

From Ter-Petrossian to Kocharian: Explaining Continuity in Armenian Foreign Policy, 1991–2003

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Abstract: This article is a study of Armenian foreign policy since independence, as a major component and requirement of national sovereignty. I argue that despite the replacement of the first administration by its opponents in 1998, the most relevant characteristic of foreign policy is continuity rather than change. In terms of political science approach, foreign policy is studied both in terms of international relations of the young republic and of the main actors responsible for it. The combination of these two approaches allows us to understand both the *raisons d'Etat* and the internal actors that explain continuity, although the brevity and novelty of the present study requires more extensive research. While the description of Armenian foreign policy has often been reviewed, the decision-making process and political elites related to it are practically uncharted territory.

Key words: actors, continuity/change, decision making, Diaspora, foreign policy, ideology, institutions, internal politics, leadership, military, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict/issue, political elites, security

Although foreign policy seems somewhat beyond the “democratization” and “liberalization” (*leitmotiv*) present in the addresses made to the Newly Independent States (NIS), it is actually a relevant observation in studying the evolution of the republics. Foreign policy is situated at the crossroads of development, regional stability, and globalization. Since gaining independence, the Republic of Armenia has been trying hard to impose its sovereignty on the definition of foreign policy.

This brief research is based on two political science approaches, usually disjointed. On one hand, foreign policy is studied in its content, in terms of interna-

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tional relations, focusing on the role of the state.¹ On the other, it is explained through its functions, which means focusing on the building of internal politics and actors engaged in this process. While the description of Armenian foreign policy has often been reviewed, the decision-making process related to it is practically uncharted territory. This article is not intended to completely cover the decision-making process; rather they are intended to outline its significance. This has a two-fold advantage: First, it provides a method for studying micro-foreign policy which, in the case of a small and constrained state as Armenia, is more often than not seen through the interests of external and more powerful states. Second, focusing on the actors and institutions of foreign policy permits emphasizing the link between the choices made and the internal forces determining them.

During the first years of independence, Armenia was regarded as the only stable state in the South Caucasus. Levon Ter-Petrossian, who joined the Karabakh Committee in May 1988, soon appeared as the leader who, entrusted by the will of the majority, was taking Armenia toward independence. This became a reality three and a half years later after an exemplary constitutional process. The Armenian National Movement (HHSh), a coalition succeeded the Karabakh Committee, ran the country for a decade and laid the foundation of the Armenian state. Reelected in 1996, Ter-Petrossian was forced to resign in 1998. The prime minister, Robert Kocharian, replaced him as president. For most observers this change of leadership has meant a change in foreign policy. Thus, they adopted a void rhetoric that usually overrides internal crises, such as the one that led to Ter-Petrossian's resignation. Nevertheless, continuity, surprisingly, has been the prime feature of foreign policy between 1991 and 2003. Although nuances do exist, the questions of classical foreign policy—defense, alliances and definition of priorities—have remained unchanged. This is due to a lack of choice, given the unchanging nature of the main issues facing Armenia and the caution of decision makers, rather than to a long-term political vision. The government's lack of accomplishment in domestic affairs, along with the lack of capital in Armenia, limits the scope of Armenia's foreign policy.

A change in leadership has no impact on the conditions in which foreign policy is implemented. On the contrary, it is foreign policy that weighs more on Armenia's internal politics. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which has been at the center of foreign policy since independence and in the minds of all Armenians since the late 1980s, has been a major determinant in the formulation of foreign policy. To a certain extent, the Karabakh issue is linked with every other item on the agenda, conferring on it this main feature: the security priority. The consequences of this particular foreign policy question weighed substantially on the new administration. But this change resembles a substitution more than an alternation. The two kinds of elites, though different in personality and image (the military versus the intellectual, the manager versus the charismatic leader), share an ideological proximity. The second Armenian administration, whose members were allies of the first government before opposing it, has been running Armenia since 1998. This article takes two approaches regarding the continuity of foreign policy: First, the continuity of its orientation from the angle of the main deter-

minants directing it. Second, it is an attempt to demonstrate a link between the continuity in the orientations and circulation of the elites.

Security, the Key Requisite of Armenian Foreign Relations

Descriptions of the relations Armenia has established with the various entities involved in its foreign policy—neighboring states, regional powers, and international organizations—have already been covered in various papers. Therefore, what should be emphasized is the main factor connecting Armenia to all of them—the need to secure its sovereignty and people. Obviously, the smaller a country, the more vulnerable and the more constrained its decision makers. Since Armenia gained independence, permanence and stability have been the predominant factors of foreign policy choices. A topic that has also been widely discussed is the weight of geography and history on Armenian politics. For this reason, this article will approach this topic only as far as security is concerned.² Geography, history, and current events, namely the Karabakh issue, are all factors that determine foreign policy. First and foremost, Armenian foreign policy aims to secure the survival of its territory and population. “Armenia’s perception of its own security, or rather its perceived threats to its security, its geographic position and long history have greatly contributed to a desire to define security needs in terms which take into account very carefully the behavior and the intentions of immediate neighbors.”³

The core of Armenian policy is Nagorno-Karabakh, first as a claim, then as a conflict, and finally as a no war, no peace area. The period from 1987 to 1990 was defined by a struggle for sovereignty between the center, Moscow, and some of the republics under its control. In Armenia, the Karabakh issue, which turned the political-territorial question into a test of perestroika and democratization, conveyed this struggle. As it became obvious that perestroika and democratization were failing the test in Armenia and Karabakh, as Russia was neither willing to repair the damage caused by central authorities against the Armenians in Karabakh, nor guarantee the physical security of Armenians in Azerbaijan, Yerevan became determined to gain sovereignty and not concede anything on the Karabakh issue that could put its population under physical threat. A month before he was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Levon Ter-Petrossian told the Parisian daily *Haratch* that his main goal was the reunification of Armenia and Karabakh.⁴ Unlike the other Soviet republics, the foundation of a sovereign Armenia relied on the Karabakh movement and the ensuing conflict, and not on the struggle against communism or the expression of a new national identity.

