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New Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan takes belligerent stand on Nagorno-Karabakh

On May 8, the Armenian parliament elected as the country's new prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, who headed April's mass protest movement against the previous government. Hoping to receive backing from the imperialist powers, Pashinyan has dramatically escalated rhetoric against Azerbaijan over the long-disputed mountain enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, indicating that his government is ready to return to open war with Azerbaijan.

Despite all claims to the contrary, his first days in office have made clear that Pashinyan's election as the new prime minister is bound up with a dramatic shift in Armenian foreign policy. Since assuming power, Pashinyan's foreign policy strategy has consisted of rallying support from the imperialist powers while avoiding an open clash with Russia, at least at this point, in order to advance the national interests of the Armenian bourgeoisie and push for the project of a "Greater Armenia," which threatens another major war in the region over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a small enclave that is territorially located within the recognized borders of today's Azerbaijan. Since the 1980s, the Armenian nationalist movement has insisted on its independence, and sections of it also on its incorporation into Armenia, while Azerbaijan has refused to give up the territory.

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh raged from 1991 to 1994 and took the lives of up to 50,000 people, wounding many more and displacing more than half a million people. Following Armenia's victory in the war in 1994, the separatist

movement in Nagorno-Karabakh proclaimed the Republic of Artsakh, a name historically associated with the plan for a “Greater Armenia.” However, even the Armenian government has so far refrained from recognizing the Republic in order to avoid a renewed major military conflict. Only three minor non-UN states have recognized the Republic, as well as a number of US states, including California, Michigan, Hawaii and Georgia.

Armenia and Azerbaijan are still formally in a state of war, and border clashes have been recurring with growing frequency in recent years. In 2016, open war broke out again for four days, resulting in Armenia losing territory for the first time since 1994. Pashinyan and other liberal opposition politicians attacked the previous government of Serzh Sargsyan for having betrayed Armenia’s national interests.

In an attempt to contain the military conflict and prevent it from flaring up again, Russia, the US and the European Union (EU) have insisted on keeping negotiations over the matter within the framework of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Minsk Group.

Pashinyan has now made clear that he is no longer willing to accept this framework. The day after he was elected, on May 9, Pashinyan met with the president of Artsakh, the Armenian chief of staff and representatives of the armed forces of Artsakh. He declared that the “Republic of Artsakh,” which he described as one of “two Armenian states,” had to have a seat at the negotiating table—effectively affirming that his government would only be satisfied with international recognition of the Republic of Artsakh and hinting that the Armenian government itself might soon move to recognize the republic officially.

Pashinyan said: “The government of Artsakh can speak on behalf of the Republic of Artsakh. Armenia is also a side in the conflict and will play a full role in conducting negotiations in its own name.” In an apparent preparation for all-out war, Pashinyan also discussed with military leaders from the self-proclaimed republic closer military cooperation and the joint build-up of the armed forces.

At demonstrations in April, Pashinyan had already called for the revival of the “Miatsum” agenda, which provides for an incorporation of Nagorno-Karabakh into a “Greater Armenia.” The Miatsum agenda had helped trigger the right-wing separatist movement in Karabakh in 1988-1991 and the war with Azerbaijan. Pashinyan also declared that Artsakh would eventually become “an inseparable part of the Republic of Armenia.”

At press conference Pashinyan gave on May 9 in Stepanakert, the capital of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, he also stated that Armenia would continue to deepen

ties with the EU. “We hope that the EU countries will soon ratify the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed late last year between the EU and Armenia,” he said.

The former defense minister of Armenia, Vigen Sarkisyan, has publicly denounced Pashinyan’s statements on Nagorno-Karabakh, describing them as “dangerous.” Russian media commentaries, too, have expressed concern over the escalating war danger in the crisis-ridden region. Writing for *Ekho Moskvy*, an outlet close to the Russian liberal opposition, El’nur Melikov warned that Armenia could make use of the current instability by officially recognizing Artsakh, hoping that neither Russia nor any other country would intervene on the side of Azerbaijan in a potential war.

The reckless moves toward military conflict by Pashinyan expose the fraudulent character of the Western media coverage of the developments in Armenia. Initially taken by surprise by the mass protests, it was quick to launch a campaign in support of Pashinyan, describing him as a “charismatic opposition leader” and praising his supposed “democratic revolution.” In reality, he was seen as someone who could advance Western imperialist influence in the Caucasus and undermine Russian interests.

Indeed, Pashinyan has repeatedly questioned Armenia’s involvement in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). After his election, he assured that his government had no plans to leave the EAEU, and at a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on May 14 in Moscow, Pashinyan stressed that he would seek to deepen cooperation with Russia, especially in the military realm. However, the economic reforms he has announced, including a bid to attract billions of dollars of investments from the US and the EU, would inevitably result not only in attacks on the working class, but also the undermining of the considerable influence of Russian oligarchs and state companies in the Armenian economy.

Pashinyan has also indicated a readiness to establish diplomatic ties with Turkey, in an apparent attempt to further isolate Azerbaijan, a close ally of Turkey in the region. Turkish President Erdogan has declared that Turkey is willing to improve relations with Armenia, and talks between representatives of Turkey and Armenia are set to take place at a meeting of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. However, given the century-long enmity between Turkey and Armenia, the prospects of such a rapprochement remain doubtful.

The Western press has maintained a noticeable silence on Pashinyan’s belligerent statements about Nagorno-Karabakh, indicating that the major imperialist powers are

ready to accept another war if it would shift the balance of power in the region in their favor while further isolating Russia.

There is little question that sections of the US political establishment fully back Pashinyan's plans. In a remarkable comment from May 14, the journal the *National Interest*, which is dedicated to analysis of foreign policy strategies for the defense of "American interest," described the events in Armenia as a "color revolution" and implied that the US should support the recognition of Artsakh and, by extension, Pashinyan's project for a "Greater Armenia."

The article states: "This crisis [in Armenia] proves that Russia maintains two major levers of influence over Armenia: Armenia's corrupt oligarchic system and the military threat stemming from Azerbaijan." The election of Pashinyan, it continued, was an attempt...to undo the oligarchic system" and to "find someone who will ensure their [Armenia's] security." According to the *National Interest*, Russia's increased ties with Azerbaijan in recent years had undermined the position of Armenia in the region. The commentary concludes that "the only way to thwart a catastrophe in the region would be for Azerbaijan to receive a clear signal from the West that any involvement with the Kremlin to undo Armenia's color revolution would be unacceptable."