SECURITY AND DEFENCE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: ARMENIA AND GEORGIA ON THE EDGE

EVENT REPORT

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Event Description

The South Caucasus have emerged as a geopolitical fulcrum since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, engaging emergent and existing global powers in this complex ethnic and political landscape. Security and defence issues remain paramount since Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, and the conflicts over Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) in 2020 and 2023. Armenia and Georgia, the focus of this workshop, each balance efforts to maintain sovereignty with the realization that regional and global powers—including Turkey, Russia and China— retain significant interest in their territories, resources and populations. Armenia has turned towards the West for military assistance, even if its efforts to pivot from Russia are challenged by legacies of economic and military interdependence. Georgia's government has made a hard turn from Europe and towards Russia, against the wishes of its population. This workshop examined multiple facets of regional security and defence, from military capabilities and alliances to cybersecurity and domestic issues that include food security and climate change.

Introductory Remarks

H.E. Andrew Turner (Canadian Ambassador to Armenia): Andrew Turner serves as Canada's first resident Ambassador to Armenia, representing the country through its inaugural embassy in Yerevan, the first Canadian diplomatic mission in the South Caucasus. Turner emphasized the significance of Canada, despite not being a member of the European Union, joining the EU observer mission in Armenia. This marks a significant milestone in the development of bilateral relations between Canada and Armenia, particularly as Canada's presence in Armenia has grown since 2018. Increased Canadian presence in Armenia is represented by the diplomatic mission in Yerevan, as well as numerous businesses and academics engaging with Armenia. The embassy opened approximately 18 months ago, during a critical time for the region. Ambassador Turner has played an influential role in shaping Canada's diplomatic efforts, notably contributing to the 2020 ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan following the Nagorno Karabakh war.

H.E. Anahit Harutyunyan (Armenian Ambassador to Canada): Ambassador Anahit Harutyunyan addressed the complex geopolitical realities of Armenia and the South Caucasus, a region marked by "persistent tensions and unresolved power conflicts." She emphasized that while processes of peace and security are crucial, achieving them is challenging due to Azerbaijan's actions, which hinder progress. The process of pursuing peace with Azerbaijan is further complicated by domestic concerns surrounding the violation of Armenia's cultural integrity and the impact of unreturned prisoners of war. Harutyunyan highlighted that the desire for peace is not reciprocated, as Azerbaijan, holding the upper hand, remains unreceptive. She stressed the vital role of international diplomacy, particularly from Canada in supporting peace efforts by taking a "resolute stance" by showing support to advocates of democracy. The ambassador noted that the continuous threat from Azerbaijan undermines peace initiatives and called for Azerbaijan to be held accountable by the international community, as it is a "moral and strategic necessity". For Harutyunyan, the role of international actors is not a matter of morality but of necessity to ensure justice and stability in the region.

Panel 1: Regional Security and Defense Issues

Jean-François Ratelle (University of Ottawa) "Conflict Resolution in Eurasia - Armenia/Azerbaijan in Regional Perspective"

Ratelle discussed the challenging prospects for peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, highlighting Armenia's weak negotiating position as a key factor that could further impede negotiations. Ratelle stressed that achieving peace in such a context requires a win-win economic solution, citing historical examples from former Communist countries that demonstrated the importance of economic incentives for peace. He noted that the burden of peace falls almost entirely on Armenia, as Azerbaijan faces no significant external pressure or incentives to engage in peace talks. Ratelle pointed out that crucial issues, such as addressing war trauma, cultural heritage, and Armenian sovereignty, remain neglected, with little international pressure on Azerbaijan to seek justice. Armenia's regional isolation further complicates efforts to establish peace, as there are few international stakeholders to support the peace process or provide diplomatic backing. This isolation leaves Armenia vulnerable and without the leverage needed in negotiations. Ratelle also warned that any peace agreement reached through minimal concessions with Azerbaijan could ultimately undermine Armenia's security, as Azerbaijan faces no significant restraints or sanctions. This imbalance in power risks further compromising Armenia's position. He emphasized the need for external guarantors, particularly from countries like Canada and EU member states, to help curb Azerbaijan's maximalist demands and push for a more balanced peace process. According to Ratelle, the involvement of international frameworks—similar to those seen in the Former Yugoslavia and during the EU accession process—is crucial for fostering peace. These mechanisms, however, are currently absent in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, making it even more difficult to achieve a peaceful resolution that ensures Armenia's security and stability.