As early as 1992–1993, threats and security guarantees were features of all the ex-Soviet republics. This was especially true in Armenia, with its delicate geographic situation and war with Azerbaijan.⁵ One term describes Armenia’s foreign policy between 1992 and 1994: Nagorno-Karabakh. It comes as no surprise that the conflicting parties very quickly attempted to create their own national armies; although several factors contributed toward the weakening of this attempt in Azerbaijan, the army in Armenia was the first state apparatus set up successfully. Even

though Armenia was one of the poorest countries of the ex-Soviet Union, it was able to lay the foundation for a national army within a few months, confirming that the building of statehood was underway. In 1990, various self-defense groups, formed in the wake of the anti-Armenian pogroms in Azerbaijan and the violence against a handful of Armenian villages in Nagorno-Karabakh, were either dismissed or placed under the government's control. The best elements of these "fedayi"-style battalions were merged to form the base of the national army. After Armenia signed the Collective Security Treaty of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1992, many Armenian officers, who served in the Soviet army, volunteered in Armenia. Before long, the HHS succeeded in creating a strong state apparatus, monopolizing economic and national resources. In 1996, the total number of soldiers in the army totaled as many as sixty thousand. Once elected, Robert Kocharian emphasized the importance of this army by stating that, "The strength of Armenia also assumes a strong security system with an efficient and disciplined army. The best guarantee for the maintenance of peace in the region is the balance of powers (i.e., between Armenia and Azerbaijan). Our army should first of all serve that goal."⁶ The need for a strong army is well understood by the population, even when more than a decade of cease-fire and deep-rooted discontent toward the authorities have increased the number of abstentions from military service. The Russian military alliance and the national army were the only guarantors of a fragile security; so fragile that Levon Ter-Petrossian, following his realist and pragmatist principles, rapidly lessened his ambitions toward Nagorno-Karabakh. In an interview with the Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet* in June 1992, Ter-Petrossian declared that his main goal in the region was the physical security of Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenians, mentioning neither independence nor reunification. This *mezzo voce* position seemed reasonable a few weeks after Shushi and Lachin were seized by Armenian forces, and in light of the internal political situation in Azerbaijan. When Ebulfez Elçibey came to power in Baku, he directly threatened Armenia, which gave a new dimension to Nagorno-Karabakh's security issue. From then on, the need for security, both in Armenia and Karabakh, became the focal point of the Armenian defense system. For this reason, Armenia reacted ambiguously to the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) resolutions.⁷ It verbally condemned the advances of Armenian forces outside the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh proper. Armenia, however, did not obey the resolutions passed by the UNSC, and it continued to seize new lands while maintaining its position on Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia and Karabakh sought to protect themselves from Azeri bombings by creating a buffer zone around Nagorno Karabakh, while waiting for a settlement on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the territories in the buffer zone under Armenian control. This does not, however, include the Lachin corridor and the Kelbajar district, which are no less than a question of life and death for Karabakh and Armenia. In October 1997, Vazgen Sargsian, minister of defense, once again stated, "The existence of Armenia and Artsakh⁸ is impossible without Shushi and Lachin. When the Azeri people begin talking about Shushi and Lachin, we must stop negotiating. No concession is possible, only compromise."⁹

The need for a security system at any cost has led Armenia to seek Russia's protection, despite some suspicion toward it and the desire to lessen ties with Moscow. Because Armeno-Russian relations have been widely discussed in Armenian foreign policy, brevity on this matter will suffice. An important factor weighing on Armenia's decision to distance itself from Moscow and to reconsider its relations with other countries, primarily with Turkey,¹⁰ was the attitude of Moscow toward the Armenians in Karabakh, Azerbaijan, and Armenia from 1988 to 1991. The belief that Russian rule was a necessary protection against the Turkish threat¹¹ was seriously damaged due to the non-intervention of the Soviet Army during the Sumgait pogroms. It disintegrated when it became clear that Soviet troops had helped Azeri

OMONs cleanse several Armenian villages in Karabakh and at the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹² This situation reversed when, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became involved in cease-fire negotiations, this time on a governmental basis. Moreover, the cordial relations between Russian president Boris Yeltsin and

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his Armenian counterpart improved relations between the two countries. The convergence of interests between them was soon expressed in the bilateral Treaty of Friendship signed in 1991, which, for the first time, recognized the de jure equality and sovereignty of the “little brother” in Russo-Armenian history. Armenia's military dependence on Russia began as early as 1992, with the capture of Shushi, and has been growing ever since. From the Collective Security Treaty, signed in May 1992, to the 1997 bilateral Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, Ter-Petrossian's administration tried to create a security alliance guaranteeing Armenia's protection.¹³ This dependence was reinforced by extensive Russian involvement in the Armenian economy during the Kocharian administration.¹⁴ The double blockade of Armenia, by Azerbaijan, since 1991, and Turkey, since 1993, and the status quo of relations between Armenia and Turkey left Armenia with no choice but to shift toward Russia. Nevertheless, Armenia's leaders were well aware that an exclusive alliance with Russia would be far too risky, thus they have always been eager to establish equal relations with all (regional) powers. Whether they succeed is another question.

