

March 28, 2024

DISSEMINATION BY THE LIVINGSTON GROUP, LLC

FARA registration # 6344

Biden State Department Must Heed Reagan's "Peace Through Strength" Philosophy



President Reagan Meeting with Then-Congressman Bob Livingston (R-LA)

In the 1980's, serving as a member of the intelligence and appropriations committees, I worked closely with President Reagan and the Reagan Administration to defeat the Soviet Union, "the evil empire."

Unfortunately, ever since Reagan's historic efforts brought peace to much of the world, Russia—the legal successor of the Soviet Union—was allowed to regroup and get stronger.

Annexing Crimea from Ukraine was the first sign of troubles to come. Russia was allowed to reassert its malign influence across most of the former Soviet space, preventing any meaningful political and economic reform in those countries and, in 2022, it launched an all-out war against Ukraine.

Another country that learned the lessons the hard way was Armenia. The world's first Christian nation, it is in a tough neighborhood, bordering Turkey, its historic rival, and Azerbaijan, with whom Armenia has been engaged in bitter conflict over disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region (Artsakh in Armenian).

Since Armenia's independence in 1991, Russia has tried to keep Armenia in a diplomatic, economic, and political chokehold, forcing it to remain part of Russia-led alliance and its security arm, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

However, Russia has recently reneged on its treaty obligations to Armenia leaving the country virtually defenseless against its much stronger adversaries. In the aftermath of the Second Artsakh war in the Fall 2020 and the events that followed, Russia effectively sided with Azerbaijan, with whom Russia signed a wide-ranging treaty agreement two days before invading Ukraine, in February 2022.

After the Russia-greenlighted exodus of 120,000 Armenians from Artsakh on September 19-20, 2024, which has been called ethnic cleansing by scholars and observers, at the time of this writing the world is bracing for a new invasion (this time of Armenia's own territory) by Azerbaijan.

Unsurprisingly, these events have led to a significant drop in Russia's popularity among the Armenian population. Some of this disappointment and anger have resulted in a gradual increase in pro-Western sentiment. Armenia's largest pro-Western political party, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), had a role to play in this.

Contrary to the position of Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on Nagorno-Karabakh—which is seen as defeatist by the overwhelming majority of Armenia's population and its vast Diaspora—NDA views the solution of the conflict within an internationally recognized legal framework. Before September 2024, it had called for the replacement of Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh with an UN-mandated peacekeeping force and the resolution of the border issue based on the League of Nations' decision of 1920 instead of Joseph Stalin's decision of 1921. NDA has also organized demonstrations against Russia's military presence in Armenia.

The Livingston Group has helped NDA carry its message to Washington. We worked with the Congressional Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and its Co-Chairs, Congressman Chris Smith (R-NJ) and Congressman Jim McGovern (D-MA), both of whom I served in Congress with, to arrange for a hearing titled "Safeguarding the People of Nagorno-Karabakh", which took place June 21, 2023.

During the Congressional hearing on June 21, the witnesses highlighted the gravity of the situation in Artsakh. One of the panelists, Columbia University's David Phillips, stated: "There is a Second Armenian Genocide underway in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) and Armenia proper being committed by the Erdogan and Aliyev regimes," part of a "stated policy of Azerbaijan."

Ambassador Sam Brownback, one of the witnesses at the Congressional hearing with whom I also served with in Congress, discussed the need for the U.S. to seize the opportunity to remove Armenia from the Russian orbit as well as provide Armenia with much needed weapons and security assistance to help defend itself. Echoing NDA's long-standing policy line, Ambassador Brownback was resolute in his conclusion: "Armenia should be designated a Major Non-NATO Ally of the US."

However, the Biden Administration approach has been unhelpful and may have sent the wrong signals to parties involved. Literally days prior to the final Azerbaijani military assault on

Artsakh, on September 14, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs [Yuri Kim said](#) "...the use of force will be acceptable." And while we were enthused by the commitments made by the Administration during the USAID Administrator Samantha Power's visit to Armenia in the aftermath of the exodus in Artsakh, these were not supported by tangible actions.

Now, the Administration is forcing a peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan on terms highly unfavorable for Armenia and before internationally secured conditions are made for refugees to return to Nagorno-Karabakh. Doing so would be tantamount of the US rewarding Azerbaijan for ethnic cleansing of Armenians, something that President Biden vowed to help avoid in his April 24, 2021 statement.

President Reagan had a foreign policy guided by "peace through strength." Secretary Blinken and the Biden Administration would do well to heed this philosophy. The US has a strong partner in NDA, which would take Armenia out of the Russian orbit and make it a strong and reliable partner of the Western alliance. We cannot squander this opportunity.

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