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THE COOPERATION BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA AND THE FRENCH REPUBLIC IN THE DEFENCE SPHERE

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Abstract

Diplomatic relations between the Republic of Armenia and the French Republic were established on 24 February 1992. Since the beginning of the 1990s, strong political and economic ties have been created between the two Republics. France became one of the members of the tripartite Co-chairmanship of the OSCE Minsk Group (alongside Russia and the USA) in 1997, which was engaged in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict regulation process.

However, following the 44-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, and especially after Azerbaijani aggression on the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia in September 2022, the cooperation between the two states developed in the defense sphere. Particularly in October 2023, several documents were signed between the Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia and the French Minister for the Armed Forces in Paris, including military education and military-technical cooperation.

The military-technical cooperation between the two states creates a possibility for Armenia to get access to advanced western military technologies, which are used in the development of the military-industrial complex of France.

Keywords: defence sector, military education, military-technical cooperation, arms trade, France, Armenia.

Introduction

Armenia and France have had long historical, cultural, and military relations for centuries. Particularly, the Armenian-French military relationships started at the end of the 11th century, during the First Crusade. This relationship developed during the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. Many famous Armenian military figures had served in the French Army during the Napoleonic era. A brilliant example of the Armenian-French military relations is the military way of the Armenian Legion, which was formed during the First World War, and the activity of Armenian members (for example Missak Manouchian*) of the French Resistance during the Second World War.

* On 21 February 2024 Missak Manouchian and his wife Mélinée were entombed in the Panthéon of the greatest figures of France (Paris) for the commemoration of his execution's 80th anniversary. Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan and French President Emmanuel Macron,

The Armenian strong community was formed in France. Diplomatic relations between the Republic of Armenia and the French Republic were established on 24 February 1992 (Official website of the MFA of the RA, 2024).

In recent years political relations between the two Republics have grown rapidly, which is also contributing to the development of the cooperation between the two states in the defence sphere.

The Potential Cooperation between the Two States in the Defence Sphere

Since the 1990s, strong political and economic relations were created between the Republic of Armenia and the French Republic. The latter became one of the members of the tripartite Co-chairmanship of the OSCE Minsk Group (Russia, France, and USA) in 1997 and was engaged in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict regulation process.

Political relations between the Republic of Armenia and the French Republic grew rapidly, which also contributed to the development of the cooperation between the two states in the defence sphere. As a result, an Agreement was signed between the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia and the French Minister for the Armed Forces on Cooperation in the Field of Defence on February 10, 2010 (Official website of the MFA of the RA, 2024).

Two years later (in 2012) between Armenia and Greece, a military contract was signed for the re-exporting of Franco-West German “Milan” antitank guided missile systems (ATGMs) to Armenia. These systems were supplied to the Armenian Army in 2013 (“RAZM.info”, 2015).

After the 44-Day War of 2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh and, especially, since 2022 the cooperation between the two states also developed in the defence sphere. It was due to 4 main reasons:

Firstly, the Azerbaijani aggression on the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia in September 2022.

Secondly, after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Armed Forces, the Russian Federation cannot realize the military contracts of supplying armament to Armenia.

Thirdly, Armenia is trying to find other sources of supplement for recovering its heavy losses of military equipment, during the 44-day war.

Finally, the weakening of its geostrategic position on the African continent, France is trying to strengthen its position in the South Caucasus region.

On September 27, 2022, within the framework of the working visit to the Republic of France, the meeting of the Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia Suren Papikyan, and the French Minister for the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu took place. At the request of his French colleague, Suren Papikyan presented the situation which was created as a result of the Azerbaijani military aggression of September 13. Sébastien Lecornu reaffirmed the French state’s position regarding the issue, which is, that the Azerbaijani troops should be

as well as Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia Suren Papikyan and the French Minister for the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu, attended the ceremony (Official website of the Prime Minister of the RA, 2024).

withdrawn from the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia. Following the meeting, an agreement was reached that the French Defence Department would send a special delegation to Armenia to get to know the situation on the spot (Official website of the MoD of the RA, 2022).

In the framework of his working visit to France next year, Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, Suren Papikyan, attended the opening ceremony of the “Paris Air Show” at “Le Bourget” on June 19, 2023. He was invited by the French Minister for the Armed Forces, Sébastien Lecornu. Visits to the demonstration pavilions of French defence industry companies and meetings with their leaders are arranged (Official website of the MoD of the RA, 2023a). The following day, Suren Papikyan had a meeting with Sébastien Lecornu. A ceremonial welcome was held for the head of the Defence Agency of the Republic of Armenia, featuring a military band and honor guard. The national anthems of both the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of France were played during the welcoming ceremony. The welcoming ceremony was followed by discussions on the current status of implementation of the arrangements arrived at during the meeting in Paris on September 27 last year. Regional security issues were discussed as well (Official website of the MoD of the RA, 2023b).