External Factors Conditioning Internal Politics: Change in Continuity

Armenia's internal political climate—its most heated debates, or, more unexpectedly, the circulation of its elites—is centered on Nagorno-Karabakh. As a recurring source of political legitimacy, Karabakh is the main issue of political dialogue as well as the main factor that dictates political orientations. Besides the above mentioned external factors, it is assumed that a series of internal factors also

explain the continuity of foreign policy. The internal factors may be defined as the leaders' intellectual categories, their political vision, and the continuity of the elites in determining foreign policy.

Not much remains of the so-called ideological rupture between Ter-Petrosian and Kocharian when we move from theory to practice. However, this does not mean that they share the same political vision of Armenia's position on the international scene, of its history, or of its future. This merely means that as far as Ter-Petrosian claimed not to adhere to a national ideology (or rather that his only ideology was realism and pragmatism,) Kocharian's foreign policy, admittedly or not, follows the same line. The reason for such behavior is simple: a lack of choice. In fact, the current leadership experienced what the previous one had realized, that for today's Armenia there is no alternative to realism. In spite of the hyperbolic rhetoric accompanying the opposition to Ter-Petrosian between late 1997 and early 1998, particularly on the Karabakh issue, neither a new ideology nor an alternative program was implemented. In concrete terms, the result is that both teams have refused to impose any ideological constraints on an already quite constrained foreign policy.

From the very beginning, the HSh chose not to mix historical representations, memory, and politics, because it wanted realism to be the only angle from which to consider Armenia's national interests. National interests, the values and goals determined by political powers, have been defined in Armenia in a way that is consistent with its abilities. When using this definition of national interests, the limits of Armenia's abilities in international relations and the *sine qua non* status of certain issues, primarily the Karabakh issue, are clearly apparent. The constraints that weigh on the country, and the external factors that limit the choices and negotiating capital of its decision makers, have led to a definition of national interest by default, as not what is most beneficial to the nation but what is the least harmful; not "a choice between good and bad, but rather between bad and worse."¹⁵ The need for security as the defining factor of foreign policy has already been underlined. This need has never been more vital than with the Karabakh issue. At its lowest denominator, this equates to achieving a solution that secures the physical survival of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

From the outset of the Karabakh movement, political unity was formed around a cause that presented no alternative. It may be called political because it was, according to Carl Schmitt's definition of politics, "a rally formed with a test of strength in mind."¹⁶ Schmitt argues, "the concept of statehood presupposes the concept of politics;" moreover, it can be said that the realization of these concepts follows the same order. Given that the struggle for political sovereignty had already been underway since 1988, 1991 was actually the beginning of the building of a sovereign Armenia. HSh won the hearts of Armenians by crystallizing the national cause of Nagorno-Karabakh, thus forming Armenia's political unity. In other words, the "center of decision which commands the distinction between friend and foe, sovereign in this way (and not in some absolutist way)."¹⁷ We assume the following hypothesis regarding the building of statehood in Armenia: the stability of the Armenian state in the first half of the 1990s, as well as the

rapid laying of its foundations (an exception in the South Caucasus), could be linked to the strong political character of the state, “which founds its unity, making it the determining unit, the center of decision.”¹⁸ At the beginning of the independence movement, the following question was raised: can an independent Armenian state exist? Is it possible that the two traumatic experiences of the beginning of the century—the genocide and the aborted 1918–1920 Republic—would not be repeated? For this reason, at the rebirth of Armenian statehood, there was, embodied in the national cause of Karabakh, the will to exist. This, in turn, founded the political organization proper, the only organization having the right, for the sake of its existence, to ask its members to defend itself against the enemy, to kill the enemy.¹⁹

A recurring link exists between the various traumatic events perceived as threatening to national existence, the 1915 genocide, the pogroms from 1988 to 1990, and the attempted cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh’s Armenian population from 1989 to 1990. This, in part, explains Armenia’s political determination not to concede anything beyond the right to live in regards to the Karabakh question. This symbolic link is translated into political discourse and actions; the link concerns questions of the genocide, and the Karabakh Armenians right to self-determination and self-defense. History is partly subject to revision, so long as this discourse reflects an Armenian perception of the events taking place in the late 1980s, as it aims to provide maximum rhetorical strength to decision makers’ political arguments on the Karabakh question. Ter-Petrosian is no exception. Despite his dislike of national propaganda, he stated, “Our attachment to self-determination must not be interpreted as a nationalist view, instead it reflects our clarity. This is because in the case of the proposed solution (following the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Lisbon Summit in December 1996) the risk of genocide would constantly hang over us, like Damocles’ sword, over the heads of Nagorno-Karabakh’s Armenians. The Armenian people have already been victims of genocide, they will not tolerate a second.”²⁰ However, we must remember that this discourse is not used in determining the political strategy of Armenian decision makers. Therefore, one cannot oppose the first administration for allegedly forgetting the genocide and abandoning Karabakh—as it was indeed accused—and the second one for allegedly struggling for genocide recognition and taking a hard line on the Karabakh issue. Not only facts stand against this primitive vision; there are also symbolic categories that structure the leaders’ way of thinking. What can be said of those opposing Ter-Petrosian is that they could hardly suggest an alternative, at least in the domain of foreign policy. During the internal battle in the fall of 1997, many things were criticized—such as the weakness of the anti-corruption struggle, democracy, or economic recovery—but very few have actually changed. As for the issue bearing the harshest critics, the resolution of the conflict, no new proposal has actually been implemented. The Karabakh cause alone was the unifying factor of the opposition between 1997 and 1998, as it provided moral legitimacy to those whose political struggle was founded on it. For a few months, an actual propaganda war took place. The accusation of abandoning Karabakh goes against all the steps taken by Ter-Petrosian’s