Nona Shahnazarian (Institute of Archeology and Ethnography, National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan, Armenia) "A Changing Landscape for Armenia-Russia Relations: A Colonial Legacy"

Shahnazarian examined the shifting dynamics of Armenia-Russia relations, framed within a patron-client relationship that has been characteristic of many former Soviet states. Russia has long used Armenia's security concerns to assert its influence, leveraging Armenia's reliance on Russia for protection and stability. One of the ways Russia capitalized on this relationship was through frozen conflicts, particularly in Nagorno Karabakh, where Russia played a significant role in shaping Armenia's security landscape. This situation led to many Armenians migrating to Russia in search of better economic opportunities and greater security. Russian involvement in Nagorno Karabakh also enabled Moscow to pressure Armenia into joining the Customs Union, despite Armenia's efforts to maintain balanced relations with both the European Economic Area (EEA) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, the 2018 Velvet Revolution marked a significant turning point in Armenia's democratic transition, bringing a positive shift towards greater independence in its foreign policy. Despite this progress, the 2023 Nagorno Karabakh war exposed a stark reality: Armenia could no longer rely on Russia for support, especially following the 2020 ceasefire. Shahnazarian argued that this marked the end of Armenia's trust in Russia, as the latter's role in the peace process was increasingly seen as insufficient. Russia's neo-colonial ambitions became more apparent, with figures like the Siloviki seeking to reassert Soviet-style control over former Soviet states. These actors employed hybrid warfare strategies to undermine the sovereignty and democratic progress of nations like Armenia, revealing a broader regional effort to maintain Russian influence and thwart democratic advancement in the post-Soviet space.

Natia Chankvatadze (Harvard University) "Peacebuilding: Discourses and Practices in Georgia and the South Caucasus"

Chankvatadze examined two contrasting perspectives on peace in the South Caucasus, highlighting that Georgia aligns more with a conflict-based understanding of peace rather than a post-conflict one. In her analysis, Georgia's 2023 peace proposal deviates from established UN peacebuilding approaches, which focus on reconciliation and long-term stability. Chankvatadze argued that a key challenge for peace in Georgia is the disconnect between the top levels of leadership and the middle levels of leadership, which creates a gap in communication between decision-makers and the grassroots. This lack of connection has led to the suppression of civil society, stifling broader engagement in the peace process. A crucial aspect of peacebuilding in Georgia is understanding how ordinary citizens perceive peace in their daily lives, citing everyday indicators for peace from a survey she conducted in 2021. For Georgians, peace is not merely about militaristic security or territorial disputes but about fundamental aspects of everyday life, such as low crime rates, rule of law,

justice, equality, and economic stability. Peace is seen as a broader societal concept that includes social and economic well-being, not just the absence of conflict. In the Georgian context, the peace process does not focus on border reunification or resolving the conflict with Ossetia, but on ensuring societal stability and fairness. Chankvatadze also pointed out that the Georgian Dream political party has framed its platform around promoting peace and the status quo, contrasting Georgia's relative peace and stability with the devastating effects of war in Ukraine. The party's narrative emphasizes the horrific destruction in Ukraine, positioning Georgia as a model of peace amidst regional turmoil. This framing reflects the Georgian preference for maintaining peace through stability rather than engaging in further conflict.

Panel 2: Politics and Security

David Sichinava (Carleton University) "Setting Sail in Uncharted Waters? Georgia's Domestic Political Trajectories After the 2024 Parliamentary Elections"

