerstone of Armenia's plan. Russia's cautious balancing on the Karabakh issue, and counterpoised Russian security initiatives in the broader Caucasus region, meant that Armenia needed to factor other, e.g., the efforts of Western actors, into their security calculations. An important consequence of this thinking was Armenia's "complementarity policy," this policy signifying a multi-power vector approach, with numerous bilateral and multilateral instruments ("vectors") embedding Armenia in a complex array of national security arrangements. But the overriding first vector was Russia ("National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia," 2020). The presence of a Russian military base in Armenia, and the stationing of Russian border guards (i.e., with Iran and Turkiye) have been consequential. It is important for Moscow to have Armenia in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the CSTO (and with Armenia being the only South Caucasus member).

Meanwhile, Russia has been the main foreign investor in Armenia, roughly half of all foreign investment comes from Russia, with significant investments in infrastructure and transportation. Many of Armenia's strategically important facilities are owned by Russian companies; e.g., South Caucasus Railway is a subsidiary of Russian Railways, Gazprom is the only shareholder of Gazprom Armenia, and Electric Works of Armenia is a subsidiary of Inter RAO UES. Russia holds first position among countries investing in Armenia's economy. There are approximately 1,300 Russian companies operating in the republic, accounting for about one-third of all joint ventures with foreign capital in Armenia. The total accumulated volume of Russian investments since 1991 exceeds $4 billion, which represents 40% of all foreign investments in Armenia ("History of Russian-Armenian Relations," 2018, and Duhamel, 2023).

Armenia, as with other FSU countries, had been one of the important links of the Soviet national-economic and military-industrial complex, and unlike many other one-time Soviet republics, had a positive balance in the export of raw materials and finished products. Armenia purchases Russian natural gas at a preferential rate, a rate second only to that for Belarus. Another suggestive example involves rubber production and processing since the 1960s, with Armenian producers having provided around 80% of rubber products for the whole USSR. Today, Armenia and Russia are trying to restore this and other areas of one-time important trade, and this includes mining, non-ferrous metallurgy, and the chemical industry (beyond the previously mentioned energy sector). Russian-Armenian bilateral economic relations can be further nested in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), within which both countries are members (going back to 2015). Developing common energy prices within the EEU is especially attractive for Armenia, though there are different perspectives (e.g., Kazakhstan) among member-states; the long-term goal of economic integration among the five members is still in the far-off distance.

An important bi-product of these resource and economic productivity arrangements was the presence of a large Armenian diaspora found throughout Russia (e.g., 1.2 million Armenians are in Russia, using census information; this diaspora compliments the large Armenian diaspora beyond the FSU space); a diaspora whose historical role was conducive to benevolent attitudes of Russians toward the Armenian community. An intriguing, related matter involves nostalgia

in Armenia among certain population groups for the Soviet (Russian) past, with such nostalgia only strengthening a certain solidarity among the two peoples; such nostalgia is especially evident among older and more rural citizens. Such citizens also overwhelmingly speak Russian, as estimated half of all Armenians speak Russian. Factor into this nostalgia and solidarity the presence of institutions such as the Russian-Armenian University, Yerevan (founded 1997), the importance of which cannot be over-emphasized, not only for the influential linkage of the two countries' educational systems, but for the aspirational value of linking elements of the two countries' intellectual elites. We find a type of Russian "soft power" in Armenia, these efforts showcasing Russia' commitment to educational and cultural exchange, which can further varnish seemingly solid bilateral interactions.

Engaging a varied Armenian elite and public

Armenian elites play a critical role in post-Soviet Russian-Armenian bilateral relations, they are varied in perspective, and they merit attention. Some elements in the elite (both governmental and those outside of the policy process) have favored expanding connections with the West, both Europe and the U.S., while others continue to emphasize the traditionally strong relationship with Russia. The so-called 2018 "Velvet Revolution" (in Armenia referred to as the "RejectSerzh" movement as it opposed the then-long-reining President Serzh Sargsyan) may have entailed waving of EU and NATO flags and the expression of slogans such as "goodbye, unwashed Russia," but "revolutionaries" did not forward strong geopolitical demands. We contend that the Velvet Revolution, which facilitated the ouster of President Sargsyan and the rise to power of Nikol Pashinyan, was an extremely Armenian – not necessarily anti-Russian – expression of national will, even granting the media often stressed anti-Russian sentiments.