administration since 1991. The opposition's agenda was nothing more than an ad-hoc reaction, championing the exact opposite of all the issues that had caused Ter-Petrosian's loss of popularity, such as improving relations with parts of the diaspora at odds with Ter-Petrosian. In the long run, however, little difference appeared other than a more confused rhetorical stance on delicate issues, particularly the genocide issue and relations with Turkey. In other words, although words change, actions roughly follow the same line. Between 1997 and 1998, in an attempt to avoid larger issues, the opposition focused on two points: the attitude of the government toward the diaspora, judged counterproductive, and agreement on the step-by-step approach to the Karabakh negotiation process. There is a gap between the rhetoric and action of the opposition between November 1997 and February 1998, as a shift in their discussions occurred after coming to power.

The discourse toward the diaspora may well be the one that changed the most, notably on the genocide issue, traditionally the touchiest issue for the diaspora. The current government's public discourse is indeed more offensive than the previous administration, but two important nuances must be taken into account. Undoubtedly, not all of the diaspora was at odds with Ter-Petrosian's stance on the genocide issue and not formulating foreign policy on an emotional or historical basis, even if its stance took some time to be understood. The main opposition group against Ter-Petrosian in the diaspora was the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (HHF).²¹ One may think that this opposition had as much to do with the political struggle in Armenia as with a moral disagreement. The perceived difference between the two public discourses toward the diaspora did not lead to an ideological difference. Nothing in the acts of the new administration concerning the diaspora advocated a new vision for it. While Ter-Petrosian was brutally realistic, refusing to espouse "national romanticism," Kocharian has advanced cautiously on the most sensitive topics. This has led to different priorities in Armenian foreign policy. The two administrations have always intended to gather the economic and political strength of the diaspora to make it work efficiently for the government. The government is the sole entity that defines national interests and formulates strategies to pursue them. The current administration took the initiative of hosting several large-scale pan-Armenian gatherings, which have certainly contributed to a better work atmosphere between the two groups. However, this never affected foreign policy. On one hand, the actual conditions and needs of Armenia require *realpolitik*; on the other, subjective factors, such as history or (national) ideology, are the only policy left for the diaspora. We know that Armenia has tried to minimize those subjective factors. Whether the challenge was too demanding, a failure, or if it was impossible given the overwhelming Karabakh issue, are questions that cannot be answered in this article. However, concerning the diaspora, the dilemma Armenia is confronted with is transparent: how does the government accommodate the expectations of the diaspora, which contributes greatly to the development of the country, without being constrained in defining national interests?

Between the two administrations, the method of resolving this dilemma may have varied, but neither the stakes nor the elements of the dilemma did. Being

physically and psychologically far from Armenia, the diaspora cannot grasp national interests in the same way decision makers in Armenia can. Three major topics of Armenian foreign policy are used to provoke reactions in the diaspora: relations with Turkey, genocide recognition, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The political acts of the diaspora are guided by two principles: security and identity, which may compete, according to the goals of the government. In the Armenian case, as in other diasporas, one can note that when security concerns are at their highest, as they were during the years of open conflict, the diaspora will also put them first. Indeed, as a matter of life and death, the struggle against disappearance is the very foundation of the diaspora. When the threat is perceived as less urgent, the concern for identity usually takes precedence. Hence the many debates that have moved the diaspora since 1994, with regard to the government's lack of consideration for the genocide recognition campaign, the main public struggle in the diaspora. It seems that for the diaspora, the identity and security stakes of national interest are proportionally opposite in comparison to the government. For instance, the Karabakh conflict has more symbolic significance, because it is linked to the loss of territories due to the genocide. A very simple reason for this is that except for a handful of impassioned volunteers, no Armenian in the diaspora suffered physically from the conflict, but there is hardly one native Armenia who did not suffer from it, at least indirectly. Therefore, even if the Armenian people can be nothing less than emotionally invested in the Karabakh issue, the decision makers must deal with it as a major foreign policy question, which must be discussed and solved with Azerbaijan. In addition, many foreign actors are involved in this issue, or indirectly related issues—i.e., Caspian oil—such as France, Russia, and the United States, the three co-chairs of the Minsk Group. By choosing not to allow the diaspora to interfere in defining foreign policy, the government's position regarding the diaspora becomes quite clear: the diaspora is a full-fledged part of the nation, but not of the state. Despite the differences between Armenia and the diaspora, one important fact remains. The evolution of the diaspora's involvement in Armenia demonstrates that national security issues give the diaspora political capital. Eventually, the integrity of Armenia will be the most important factor for Armenians, regardless of where they live. The primary task of the first administration was to assure the existence of the Armenian state, and provide it with adequate tools in a difficult environment. The second administration, though benefiting from the deeds of its predecessor, cannot make room for the wishes of the diaspora, except in the discourse, while maintaining identical national interests. A part of the diaspora hastily rejoiced when Kocharian replaced Ter-Petrossian. The former has indeed adopted a more consensual discourse, and spares no occasion to attract the diaspora to Armenia, but has refrained from compromising national interests as defined by the Ter-Petrossian administration. Hence, Armenia still openly seeks the normalization of relations with Turkey without preconditions. Thus, the same objection is still occasionally heard in the diaspora with regard to the struggle for genocide recognition. But, be it that the diaspora has accepted the political stance of the government, or that it is lured by the symbolically charged rhetoric of the current administration, there is no