Sichinava unpacked Georgia's domestic political trajectories following October's 2024 parliamentary elections, drawing attention to the broader contexts and issues often overlooked. Sichinava emphasized a shift in the Georgian Dream party following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as the ruling party has taken a more authoritarian and anti-western stance. Despite the war creating opportunities for Georgian-EU ascension, Georgian Dream has taken measures to pursue EU ascension while simultaneously undermining integration. The actions of the Georgian Dream have resulted in the freezing of negotiations between the EU and Georgia in November. Societally, this shift can be seen in the Georgian Dream's increasing censorship of local media, laundering of illicit funds, constraining civil society, increasing authoritarianism and utilization of populist tactics. Sichinava emphasized the importance of recognizing grass-roots efforts and agency in the protests, as Western media has consistently focused on foreign actors' involvement. Georgian Dream's response to the protests emulates levels of crackdown seen in Russia, arresting 500 protestors (a number proportionally higher than in Russia) and issuing fines up to 7700₾ ($4000 CAD). Looking forward, Sichinava proposed potential two outcomes. First, the Georgian Dream could be pressured to make reforms and hold new elections, specifically in the form of Western-imposed sanctions. Signs of this fear can be seen in Georgian President Mikheil Kavelashvili's return of offshore assets to Georgia. The second scenario would have Georgia diversifying its international relations and maintaining authoritarian behaviour. The UAE has promised 6 billion dollars, emphasizing Georgia's interest in allying itself with authoritarian regimes. Other non-Western alliances could further incentivize them to distance themselves from the West, and also from democratic reform. To conclude, Georgian Dream's willingness to concede to opposition following elections remains uncertain, and much of the future will depend on local initiatives and whether civil society can force reform out of the ruling party.

Ella Bennett (Carleton University) "Crossroads of Contention: The Zangezur Corridor's Role in Regional Security and Stability"

Bennett reported on the contentious situation surrounding the Zangezur Corridor, and its impacts on regional security and stability. Negotiating a sustainable and equitable agreement has been extremely difficult, as both Armenia, Azerbaijan, and outside powers have conflicting interests, in addition to pre-existing conflicts and power imbalances. Azerbaijan has demanded unimpeded access without Armenian checkpoints. Its external ties with Turkey and advantageous economic position enable Azerbaijan to hold an uncompromising stance, only offering the opening of its borders should the corridor be constructed on its terms. Disadvantageously, if the corridor were opened on these terms, it would cut Armenia off from Iran. Armenia views these demands as Azerbaijan's further cultural and economic expansion and is in a contentious position economically, and militarily (especially after its recent departure from CSTO). Bennet outlined three possible scenarios for the negotiations on this corridor. The first would be a continuation of the status quo, potentially leading to further flare-ups and diplomatic tensions. This scenario would impede any long-term solutions from taking place, risking immediate escalations of conflicts. In the second scenario, Azerbaijan would establish control of the territory through force, as they "hold all of the cards" economically and militarily. In this case, Armenia would likely not open its borders, would be cut off from Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Iran, and would be forced to rely on Georgia. In the third scenario, a formal agreement with compromises on respective demands would take place. Bennet emphasizes the need for Western mediation in this scenario. Her recommendations for Armenia are: continued strengthening of relationships with Western countries (and acquiring knowledge and expertise on improving bilateral relationships); promoting normalization between Armenia and Azerbaijan (to be encouraged by Turkey, and achieved through shared control and customs exemptions); and a commitment to diplomacy and de-escalations, though this can be difficult with authoritarianism in Azerbaijan and a lack of involvement of international institutions to place pressure.

Margarita Tadevosyan (George Mason University) "Navigating Loss: Armenia's Domestic Challenges after Nagorno-Karabakh"

Tadevosyan unpacked the domestic impacts of the Nagorno-Karabakh war on Armenia and offered alternative ways to consider sovereignty and security given these domestic challenges. Nagorno-Karabakh held significant symbolic and practical importance to Armenia, and its loss created a profound identity crisis and a sense of imminent stress across the population. Research has shown that people view this loss in both symbolic and existential terms, in addition to widespread disillusionment stemming from decreasing levels of trust in the government and a sense of betrayal from the international community. Debates surrounding the 2020 war in Armenian society indicate that many believe that the war was unavoidable and view it as a chapter for building peace, whereas others view the defeat as a national humiliation.

As a result of the conflict, Armenia bears the economic burden of hosting 100,000 refugees, negatively impacting employment, housing and healthcare, leading to further issues with social cohesion. Refugees and Armenian residents alike have little social support and face the constant threat of security. Russia has not been a reliable partner in offering peacekeeping support, though new partnerships with Western allies present opportunities, and also challenges, for further initiatives to pursue stability and peace. Drawing the listener's attention to definitions, Tadevosyan offered a new conceptualization of the term sovereignty, viewing it in terms of economic self-sufficiency, resilience against external coercion, and power asymmetries in the region. This reframing challenges notions of sovereignty by suggesting more fluid concepts of governance and security that go beyond just protecting security. The concept of security can also be expanded to include not only military and defence elements, but social, economic and health dimensions. Issues like scarce housing and a lack of stable livelihoods can broaden the scope of what needs to be protected under the framing of security. On the subject of citizenship to the displaced, Tadevosyan highlights the need for a strong political will, and strong international initiatives, with these conditions present in other regions with similar challenges. Lastly, Tadevosyan emphasizes the need for the Armenian government to engage directly with the local population and not dismiss disillusionment, in addition to building a coherent idea of peace and a narrative of social cohesion. Through relationships with Canada and the US, this initiative could be improved by humanitarian support, cybersecurity infrastructure and training, and supporting government initiatives to build a new narrative.

