

Nuances of the French Military Procurement Policy in the South Caucasus

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According to *fip.am*, a fact investigation platform, from 2013 to 2019 France exported €148.3 million worth of weapons to Azerbaijan. A similar index was published separately by the *Ministère Des Armées en France*, which provides compelling evidence of weapons sold between 2010 and 2019. The death of Charles Aznavour also seems to have eased up relations on weapons procurement between the two nations post-2018 with discussion around more advanced weaponry such as the French *ASTER 30-SAMP/T* and *VL MICA* air-defense missile systems.

Armenia has been aware of these relations between Azerbaijan and France, and additional evidence surrounding these issues further complicates the matter. An *IHS Markit* source speculates that European companies denied satellite imagery sales to Armenia in 2015 because of contractual obligations to Azerbaijan. It is not known if *Airbus* was the main supplier to Azerbaijan, the most obvious company in a position to control and sell fresh satellite imagery. With the company owned by a consortium and a lack of corroborating evidence faulting France, the topic remains open for analysts. However, rumors inside Armenian defense circles support the speculations surrounding the *IHS Markit* lead with many that believe France was the direct supplier of satellite imagery to Azerbaijan, a key factor of Azerbaijani military superiority on the battlefield in 2020. Alternatively, other evidence highlights France's intended support to Armenia, with Armenian officials denying French military advisors access to support technical operations during the 44-Day War in 2020.

Taking the above mentioned into account experts are still perplexed as to France's true nature in the region and if there is any stake in Armenia for French national interests. Some experts have said that France's intentions are purely to offset Russian influence in the region while Russia is preoccupied, others believe that France has truly moved away from Azerbaijan in terms of their procurement relations. Regardless of France's new geopolitical shifts post-2020, it cannot be a coincidence that these improved relations between Armenia and France occurred after the 2020 44-Day War with the enclave coming under Azerbaijani jurisdiction, and without a word about the ethnic cleansing that took place in Arstakh in 2023.

Moving forward, if France does have renewed interest in Armenia, taking into account the current Azerbaijani pressure seen on France's weapon sales, many experts wonder if Azerbaijan is fighting to save access to satellite imagery. This scenario of losing satellite imagery is highly unlikely as "*business is business*", and no country will cut profits and aggravate relations. Alternatively, this can indicate that France is playing a similar game to Russia, selling weapons

to both sides keeping a level playing field to ultimately gain control over both nations and entertain its own interests at the time of calling.

Armenia should push for new strategic partners regardless if that particular nation is selling weapons to the aggressor. However, continued research and a deep understanding of these geopolitical shifts need to be untangled in order to decrease the chance of manipulation similar to what was seen over the last 20 years of Armenia's reliance on a single strategic partner.