strong criticism of Kocharian on the issue. Kocharian has played on his Karabakhi origin to embody the various elements of a single nation: Karabakh-Armenia-Diaspora. During the 1998 presidential campaign, he presented himself as the bridge between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. He then wished to extend this symbolism to encompass Armenians all over the world, to have them involved in the strengthening of Armenian statehood.

A major change cannot be seen either regarding the second issue pointed out by the opposition, the Karabakh issue. Nagorno-Karabakh has been a national cause in Armenia, but without “the politics of heroics.”²² From 1988 to 1998, the Karabakh issue was at the core of political legitimacy. No ruling team can

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avoid an international commitment to Nagorno-Karabakh, or make any political moves at the cost of Karabakh’s security. Could the HSh not have supported Karabakh in the war against Azerbaijan once they were elected in 1990? Not at the risk of major internal destabilization; the HSh has always claimed that stepping out of

the Soviet Union without internal upheaval was one of its major objectives and achievements. From the point of view of security, the swift connection established between the defense systems of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia makes the separation of the latter from the former almost impossible. Without Nagorno-Karabakh (including at least the Lachin corridor and probably the Kelbajar area) the southern region of Armenia would be under constant threat. Due to obvious psychological and emotional reasons,²³ “the cause was sacred and non-negotiable.”²⁴ From an ideological point of view, the line between a national cause and a nationalist cause is thin. Whether such a distinction is accurate in a political sense is not the issue here; it is important to note that the Armenian leaders created a barrier between the two and refused to deal with the Karabakh question as a nationalist issue. Even after exploiting the accusation of “treason” against Ter-Petrossian in regard to Karabakh, the 1997 opposition did not change the treatment of the Karabakh issue in foreign policy. The Karabakh question has never dictated foreign policy choices, although it interferes in Armenia’s international relations to a great extent. For instance, Turkey imposed as a precondition to diplomatic relations with Armenia that decisive steps must be taken in the Karabakh resolution process. But one could hardly imagine Armenia’s decision makers following a policy of alliance according to each country’s stance on the Karabakh issue, while the economic stakes of the Caucasus region make it highly improbable that anyone involved favors the people’s right to self-determination. Karabakh is no less than the decisive security issue of Armenia, a matter on which it has “no right to make mistakes.”²⁵ Since the beginning of the con-

flict, Armenia has claimed that any solution guaranteeing the security of Karabakh's Armenians would be an acceptable basis of negotiations. Armenia has regularly called for a solution based on mutual concessions, acceptable to all parties, but first of all to Karabakh. The second principle of the resolution process is that it must be accompanied by international organizations within the OSCE Minsk Group. Whatever the final solution, it must allow "the Karabakh people to live in security and to enjoy normal economic development."²⁶ Following the cease-fire, a round of direct negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan took place. One major problem remained: Karabakh was not directly participating in the discussions. Armenia repeatedly claimed that it would never sign a document Karabakh did not agree with, and called on Azerbaijan to talk directly with the elected representatives of Karabakh. But in Azerbaijan's view, engaging in direct discussions with the representatives of Karabakh would mean admitting that the region has a status other than that of a mere region within the Azerbaijani state, and on this ground has constantly refused to engage in discussions with them.

The internal opposition that was raging against Ter-Petrosian during the fall and winter of 1997–1998, which led to the president's resignation in February 1998, made public a disagreement over the method of negotiations.²⁷ It seems this was much ado about nothing. Interim president, Robert Kocharian, promptly reaffirmed Armenia's commitment to the 1994 cease-fire and to a negotiated solution. Those same parties who based their legitimacy on an allegedly different way to resolve the question have actually followed the principles of the previous administration. As soon as he was elected, Kocharian dealt with the Karabakh issue in two sentences: "The Nagorno-Karabakh issue is a national issue, and we have to settle it with dignity. Proceeding from the principles of peaceful resolution, we should achieve the international recognition of the Karabakh people's right to self-determination, ensuring its development within safe frontiers and the permanent geographic connection with Armenia."²⁸ This is hardly a more intransigent line than that of the previous administration. Armenia does not want Nagorno-Karabakh to return under Baku's control, but cannot move further toward this within a peaceful negotiation process. Therefore, the actors make little difference here. Pragmatism remains a key feature of the second administration, the difference being that in one case pragmatism was an intellectual posture. In the other case, it is the result of concerns focused mainly on the interests of Karabakh. So how is it that Kocharian is not accused of treason when he follows roughly the same line as Ter-Petrosian? The answer is that Kocharian, at least in his first years in office, enjoyed symbolic legitimacy both as an Armenian from Karabakh, and as a major actor in the building of Karabakh's self-defense forces. Also, it seems that no political party today has the strength the 1997 opposition had, which was an opposition from within the administration. Moreover, it might be that Karabakh is no longer at the forefront of political legitimacy. Given the lack of progress in the negotiating process and new options, Armenians have refocused their expectations on the classical fields of domestic affairs, such as the economy and social welfare, for which, it must be said, no party has a coherent policy.

