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# Strategic Relations in need of correction

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New Russian military bases as the talk of the day in Yerevan on the eve of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit

MOSCOW IS TRYING TO DO AWAY WITH WHATEVER MARS THE RUSSIAN-ARMENIAN STRATEGIC RELATIONS; President Dmitry Medvedev's official two-day visit to Armenia begins today.

It is time presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Serj Sarkisjan met because the Russian-Armenian relations are no longer as cloudless and unproblematic as they used to be. Most of the friction comes down to consequences of the war in South Ossetia. Something has to be done away about it to retain the relations both Moscow and Yerevan regard as strategic.

The Kremlin has some questions concerning Yerevan's stand on the matter of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Armenia condemned the Georgian aggression at the summit of the CIS Collective Security Treaty Organization but backed Georgian territorial integrity later on. It happened during Sarkisjan's visit to Tbilisi in late September. Armenian media outlets assume that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov flew over to Yerevan on October 3 precisely in order to elucidate the Armenian stand on the matter. He had probably failed and therefore made a statement in an interview with Rossiiskaya Gazeta several days later that Armenian political scientists appraised as "a cold shower" for Yerevan. Elaborating on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Lavrov said there were two or three issues yet that had to be addressed. "Being one of the three international brokers, Russia is of the opinion that the settlement is within grasp," the minister said. "When the Karabakh settlement is a fact of life, Turkey will be prepared to help Armenia with restoration of normal contacts with the rest of the world through the establishment of official diplomatic relations between Ankara and Yerevan of course."

Newspaper Aikakan Jamanak (Armenian Time) meanwhile reported a never announced visit of the Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov to Armenia. Citing some sources it claimed could be relied, the newspaper stated that Serdyukov and his Armenian counterpart Sejran Oganjan discussed the withdrawal of the Armenian army from the Azerbaijani territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian Defense Ministry issued immediate - and vehement - denials, but all of Yerevan is convinced that there is no smoke without fire.

Arthur Agabekjan, Chairman of the Defense and National Security Commission of the parliament and former deputy defense minister, called territorial concessions to Azerbaijan unacceptable in the opinion of Revolutionary Federation Dashnaktsutjun. "The lands around Nagorno-Karabakh are of paramount importance from the standpoint of security," Agabekjan said and suggested that Russia might install new military bases (in addition to the one in Gyumri) in Armenia and a base of peacekeepers in the Nagorno-Karabakh region itself. The lawmaker emphasized that it was only possible on the basis of a new agreement between Armenia and Russia but observers immediately suggested that the Armenian regular army might be withdrawn from the territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh if the Russians helped Yerevan with national security and deployed its peacekeepers in the self-proclaimed republic. Colonel Sejran Shakhshavarjan of the Armenian Defense Ministry Press

Service denied knowledge of any such plans when approached for comments. His Russian opposite numbers offered but a curt "no comment".

Stepan Grigorjan of the Center for Globalization (Yerevan) admitted that there was a chance that the establishment of military bases in Armenia and the deployment of a contingent of peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh might be discussed. "The former is a matter for bilateral talks. Experts meanwhile say that the military base in Gyumri is powerful enough to obviate the necessity of other bases," the political scientist said. "As for peacekeepers, that's more difficult. Should Yerevan and Moscow decide that this is what they want and launch these processes, the matter will need more than their willingness and desire to be pulled off. Azerbaijan will certainly raise objections. Besides, the Armenian authorities themselves are unlikely to want it..."

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