In fact, the Armenian public demonstration for change was centered on domestic politics, with the Velvet Revolution especially focused on rampant corruption (or rather a public perception of corruption) within the government and various state institutions. Armenians were frustrated with the widespread bribery, embezzlement, and abuse of power that had eroded public trust and hindered economic development. The government, at the time led by President Serzh Sargsyan and his party, had been in power for many years and was accused of concentrating power and stifling political opposition. There was a perception of an increasingly authoritarian rule and a lack of political pluralism. Meanwhile, Armenia faced economic challenges, including high levels of poverty and unemployment. Many citizens felt that the government's economic policies were not effectively addressing these issues and that corruption was exacerbating economic inequality. The 2017 parliamentary elections had been marred by allegations of widespread electoral fraud and irregularities; these allegations further fueled public discontent and eroded confidence in the political system. Meanwhile, many Armenians were concerned about social justice issues and believed that the government was not adequately addressing issues such as healthcare, education, and access to basic services ("Reasons for the 'Velvet Revolution'," 2023).

We argue that Russian policymakers divide the Armenian elite into three groups: (1) pro-Western, (2) technocratic, and (3) pro-Russian elements. All three groups are influential and

well-positioned within the society, domestic maneuverings among them are the stuff of the country's domestic politics, though we only give passing attention to these groups as we consider Armenian foreign-security policy and its relations with Russia.

Pro-Western elite elements are influential, they are numerous, and they have assumed a high profile in Armenian public discourse in the late 2010s and 2020s. Pro-Western elites are often those who have studied or spent time in the West (both Europe and the United States), they often are representatives of civil society who have received grants from Western funders. Active young people have often spent time in the West while, in contrast, relatively few have spent time in Russia. The public posturing of pro-Western elements is not always anti-Russian, and where most emphasize Armenian inclusion in various Western-dominated IGOs, some still hold Armenia should remain a party to pro-Russian IGOs. An intriguing group within the pro-Western ranks are the so-called "Sorosovites," individuals who have worked with Soros-backed institutions such as the Open Society Foundation and Transparency International. Such elites do rise to governmental posts, and it is said perhaps 15-20 members of the government or the parliament are in place on a "Soros quota."

Technocrats constitute roughly one-third of Armenia's elite, and many are non-ideologized members of the civil service. With careers firmly rooted in government agencies, these technocrats are generally pragmatists whose pro-Western posturing is related to with professional experience with Westerners and Western institutions; professional linkages with such foreign actors can be advantageous to career advance.

Finally, pro-Russian elites are mostly found in state bureaucracies, at all levels, many observers contend these officials are moderately pro-Russian by a sort of political inertia. Pro-Russian elites know Russia well, they have participated in Russian public diplomacy and exchange programs, they often have practical career experience dealing with their Russian counterparts. These elites tended to be found in earlier Armenian governments (e.g., those of Serzh Sargsyan) at the high level, but no such officials are to be found in Prime Minister Pashinyan's team (since 2018).

Russian officials have proven capable of working with all of these Armenian elite elements. In the later 2010s Russian officials may have inclined more toward the Sargsyan cohort, after all, Sargsyan and his team led Armenia to join the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Community. But as the struggle around Sargsyan retaining power heated up, with the soon-to-be Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan assuming an important role in leading the challenge, Russia reacted in a restrained fashion and was cautious in not strongly favoring one side over the other. Pashinyan said as much in April 2018, putting forth the thesis that "Sargsyan had lost Moscow's support." Many conclude watching Pashinyan in power that he has cautiously balanced the various elite elements, albeit he has been a visible symbol for greater engagement with the West. In fact, the structural framework of Russian-Armenian relations grounded in decades of late Soviet and post-Soviet experience, was strong; indeed, arguably stronger than pro-Western elites might have considered. During the Pashinyan years, many Armenians (including Pashinyan) may have liked the word "revolution" in anticipating desired change (and

away from Russia). But what occurred was more of an elite realignment more favoring pro-Western elements, yet balanced with political institutions and a political system remaining essentially the same. Overall, fears from Moscow and its supporters that Yerevan would turn exclusively to the West and reduce cooperation with Moscow did not initially materialize. Until 2023, Pashinyan, had not publicly expressed overtly anti-Russian policies. He maintained a delicate balancing act between Armenia's historically close ties with Russia and the desire to engage with Western countries and international organizations. While his government pursued closer relations with the European Union and the United States, it did not signal an overt anti-Russian stance.