The priority given to security, determined by the Karabakh conflict, soon led members of the HHS to share decision making with the military. Tensions flared in the Armenian political system. While the Karabakh issue was becoming one question among many on the foreign policy agenda, the internal political structure responsible for foreign policy became increasingly linked with Karabakh. Concerning foreign policy, one can see two competing streams explaining the current features of institutions and actors. The first stream concerns foreign policy actors in a narrow sense of the term—presidential advisors in foreign affairs under Ter-Petrosian's administration who played a significant role, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These institutions work with numerous diplomats and Western experts. The second stream brought late partisans of the HHS, mostly those close to military circles and from Karabakh, to key posts in defense and national security. Foreign policy is torn between Westernization and "karabakhization." In the spring of 1997, the nomination of Robert Kocharian as prime minister heightened this tension.

The HHS's victory in the 1990 Supreme Soviet elections, followed by Levon Ter-Petrosian's election as the first president naturally led to an HHS-dominated government and National Assembly (NA). Yet with Armenia essentially at war, the power ministries soon acquired fundamental weight on foreign policy. In 1992, the Nagorno-Karabakh Parliament gave all powers to a State Committee for Defense, chaired by Robert Kocharian, who was designated by the HHS as one of its most devoted partisans in Nagorno-Karabakh. As early as 1993, the government of the HHS in Yerevan and the political circle actually in power in Karabakh were closely united. In September of the same year, the director of the Committee of Self-Defense Forces of Karabakh, Serge Sargsyan, was appointed defense minister of Armenia by Ter-Petrosian. The new minister also had the status of negotiator in the search of a cease-fire. In December 1994, Kocharian was elected president by the Parliament of the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, while still retaining the commander-in-chief position. In November 1996, direct elections in Karabakh confirmed him as president. Although the international community was against elections in Karabakh, observers recognized them as free and fair,²⁹ in contrast to the elections that took place in Armenia a few weeks prior. In March 1997, Ter-Petrosian appointed Kocharian to be prime minister.³⁰ According to Ter-Petrosian, this appointment was strictly for domestic reasons and was not related to the Karabakh issue.

When the opposition rallied against Ter-Petrosian in the fall of 1997, political forces were divided in the following way: Kocharian was supported by a coalition that included the power ministries—Vazgen Sargsyan, the defense minister, and Serge Sargsyan, then-minister of national security, some opposition elements, such as the HHD, and the president of Nagorno-Karabakh, Arkady Ghukassian. As for Ter-Petrosian, only loyal partisans continued to support him. The Karabakh issue was just one element of the power crisis that was taking place. In actuality, the forces that determined its outcome held the real positions of power. The military and security forces, supported by a parliamentary faction, had become a consistent block, and the *Yerkrapahs* (Guardians of the Land) were loyal

to Vazgen Sargsyan. The prime minister, the defense minister and the interior and national security minister formally refused to implement a foreign policy decision from the president, which provoked a deadlock in the executive. The president, who no longer had a majority in the NA, was compelled to resign.

This crisis was the result of the power ministries' growing influence within Armenia, particularly in economic affairs. As early as 1992, they acquired important privileges to organize the war effort. According to Ter-Petrossian, the Ministry of Defense was already the most prominent ministry in terms of budget, personnel, and programs, a state within a state, too strong to be dismantled after 1994. In 1996 the presidential authority became indebted to the Defense Ministry when it sent tanks to disperse an opposition crowd, publicly displaying its strength.³¹ In the following weeks, remarks were heard from the president's closest allies seeking to reduce those ministers' power. Yet the fear of destabilizing the borders restrained Ter-Petrossian from such a move. On the contrary, the Interior Ministry and the National Security Agency were merged and given to Serge Sargsyan.³² From an administrative point of view, the merging of the police forces appeared to be logical, because it made them more powerful. Robert Kocharian, though apparently benefiting from Ter-Petrossian's departure, seems to be aware that the dénouement could have been quite the opposite. That is why as soon as the 1998 presidential election was under way, Kocharian sought to reduce Vazgen Sargsyan's power. The task would have been more difficult had Kocharian encountered internal opposition, as his constitutional right to run in the election was not assured. After he was elected in March 1998, Kocharian presented the new government, which demonstrated surprising continuity. Only ten out of twenty positions had replacements and the power ministries remained the stronghold of Vazgen Sargsyan and Serge Sargsyan. A few symbolic places were given to the HHD. Its leader, Vahan Hovannissian, released from jail just after Ter-Petrossian resigned, was appointed advisor to the president. Vartan Oskanian, deputy minister of foreign affairs under Ter-Petrossian, was appointed minister of foreign affairs, a position he holds today. Following the parliamentary elections in 1999, Robert Kocharian appointed Vazgen Sargsyan prime minister, with little choice in the matter, thus, for the first time, people knew who the real arbiter of power was. The only major move was limiting Serge Sargsyan's authority to the National Security Agency alone. The attack on Parliament on October 27, 1999, when Vazgen Sargsyan was assassinated along with other political figures, did not modify this hierarchy, but consolidated power in two men, the president and his defense minister, Serge Sargsyan. In foreign affairs, this domestic duo stands in contrast with the public duo, Kocharian and Vardan Oskanian.