Panel 3 Broader Security Issues and Canada's Role

Samvel Minasyan (SecDev, Ottawa) "Cybersecurity Challenges in Armenia and the Caucasus"

Minasyan outlined Armenia's current cybersecurity challenges, offering solutions to improving its cybersecurity resilience amidst frequent cyber-attacks aimed to influence and destabilize the Armenian population and its institutions. Minasyan drew attention to the importance of protecting digital information and the systems that store it, as it has drastic implications for the trade and energy sectors (especially regarding the potential Zangezur corridor). In the South Caucasus, two-thirds of the population use the internet, and a lack of public awareness and adequate defence makes Armenia vulnerable to cybercrime groups that actively and continuously target its key sectors. These attacks are perpetrated in the form of surveillance, hacking, implants and spyware, and are inflicted by state-sponsored groups that seek to influence Armenia's politics and economy by changing public perceptions through propaganda. Attacks against Armenia have been increasing since 2015 with assaults against infrastructure, the economy, and energy sectors, coinciding with major geopolitical events. Despite Armenia's efforts to develop cybersecurity resilience, it has severe limitations. Armenia

does not possess an official strategy, contingency plans, centralization, or an adequate workforce. Minasyan suggested that Armenia seek developmental aid from the international community to obtain cyber tools, training, public awareness, educational resources, and improved cybersecurity processes and procedures to protect Armenia's assets. He urges the Armenian government to seek help from the private sector for this purpose, as other states have sought similar agreements with private companies to improve cybersecurity resilience.

Elza Stepanyan (Consultant) "Food Security in Armenia"

Stepanyan spoke on the challenges surrounding Armenian food security that are increasingly exacerbated by climate change. In Armenia, as in all other nations, food security is influenced by economic, social, and environmental factors. However, in Armenia, 35% of the nation's rural population depends directly on agriculture for income. Stepanyan identified four critical gaps in policy and sectoral challenges which hinder the implementation of sustainable agricultural techniques. First is Armenia's dependency on agriculture, accounting for 12% of the nation's GDP, and 30% of the population finding employment in the agriculture industry. Changing climate conditions and intensifying weather have problematized Armenia's small-scale model of agricultural production which still utilizes traditional farming practices. Further challenges presented by climate change are Armenia's reliance upon irrigation, unequal access to irrigation infrastructure, and water shortages, which all pose challenges to the food security of the semi-arid nation. According to the Armenian Ministry of Environment, rising temperatures and water scarcity threaten food availability and affordability with negative impacts on crop yields and livestock herds. These challenges necessitate the development of more effective food production processes such as crop diversity, efficient irrigation, and improved farming techniques. Armenia's lack of an agricultural policy framework necessitates the development of strategic policies to develop infrastructure, provide financial incentives, and develop market integration. Canada, as a global leader in sustainable agriculture, can play a critical role in assisting Armenia develop its food security. By sharing "best practices" for agricultural production, building capacity through knowledge sharing and training, collaborating on research and innovation, and the provision of financial and technical support, Canada can play a pivotal role in fostering long-term resilience and sustainable growth in Armenia's food security sector.

Jeff Sahadeo (Carleton University) "Closing Remarks"

To conclude the event, Sahadeo emphasized the need to address the issues discussed in the panels during this critical time and close relationships between Canada and Armenia, largely through its diaspora. Sahadeo stressed the influential role that Canada can play amidst the unpredictability of the United States and its recent conduct in foreign affairs. Canadian government statements of support, especially on the protection of cultural heritage and the return of prisoners in Armenia, could be an

effective sign of support. Sanctions against government actors in Georgia who have unleashed violence on their own citizens would also be important. Sahadeo concluded by thanking the speakers and attendees, commenting on the tremendous resilience of populations in the South Caucasus, the growing relationship with Canada, and the increasing research interest in the region.