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Armenia PM Signals Foreign Policy Shift Away From Russia

By Mariam Harutyunyan for AFP

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Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on Sunday signalled a major foreign policy shift away from Russia following Moscow's refusal to enter the latest conflict over disputed Nagorno-Karabakh.

Pashinyan told the nation in a major television address that his former Soviet republic's current foreign security alliances were "ineffective" and "insufficient."

He added that Armenia should join the International Criminal Court (ICC) — a tribunal which has issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin over his actions in Ukraine.

"The systems of external security in which Armenia is involved are ineffective when it comes to the protection of our security and Armenia's national interests," Pashinyan said.

His address aired just days after Azerbaijan claimed full control over Nagorno-Karabakh in a

lightning offensive that forced the ethnic Armenian separatist territory to sue for peace.

The separatists' apparent capitulation could mark the end of a conflict between the Christian and Muslim Caucasus rivals that has raged — off and on — through the three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) — a Russian-dominated group comprised of six post-Soviet states.

The group pledges to protect other members that come under attack.

But Russia is bogged down in a war in Ukraine and has grown more isolated on the international stage.

It argued that Yerevan itself recognized the disputed region as part of Azerbaijan and refused to come to Armenia's aid.

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"It has become evident to all of us that the CSTO instruments and the instruments of the Armenian-Russian military-political cooperation are insufficient for protecting external security of Armenia," he said.

"We must transform and supplement the instruments of Armenia's external and domestic security, in cooperation with all the partners who are ready for mutually beneficial steps," Pashinyan said.

'Respect our sovereignty'

Pashinyan's address came after days of increasingly strong criticism in Moscow of what has been Russia's main ally in the volatile Caucasus.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Saturday accused Armenia of "adding fuel to the fire" with its public rhetoric.

Moscow had earlier this month summoned Armenia's ambassador following its decision to host U.S. forces for small peacekeeping drills.

Related article: Russia Says Armenians Added 'Fuel to Fire' in Azerbaijan Conflict

Russian state television commentators have been attacking Pashinyan and other Armenian leaders for their criticism of Moscow.

Pashinyan's comments about the ICC threaten to generate particular anger in the Kremlin.

ICC judge Tomoko Akane issued an arrest warrant for Putin in March for the war crime of

allegedly unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children.

Putin has avoided visiting other ICC member nations to avoid the possibility of arrest.

Pashinyan sent the Rome Statute — a founding document of the ICC — for parliamentary ratification earlier this month.

The Armenian leader said the ICC could help "ensure our security."

"The decision is not directed against CSTO and the Russian Federation," Pashinyan said of his desire to join the tribunal.

"It comes from the interests of the country's external security, and taking such a decision is our sovereign right."

He concluded his address by calling "on our colleagues to respect out sovereignty."

Independent Armenian political analyst Beniamin Matevosyan said Pashinyan was "deliberately aggravating tensions with Russia."

"He is openly telling Russia: if you don't help keep Armenians in Karabakh, I'll quit CSTO," he said.

Matevosyan said the Nagorno-Karabakh supporters and people with roots in the region were leading the protests that have been simmering across Armenia in the past few days.

"He is afraid of the 120,000-strong mass of people [from Karabakh]. He is seeing that so many Karabakhis are taking part in the street protests these days," Matevosyan told AFP.

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