Alongside Armenian-French military cooperation, the military ties between Armenian and India, as well as between French and India, are also rapidly advancing. As the result of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s two-day visit to Paris for the 14th July Bastille Day celebrations in 2023, where India was guest of honor, the two countries released a document entitled “Horizon 2047”. This document states that “both countries are also working towards adopting a Roadmap on Defense Industrial Cooperation”. Additionally, it highlights that India “is setting up a Technical Office of the Indian Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) at its Embassy in Paris” in view of the “uptick in defense industrial collaborations” (Mackenzie, 2023). This collaboration is significant not only for India but also for Armenia, given its recent status as the main importer of Indian-produced weapons. Access to new western advanced military technologies, utilized in the development of the military-industrial complex, holds substantial importance for Armenia's defense capabilities*.

The same day, on July 14, 2023, the President of the French Senate, Gerard Larcher, after the meeting with the President of the National Assembly of Armenia, Alen Simonyan in Paris, wrote on his “Twitter” page. “Speed up the supply of defensive weapons by France to Armenia in order to ensure its security” (“Armenpress”, 2023a).

On August 9, 2023, the Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, Suren Papikyan, received the newly appointed Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the French Republic to the Republic of Armenia, Olivier Decottignies, and the newly appointed Defence Attaché, Lieutenant Colonel Arnaud Helly. During the meeting, the sides emphasized the importance of establishing the Defence Attaché office at the French Embassy in Yerevan, which was implemented

* See more in detail in Nazaryan, H. (2023).

within the framework of the agreement reached in September 2022 between Defence Ministers Suren Papikyan and Sébastien Lecornu (Official website of the MoD of the RA, 2023c).

On September 28, 2023, in an interview with “Franceinfo”, French Minister for the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu said. “The President (Emmanuel Macron) said that the integrity, sovereignty, and defense of the Armenian population are an absolute goal for us. I’ve met with Armenia’s Defense Minister several times. Besides, I think I am the first Minister of the Armed Forces who’s had so many contacts with the Armenian partner. We’ve opened a defense mission in Armenia that didn’t exist before, and which allows to have daily dialogue with the Armenian military and Armenian authorities, particularly to examine their needs in case of necessity” (“Armenpress”, 2023b).

During his working visit to the French Republic, Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, Suren Papikyan, visited the Ministry of the Armed Forces of the French Republic on October 23, 2023, where a ceremonial welcome was held with the participation of the Military Band and Guard of Honour. The national anthems of the Republic of Armenia and the French Republic were played. Then, a meeting took place with the French Minister for the Armed Forces, Sébastien Lecornu. During the meeting, various issues related to the Armenian-French cooperation in the field of defence and regional security were discussed. New opportunities for the development of cooperation were outlined, including the acquisition of defence systems, military education, training, exchange of experiences, and other areas of mutual interest. Both sides highly valued the current status of cooperation and expressed readiness to make efforts to further develop it in the future.

Following the official meeting, a joint statement was made to the press, during which the Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia expressed his gratitude to the French side for their comprehensive support to the development of defence cooperation. Afterward, documents on bilateral cooperation were signed at the Ministry of the Armed Forces of France (Official website of the MoD of the RA, 2023d).

Particularly, Armenia signed a contract to buy three Ground Master 200 (GM 200) radars manufactured by Thales Group and another contract with Safran Company for equipment including binoculars and sensors. Additionally, Armenia and France signed a letter of intent to kick off a process to purchasing Mistral air defense systems made by MBDA. Furthermore, during the following months, the French government is preparing to send a French military official to act as a defense consultant for the Armenian executive branch on issues such as armed forces training. France will also provide training to Armenian soldiers and assist Yerevan in auditing Armenia's air defense to identify blind spots (Kayali and Gavin, 2023).

The day after, as part of his working visit to the French Republic, the Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, Suren Papikyan, visited The Senate of the French Republic. During his visit, he held meetings with Senate Vice President Pierre Ouzoulias, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and

Armed Forces Cédric Perrin, and Chairman of the France-Armenia Friendship Group Gilbert-Luc Devinaz. Discussions encompassed topics related to Armenian-French bilateral defence cooperation (Official website of the MoD of the RA, 2023e).