The study of foreign policy outlines confrontations between various decision makers. The Armenian Constitution names three institutions that play a role in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. First and foremost, there is the executive branch, which includes the president and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Second, is the legislative branch, that is the NA. By establishing a semi-presidential regime à la française, the constitution assigns quite a limited role to the latter in terms of decision making. Yet as the NA must ratify laws proposed by the executive branch and international treaties negotiated by it, it has influ-

ence over some decisions. As for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it prefers Westernized personnel. During the first stage of foreign policy formulation, in particular, new figures, sometimes diaspora Armenians, were taken over the experienced, yet discredited Soviet diplomats.³³ This new personnel was always of valued intellectual competence and willing to serve the government, as was the case of Raffi Hovannissian, the first minister of foreign affairs until 1992, or of Gerard Libaridian, senior advisor to the president until 1997.

In Armenia, like other parts of the former Soviet Union, the mechanisms of formulating foreign policy have gradually become the exclusive domain of the president. The 1995 constitution reflects two phenomena. First, this late adoption indicated that Armenian statehood was gaining strength due to external events of critical concern. Second, it gave the president a major role in the country's foreign relations, "the one most in contact with leaders of the international community." The president assumed a key role in security, defense, and international relations issues. He also acts as the commander-in-chief of the army. Once again the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is at the center of the power structure. Early in the 1990s, the situation of war explained the tendency of concentrating decision-making power in a few hands. This became the status quo. On some delicate issues, like the one of Karabakh, the president shares the decision with the Security Council. Somewhat similar to a parallel executive branch of the Russian model, the Security Council is chaired by the president and is composed of the prime minister, the defense minister, the national assembly chairman, the president of Nagorno-Karabakh, and may include some other senior officials, depending on the agenda.³⁴ Under the current administration, its role as a decision-making body has been decreasing at the expense of the individuals who comprise it. Ultimately, the president alone chooses the priorities of foreign policy. The Security Council is mainly formed on a nonpartisan basis according to day-to-day management, incumbent on changing needs. Only a few issues linked to stability and security figure in long-term plans. Such is the case of the alliance with Russia and integration with European political and institutional structures. The question of the extent to which the two should be combined remains somewhat unclear. Since security defines most of Armenia's international relations, the role of the defense minister is important but difficult to evaluate because information on this ministry is restricted. This method of working would obviously make the costs of change higher and confirms the weak degree of institutionalization of the decision-making process. Characterized by the remarkable continuity of its elites, Armenian foreign policy has been evolving between relatively narrow borders. The substitution of Kocharian's administration has confirmed the tendencies of the foreign policy institutions since the first post-independence years: Westernization of the public aspects of foreign policy and "kharabakhization" of its security and defense arenas.

The main determinant of foreign policy has been the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Notwithstanding the differences in image, mode of working, style, or even efficiency of the Ter-Petrossian and Kocharian administrations, the priorities and constraints have generally remained the same.³⁵ The principles posed by the

HSH at the dawn of the 1990s appear to be tacitly adopted by the Karabakh party as well, even on matters at the epicenter of the 1997 opposition. The perception of Armenia's security needs, due to its commitment toward Nagorno-Karabakh, plays an essential role in its alliances, despite the political will to overcome the burden of geography and history. The conflict weighs on all aspects of Armenian international relations. Paradoxically, while for Armenian decision makers the Nagorno-Karabakh issue has long been one point among others on the agenda, domestic political developments, as well as the country's place in the international community, depend on the settlement of this issue.

Notes

1. Although the realist approach has been rather negligent of small states and out of favor since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it appears to be quite relevant in the study of a newly independent state for which sovereignty is an utmost priority.

2. By the constraints of geography one should take into consideration the enclave situation, the geostrategic potentialities versus realities, and the regional alliances, all of which currently isolate rather than integrate Armenia into the region. Also, the burden of history is widely discussed, in particular referring to the 1915 genocide of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey, the denial of this fact, and the subsequent relations between Armenians and Turks. Given the format of this study and because these are generally well-known facts, we chose not to develop them further. For a description of Armenia's relations with its neighbours and the historic and geographical constraints explaining them, see Paul Rouben Adalian, "Armenia's Foreign Policy: Defining Priorities and Coping with Conflict," in *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the News States of Eurasia*, ed. Aaded and Karen Dawisha, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995). This article does not elaborate on this topic as the government of Armenia has intentionally chosen to disassociate politics from history, and formulate a foreign policy that would be independent of history as long as political and economic relations were beneficial to Armenia. For accurate developments on this subject, see, among others, Gerard J. Libaridian, *Modern Armenia: People, Nation, State* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004).

3. Speech by Vartan Oskanian, Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the Permanent Council of the OSCE, October 8, 1998.

4. *Haratch*, "Interview with Levon Ter-Petrosian," April 15, 1990.

5. According to the new political thinking of Ter-Petrosian's administration—to be realistic and to establish normal relations with all neighbors—Armenia has constantly stated that it had no claim toward Azerbaijan and was taking part in the conflict between Nagorno-Karabakh's inhabitants and Azerbaijan only as an interested third party, preoccupied by the fate of its compatriots in Nagorno-Karabakh.

6. From Robert Kocharian's inaugural speech to the National Assembly on April 9, 1998.

7. Resolution 822, passed on April 30, 1993, condemns the seizure of Kelbajar by the Armenian forces of Nagorno-Karabakh, but not Armenia itself; and Resolution 853, passed on July 29, 1993. Two more resolutions were issued the same year, neither blaming Armenia directly.