Considered overall, Pashinyan's approach was characterized by seeking greater cooperation and economic ties with various partners while also maintaining Armenia's security partnership with Russia, as evinced by the continued presence of the Russian military base in Armenia and Armenia's membership in the CSTO ("10 Reasons Not to Call the 'Velvet Revolution' in Armenia a 'Maidan'," 2018). Pashinyan balanced juxtaposed Russian and Western interests, he would, on the one hand, attend the May 9, 2023, Victory Parade in Moscow, while simultaneously facilitating the joint Armenian-U.S. September 2023 "Eagle Partner" war drills to signal bilateral military cooperation in the midst of simmering tensions with Azerbaijan. Regarding Russian-sponsored IGOs, of which Armenia is a member, the Pashinyan government would appreciate the potential for the Eurasian Economic Union to further solidify Russian-Armenian economic relations, while it would cautiously approach a CSTO that had the potential to pull Armenia toward defending members (e.g., Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) in which it has no real interests. Pashinyan had on numerous occasions publicly characterized Russian-Armenian relations as "brilliant," though by summer 2023 he was openly criticizing Russia's conduct of the war in Ukraine and questioning Moscow's ability to be a policeman in the troubled Caucasus ("Armenia rejected the alliance with Russia in the conflict in Ukraine," 2023). The generally cautious Armenian government questioned Russia's power capabilities as it appeared Russia was mired in the Ukrainian conflict and might be less able to be a firm powerbroker in the Caucasus. It would only be with the dramatic developments of later summer and fall 2023 that serious questions would arise as to Pashinyan's willingness to compromise Armenia's long-standing solidarity with Russia to advance its interests, not only in Nagorno-Karabakh and with Azerbaijan, but with the broader global community.

Meanwhile, Armenian elite attitudes could be nested in broader public attitudes, and there is a corresponding range of public perspectives toward Russia and other states. One can go back just a decade ago to see that most Armenians had a positive view of their past Soviet experience, a 2011 survey revealing 91% of respondents agreed with the statement "In the USSR, most people in Armenia lived better than today," while 85% agreed with the statement, "With the collapse of the USSR we lost more than we gained." But since then, interest in expanding ties with the West, combined with reservations about Russian foreign policy actions (most notably the war in Ukraine), weakened the one-time very positive assessment of Russia. The long-term image of Russia as a "patron" has not disappeared, though some (especially younger Armenians and residents of Yerevan) have a more skeptical view as the fighting in Ukraine continues. Bi-annual results of the Caucasus Barometer Survey, focusing on the

question "Approval of doing business with Russians," reveal broad stability in views, though with a modest downturn, 2010-21 (survey samples of approximately 1600 respondents; Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2021):

2010	90% approve
2011	86
2012	84
2013	89
2015	91
2017	77
2019	85
2021	80

A 2023 Washington-based International Republic Institute survey, however, revealed respondents were almost evenly divided between viewing Armenia's current relations with Russia as "good" or "bad." Just four years earlier, in 2019, 90% of respondents had viewed the relations as "good" ("Growing pessimism in Armenia," 2023). Despite the slippage in regard for Russia, the majority of respondents did recognize Russia as one of Armenia's most important political, economic, and security partners on the global stage. The question would remain, however, as this chapter is being authored, how the dramatic Summer-Fall 2023 moves by the Pashinyan government would impact Armenian public opinion. Initial developments suggested a divided public response.

Looking Ahead

While there has been a long-term, fundamentally constructive, relationship between Russia and Armenia that has continued for centuries, we see the contemporary, post-Soviet relationship as one of pragmatism and interconnected linkages between the two polities. For Yerevan, there is the reality of profound Armenian dependence on Russia for both security and the economy, and this has been recognized by all post-Soviet Armenian regimes. Meanwhile, Moscow, operating through a friendly Armenia, extends its geo-strategic power interests in the Caucasus. This position is totally consonant with the logic of the Russian National Idea, with 21st century Russian security bolstered through Russia reclaiming its leadership in Eurasia, and especially in areas – and with polities – which have been central to Russian geo-strategic interests. The Putin team's over-two-decade effort to consolidate a strong federal state, tied with a program of economic rejuvenation that sees Russia weathering the challenges of numerous Western sanctions, yields a forceful foreign-security policy that strengthens Russia's standing in Eurasia. Meanwhile, Russia also enjoys a stronger position in the "tough neighborhood" of the Caucasus via its bilateral relationship with the small, but not inconsequential, Armenia. Not unlike the past, when Russia had contrasting power interests that resulted in a balancing of policies not always favorable to Armenia (e.g., involving Turkiye and the 1915 Armenian genocide), today's Russia balances strategic relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia that troubles both Caucasus polities. But we contend that the decision-makers of all three polities understand that, all things considered, there is a "special relationship" between Russia and Armenia, that

Russia continues to stand as a sort of Armenian "patron," but that Russian Eurasian and Caucasus regional leadership needs can necessitate occasional Russian equivocation.

