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Armenia, U.S. Forces to Hold Joint Drills Amid Moscow Tensions

By AFP

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Armenian defense ministry

Armenia will host joint drills with U.S. forces next week, officials in Yerevan said Wednesday, the latest sign of the ex-Soviet republic's drift from its traditional ally Russia.

The announcement came a day after Moscow dismissed criticism from Armenia that Russian peacekeepers were failing to maintain order over the only route linking Armenia to the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan.

The Armenian defense ministry said the Eagle Partner 2023 drills aim to "increase the level of interoperability" between Armenian and U.S. forces in international peacekeeping missions.

They will be held on Sept. 11-20 in Armenia's Zar training center.

The Kremlin responded saying the announcement "raises concerns" and vowed to

"thoroughly analyze" the exercises.

Russia and Armenia are at odds over a 2,000-strong Russian peacekeeping contingent responsible for the Lachin corridor, which connects Armenia to the separatist region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

They have been deployed there since 2020 when Russia brokered a ceasefire to end a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the mountainous territory.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan recently said Moscow was either "unable or unwilling" to control the corridor.

His government says Azerbaijan has closed the road and blockaded Nagorno-Karabakh spurring a humanitarian crisis in Armenian-populated towns.

Marking a major foreign policy shift, Pashinyan also said that Yerevan's longstanding reliance on Russia as its security guarantor was a "strategic mistake."

His wife was on Wednesday in Kyiv to attend a meeting of first ladies and gentlemen and deliver humanitarian aid for the first time since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Russia has a permanent military base in Armenia which is part of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization.

The Kremlin said this week that Russia was fulfilling its obligations to Armenia, with Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying Russia "is not going anywhere."

Tensions between Baku and Yerevan have escalated sharply in recent months, as both sides accuse the other of cross-border attacks.

The two sides have been unable to reach a lasting peace settlement despite mediation efforts by the European Union, United States and Russia.

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