8. Artsakh is the historical Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh.

9. "On the eve of the Karabakh Talks in Geneva: What does Armenia gain or lose from a peace agreement?" *Armenian News Network*, May 15, 2001.

10. For an overview of the new political thinking of the HSH and Karabakh Committee leaders, see Gerard Libaridian, ed., *Armenia at the Crossroads: Democracy and Nationhood in the Post-Soviet Era, Essays, Interviews and Speeches by the Leaders of the National Democratic Movement in Armenia* (Watertown: Blue Crane Books, 1991).

11. It is commonly accepted that the first republic led by the HHD or Dashnak govern-

ment (1918–20) surrendered to the Bolsheviks to gain protection from the advancing Turkish armies and to avoid the loss of Eastern Armenia.

12. Notably the Gedashen and Shahumyan district villages.

13. No less than a dozen techno-military treaties were signed between 1991 and 1997. This last treaty is the most important military agreement of Armenia with a foreign country. It explicitly specifies that in the case of aggression against one partner, the other is committed to providing help. It was signed on August 29 and is in force for twenty years, renewable thereafter. Russia also signed a Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Security with Azerbaijan in July 1997, but the latter does not contain such a clause.

14. This was quite a heated debate, as some circles in Armenia have been accusing the administration of “selling” Armenia to Russia, particularly after the so-called “swap agreement” of November 2002, in which five Armenian major companies were transferred to Russian management in exchange for the cancellation of a \$98 million debt. This movement is still going on with Russia acquiring more Armenian companies.

15. As one can infer from this quotation by Ter-Petrossian in his now famous article “War or Peace? Time for Thoughtfulness,” in *Hayastani Harapetutyun*, November 2, 1997.

16. Carl Schmitt, *The Notion of Politics*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid. “Il n’est pas de finalité rationnelle, pas de norme, si juste soit-elle, pas de programme, si exemplaire soit-il, pas d’idéal social si beau soit-il, pas de légitimité ni de légalité qui puissent justifier le fait que des êtres humains se tuent les uns les autres en leur nom. Car, si à l’origine de cet anéantissement physique de vies humaines, il n’y a pas la nécessité vitale de maintenir sa propre forme d’existence face à une négation tout aussi vitale de cette forme, rien d’autre ne saurait la justifier.”

20. Unofficial translation of Michel Marian, Entretien avec Levon Ter-Petrossian, “Arménie: le pivot caucasien” in *Politique Internationale*, no. 75 (1997). “Notre attachement à l’autodétermination ne traduit pas une visée nationaliste mais reflète notre lucidité. Car dans le cas de la solution qui a été proposée [lors du sommet de Lisbonne de l’OSCE en novembre 1996], le risque de génocide pèserait constamment, comme une épée de Damoclès, au-dessus de la tête des Arméniens du Karabakh. Le peuple arménien a déjà été victime d’un génocide, il n’en tolérera pas un second.”

21. The HHD is the party that claims to be the most representative of the diaspora, until recently. Two other political parties are important in the diaspora: the Ramkavar Azatakan Party, or Liberal Democrat, and the Huntchakian Social Democratic Party. The three parties returned to the homeland after Armenia gained independence. The HHD is the only one that played a significant political role. It has been a member of the ruling coalition since 2003.

22. Levon Ter-Petrossian, “War or Peace?”

23. Those are the aforementioned horrors perpetrated in Armenia first by the Sumgait pogroms, then by the cleansing of twenty-four Armenian villages north of Nagorno-Karabakh by the Soviet army and the Azerbaijani OMON— The Ministry of Interior forces.

24. Levon Ter-Petrossian’s annual address to the nation, December 31, 1995.

25. Levon Ter-Petrossian, “War or Peace?”

26. *Lettre de l’UGAB*, “Levon Ter-Petrossian à Paris,” no. 124, March 20, 1993.

27. The two methods are known under the names of “step-by-step approach” and “package deal approach.” Whereas Ter-Petrossian preferred the first, Kocharian and Nagorno-Karabakh insisted on the second; Azerbaijan eventually favored the step-by-step approach. The differences between the two being well known, it should be emphasized that they are not necessarily incompatible. From what is known about the current phase of discussions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a new basis of negotiations would be under discussion mixing elements of the two approaches, to give room to both parties’ desires.

28. Robert Kocharian, inauguration speech to the National Assembly, April 9, 1998.

29. That is given the local conditions of a military regime and the absence of a signifi-

cant opposition.

30. Replacing Armen Sarkisian, who resigned for health reasons.

31. In the aftermath of the presidential elections, the opposition resorted to acts of violence, attacking the president of the National Assembly and the two vice presidents.

32. Prior to this Serge Sargsyan was chief of the National Security Agency. Vano Siradeghian, former interior minister, was appointed mayor of Yerevan.

33. Diplomacy was not the only branch in which diaspora Armenians were recruited. Agriculture, energy, and other spheres also welcomed the help of Armenians from abroad.

34. This is the case of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, despite not being a power ministry.

35. A study aimed to compare the efficiency of Armenia's international relations under the two administrations might have underlined more differences in achievement than the present study, particularly regarding the growing diplomatic isolation facing Armenia. This aspect of foreign policy would be more linked to the views that other powers hold toward Armenia and/or the whole South Caucasus region, which was deliberately not focused on in this article.