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Russia Reckons With Loss of Regional Influence as Armenia Eyes Exit from Moscow-Led Military Bloc

By Pyotr Kozlov

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Police at the 102nd Russian military base, where a rally demanding Armenia's withdrawal from the CSTO is being held. **Alexander Patrin / TASS**

Russian officials privately admit that their chances of preventing an Armenian exit from the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are slim, two Russian officials, one current and one retired Russian diplomat, and a former CSTO official have told The Moscow Times.

Some of The Moscow Times' sources agreed to speak on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue.

While Russia seeks to avoid losing one of its closest military allies and a blow to its interests in the region, officials in Moscow understand that the longer the rift between Yerevan and

Moscow lasts, the less likely it is that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan will back down, The Moscow Times' sources said.

"Armenia's pullout raises a problem for Russia and the CSTO," said a Russian government official close to the military.

"This region will have to be secured by someone, and it will be impossible to rely on the Armenian army in the CSTO format. However, Russia has no other ally in the South Caucasus," he added.

A retired Russian diplomat said that Moscow has counted on Armenia to maintain the alliance's flank with Turkey, which is a member of Russia's foe NATO.

"The Armenian army is experienced and combat-ready. Along with the Russian military base in Gyumri, it is an outpost against NATO member Turkey, which has a strong army standing across the border," the retired diplomat said.

Armenia has become increasingly critical of the CSTO and Russia, its largest security guarantor and economic partner, since they declined to intervene in Azerbaijan's September 2023 capture of the breakaway republic of Nagorno-Karabakh.

But this week, Pashinyan for the first time said that Armenia intends to leave the CSTO, a military-political bloc comprising six post-Soviet allies.

He also accused fellow CSTO member Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, the Kremlin's closest ally, of supporting Baku's 2020 attack on Armenia.

Speaking at a debate in parliament on Wednesday, Pashinyan, who has faced weeks of mass protests in the center of Yerevan over an agreement to hand several border villages to Azerbaijan, said the country could withdraw from CSTO.

"We will leave CSTO, and we will decide the timing of our exit," Pashinyan said, without offering further detail.

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The next day, he poured oil on the fire by issuing a public appeal to Moscow to expel Belarus from the CSTO. Pashinyan accused Lukashenko of supporting Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev ahead of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, which eventually ended in Yerevan's defeat and Baku's 2023 capture of the breakaway region.

"A member of the CSTO claims to have participated in the preparation of the 44-day war [in 2020], encouraged it and wished victory for Azerbaijan," Pashinyan said.

Politico later reported, citing leaked documents, that Belarus secretly delivered advanced weapons to Azerbaijan between 2018 and 2020.

Pashinyan said he would reconsider his stance on leaving the CSTO if Belarus gave "apologies

and explanations that would be acceptable to the Armenian people" or left the bloc altogether. Later Thursday, Yerevan recalled its ambassador to Minsk for consultations.

Ultimatums like the one issued by Armenia are "firstly, impossible, and secondly, incorrect and unacceptable," a Russian Foreign Ministry official told The Moscow Times.

Russian officials and a CSTO spokesman on Thursday sought to downplay the tensions, with Kremlin Dmitry Peskov saying that Russia still sees Armenia as an ally.

Beyond its statements, Armenia's leadership is taking concrete, consistent steps to indicate its intentions are serious, former CSTO spokesman Vladimir Zainetdinov told The Moscow Times.

These include freezing its participation in the alliance, refusing to appoint a representative to the post of deputy secretary-general and refusing to pay its 2024 financial contribution.

The unprecedented tensions within the CSTO reflect both the deepening rift between Moscow and Yerevan as well as the latter's shift toward the West.

"The prime minister doesn't make these kinds of statements by chance," Zainetdinov said. "I see this as [part of] a plan. First Pashinyan enlisted the support of the U.S., then he decided to make a withdrawal statement. Unfortunately, all these steps show that Armenia is starting to halt its activities in the CSTO and is getting closer and closer to the West."

If Armenia does withdraw from the CSTO, "one can say that Russia under Putin is withdrawing from the South Caucasus," the retired Russian diplomat said.

"Everything was leading up to this. The question is how Pashinyan will overcome [Armenia's] economic dependence on Moscow," the retired diplomat said.

Moscow has traditionally been Armenia's top foreign trading partner and Armenia is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

As a CSTO member, Armenia is guaranteed protection from Turkey, its main threat, said former CSTO spokesman Zainetdinov — and it will lose this protection if it withdraws.

"In the zero hour, the CSTO collective operational response force will not come to Armenia's aid if it withdraws. And who will ensure Armenia's security? The U.S.? The EU? Or Turkey, a NATO member state with which it borders?" he asked rhetorically.

He added: "But for the CSTO as a system of collective security in the Eurasian space, Armenia's withdrawal will also create a problem that will have to be solved somehow.

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