There may be juxtaposed pro-Russian and pro-Western interests among Armenian elites and citizens, but the West's geographical distance and on-and-off engagement of Armenia necessitate some caution for Yerevan in favoring the West at Russia's expense. Only time will tell whether Prime Minister Pashinyan's at-times forceful rhetoric regarding Russia and the global environment will yield policy changes that hold up. Meanwhile, there is a lingering Russo-Soviet nostalgia among some, especially, older (and more rural) elements in Armenia, with well-established institutions such as the Russian-Armenian University (founded in 1997) fostering consequential societal-political linkages between the two polities.

Russian elite responses to the political dynamics in Yerevan have been cautious, even circumspect. President Putin, when asked in September 2023 about any geopolitical shift in Yerevan, commented, "I don't think there is any shift, we see, understand what is happening." He continued, "We have no problems with Armenia, and there are no problems with Prime Minister Pashinyan. We are in constant contact with him" ("Why Putin did not see a 'reversal' in the relations of Russia and Armenia," 2023). While Armenia's growing contacts with Washington and Brussels during the Pashinyan period have troubled Moscow, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova observed "Russia is not Armenia's enemy and will never become one" ("FMA refused to consider Russia an enemy of Armenia," 2023).

The Pashinyan government startled politicians and observers in Yerevan, Moscow, and throughout the Caucasus and elsewhere by its later summer 2023 decision to recognize Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh. Related unfolding developments led to renewed Armenian-Azerbaijani fighting in Karabakh, and while mediation efforts proceeded apace, the full outcome is unclear as this chapter is completed. Russian authorities proceeded cautiously, but were nonplussed with Pashinyan statements and maneuvering. Domestic Armenian reactions to what was essentially Pashinyan's offloading of Nagorno-Karabakh were mixed. The related outbreak of new Armenian-Azerbaijani hostilities also occasioned various domestic Armenian reactions, and it would take time to determine whether this change in the government's stance on Nagorno-Karabakh would ultimately strengthen Pashinyan, or lead to his ouster.

Overall, we contend there is more to contemporary Russian-Armenian relations than a sort of Caucasus-style Finlandization that compels Yerevan to reluctantly engage Moscow. Pragmatic and practical concerns, joined with historical proclivities, link the two polities in ways that continue to be meaningful and substantial. Considered in the main, Armenia has constituted an important and reliable Russian partner whose actions generally reinforce Russia's Eurasian and Caucasus power interests. While granting the significant impact of the war in Ukraine, and the push-pull of forces Russia's application of power has given rise to in Armenia (and elsewhere), we see no reason to doubt that the long-term pattern of Russian-Armenian bilateral cooperation will continue. Indeed, we are uncertain how the altered Armenian position on Nagorno-Karabakh and the outbreak of new Armenian-Azerbaijani hostilities will affect long-

term Russian-Armenian relations. Yet given the historical past, and contemporary bilateral interdependencies, we wonder whether long-term geopolitical forces will not, once again, ultimately reinforce proclivities pushing Moscow and Yerevan toward one another.

The restoration of Russian Eurasian influence – in the logic of the Russian National Idea – necessitates a foreign policy that is flexible, creative, and patient; characteristics increasingly noticed by observers (Tsygankov, 2023). The one-time crude bullying of the Cold War period is not effective in the 21st century. Maintenance of the traditionally strong cooperative relationship with Yerevan is importance to the maintenance of Russian power in the South Caucasus. Coping with dynamic developments in Pashinyan's Armenia necessitates a Russian policy resilience that looks past short-term turbulence to patiently embrace longer-term behavioral routines. Russian policy makers can question whether there is staying power to Yerevan bringing Western actors into Armenian security arrangements. Centuries of experience suggest there is such staying power for a strong Russian presence.

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