Additionally, Suren Papikyan met with the Chairman of the Commission on National Defence and Armed Forces of the National Assembly of the French Republic, Thomas Gassilloud, and the Chairman of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, Jean-Louis Bourlanges. Conversations focused on issues pertaining to Armenian-French bilateral defence cooperation and regional security. On the same day, Minister Suren Papikyan also visited the “Les Invalides” military rehabilitation and disabled veterans support center, where he got acquainted with the center's activities (Official website of the MoD of the RA, 2023f).

In a short period, on November 9, 2023, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, arrived in the French Republic and met with French President Emmanuel Macron at the Élysée Palace. During the meeting, the Prime Minister emphasized the importance of enhancing Armenian-French cooperation in all fields, including defence. Nikol Pashinyan and Emmanuel Macron exchanged views on regional peace and stability (Official website of the Prime Minister of the RA, 2023).

In December 2023, French senators called on the authorities to explore the possibility of sending 155mm Caesar self-propelled howitzers to Armenia, in addition to the other recently shipped weapons, as outlined in a defense budget bill of the French Senate. The document also mentions that Armenia will receive a total of 50 Arqus Bastion armored personnel carriers. While 24 of these vehicles are already being shipped, the remainder is currently in production (“Armenpress”, 2023c).

In this context, the important fact for Armenia is France’s plan to increase its monthly deliveries of 155mm shells. These deliveries are set to increase from 1,000 per month in January 2023 to 3,000 per month in January 2024, but Nexter Systems Company has raised its production of the Caesar self-propelled howitzers to six per month from two at the start of 2022. Meanwhile, Matra BAE Dynamics Alenia (MBDA) Company has doubled its production of the Mistral short-range surface-to-air missile to 40 per month (Ruitenbergh, 2023). At the same time Thales-owned factory in Limours, which previously produced around 10 radars annually, now aims to produce over 20 per year (Kayali, 2024). The 2022 SIPRI report documented that France has increased its sales by 59 percent over the previous 10 years – more than any other country, and it may be possible that in 2024 France becomes equal to – or surpasses – Russia as the world’s N^o 2 arms exporter (Thompson, 2023).

On February 2, 2024, representatives from the leadership of the Saint-Cyr Military Academy of the Armed Forces of the Republic of France visited the Military Academy named after Vazgen Sargsyan in Yerevan. The guests were presented with detailed information about the structure, activities, and educational programs of the Academy. Discussions were held on matters related to the interaction and cooperation between the two academies. Furthermore, on the same day, in the presence of Deputy Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, Arman Sargsyan, and the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the French Republic to Armenia, Olivier Decotigny, a modernly equipped French classroom was

inaugurated at the Academy. The symbolic act of cutting the red ribbon was jointly performed by a French cadet studying in Armenia and an Armenian cadet set to pursue studies in France, exemplifying the cooperative ties between the two Military Academies (Official website of the MoD of the RA, 2024a).

On February 23, 2024, in the framework of the working visit to the Republic of Armenia, French Minister for the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu and Minister of Defence of the Republic of Armenia Suren Papikyan signed several new agreements on cooperation between the two states in the defense sector (Official website of the MoD of the RA, 2024b). Particularly, during a joint press conference, Sébastien Lecornu announced France's readiness to supply various range Air defense missile systems to Armenia if necessary, emphasizing the importance of training for the development of the Armenian Armed Forces. Under another agreement, Armenian military officers will train in France, including in Saint-Cyr, the French national military academy ("Armenpress", 2024).

The characteristic feature was the fact that French Minister for the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu arrived in the Armenian capital with the representatives of MBDA, Nexter, Arquus, Safran, Thales, and PGM French defense companies. At the same time, it was reported that Armenia also signed a contract to buy assault rifles from the PGM company (Kayali and Gavin, 2024).

Conclusion

Thus, in recent years, the rapid growth of political-economic relations between the Republic of Armenia and the French Republic has significantly contributed to the development of their defense cooperation, particularly in military-technical aspects. Especially, this growth was notable during 2023. That was determined by the fact, that after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Armed Forces, the Russian Federation cannot realize military contracts of supplying armament to Armenia. As a result, being a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Armenia is trying to find other suppliers to recover its heavy losses of military equipment during the 44-Day War. The military-technical cooperation with France creates a possibility for Armenia to get access to western advanced military technologies, which are used in the development of the military-industrial complex of France.

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