

US POLICY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS PRIOR TO AND AFTER THE 2020 KARABAKH WAR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EVOLVING REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL GEOPOLITICS

BENYAMIN POGHOSYAN  *

Abstract

The article analyzes the main directions of US foreign policy in the South Caucasus before and after the Artsakh war in 2020, taking into account new regional and geopolitical challenges.

It is shown that the United States considers the policy in the South Caucasus in the context of Russian-American relations. In recent years, the South Caucasus has not been included in the US foreign policy priorities, yielding to both the Asia-Pacific region and Ukraine. Under US President Trump, the three main US goals in the region were to include the South Caucasus in a policy of maximum pressure on Iran, launch the Southern Gas Corridor, and contain Russia. The US took a rather passive position during the 2020 Artsakh war, limiting itself only to calls for a cessation of hostilities and the organization of a meeting between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Washington.

As a result of the study, it was substantiated that after the end of the Artsakh war, the main goal of the US was to eliminate the Russian monopoly in the process of resolving the conflict. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022 and the complete breakdown of Russian-American relations, the weakening of Russia's position in the South Caucasus became the cornerstone of US regional policy.

Keywords: US, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, South Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, geopolitics.

Introduction:

The South Caucasus has a strategic location as a crossroad between Europe and Asia. As a part of the former Soviet Union, the region is included in the self-declared Russian zone of influence, as mentioned by then - Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in August 2008 (Kremlin.ru 2008).

* Benyamin Poghosyan is a PhD in History, Associate Professor of the Chair of Political Science at Russian-Armenian University.

Email: bpoghosyan@gmail.com

Journal of Political Science: Bulletin of Yerevan University, Vol. 1 (3),
December 2022, Pp. 36-50

Received: 25.09.2022

Revised: 10.10.2022

Accepted: 26.11.2021



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. © The Author(s) 2022

Given its land borders with Turkey and Iran, as well as natural resources and transit capacities to bring Central Asian gas and oil to Europe while circumventing Russia, the region has a role in US foreign policy. As a part of the former Soviet Union, the region was also included in the US policy of bolstering a transition from a totalitarian past to liberal democracy. However, the South Caucasus was not among the top US national security interests, and the American approach towards the South Caucasus was primarily influenced by developments in the US-Russia relations.

Another critical aspect shaping the US policy towards the region was unresolved conflicts in Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. The US considers both Abkhazia and South Ossetia part of internationally recognized Georgian territory. As an OSCE Minsk Group co-chair state, the US has been actively involved in the Karabakh conflict resolution negotiation process. Despite a sharp deterioration in the US–Russia relations since the start of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, until the start of the 2022 war in Ukraine, both countries continued to agree on the main principles for settling the Karabakh conflict. These principles were articulated in several statements by the US, Russian and French Presidents made in 2009–2012 (OSCE 2009).

Relations with the United States are of significant importance for Armenia. Despite the relative decline in the US position as the only world superpower, Washington remains the number one global power globally. The US is a Minsk Group Co-chair country, actively involved in the Karabakh conflict settlement process, and it exerts significant influence in the neighborhood of Armenia. America is also home to the most influential part of the Armenian Diaspora, which may play a key role in bringing needed investments into the Armenian economy. It also can be a source for, albeit a modest, yet significant, process of repatriation of Armenians from the Diaspora to the motherland, thus alleviating the demographic challenges faced by Armenia.

The main directions of the US regional policy prior to the 2020 Karabakh war (2017-2020)

As we mentioned, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has perceived its relations with the region through the lenses of its overall policy towards the Former Soviet Union and Russia. We may identify several vital goals of the Trump administration in the South Caucasus.

The first is the region's involvement in the policy of 'maximum economic pressure' against Iran (Nuruzzaman 2020; Wallsh 2020). Both Armenia and Azerbaijan border Iran, and Georgia also may play a role as an alternative route for Iran towards Europe via Armenia and the Black Sea. The US policy aimed at decreasing the region's relations with Iran as much as possible. Iran's issue was the top priority for the US National security adviser John Bolton's visit to the region (Kucera 2018).

The second goal of the Trump administration was the facilitation of the launch of the Southern Gas Corridor¹, which would bring Azerbaijani gas to Europe, circumventing

¹ BP. 2021. "Southern Gas Corridor - project of the century." *BP p.l.c.*, 29 January 2021. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/news-and-insights/reimagining-energy/southern-gas-corridor-special-feature.html>.

Russia, as was the case with Azerbaijani oil delivered through the Baku - Tbilisi - Ceyhan pipeline. The US had much less enthusiasm regarding the capabilities of Azerbaijan to strategically decrease Europe's gas dependency on Russia, as it transpired that Baku had only the potential to pump into Europe a maximum of 20 billion cubic meters of gas annually. However, despite the decreased significance of Azerbaijani gas for Europe, it still mattered for the US to have alternative gas supply routes to Europe (Mehdiyev 2018).

The third factor influencing US policy in the region in 2017-2020 was the policy of containment and deterrence of Russia. Despite the seemingly warm attitude of President Trump towards Russia and President Putin, the Trump administration adopted a strict policy towards Russia, putting various new sanctions in place and providing lethal weapons to Ukraine and Georgia (Miller 2018). As a part of the former Soviet Space, the South Caucasus was included in this containment of Russia policy. Washington aimed to prevent any possible increase of Russian influence in Georgia and Azerbaijan and decrease Russian involvement in Armenia.

The "maximum pressure campaign" against Iran created significant complications for Armenia. Given the geopolitical situation of Armenia, any deterioration in its relations with Iran, or significant destabilization in a neighboring country, would have serious detrimental effects on Yerevan. Iran, alongside Georgia, was one of the two land corridors connecting Armenia with the world. Despite the fact that Gazprom owns its Armenian part, the Iran-Armenia gas pipeline provides Armenia with a vital alternative for gas supplies (Danielyan 2008; Zarifian 2009; Kochnakyan et al. 2014). It has a 2.2 billion cubic meters annual capacity to cover all of Armenia's natural gas needs. For now, the pipeline is used only to supply gas, which is used to produce electricity and export it to Iran. Armenia also valued Iran's position in the Karabakh conflict. A Shia Muslim country, Iran had a balanced approach, de facto supporting the status quo before the 2020 Karabakh war. Thus, Armenia could not support President Trump's strict policy towards Iran and has to maneuver a thin line of not annoying the US too much and simultaneously at least preserving the current level of relations with Iran.

The development and launch of the Southern Gas corridor had a negative impact on Armenia. Even prior to the 2022 war in Ukraine, it increased the strategic potential of Azerbaijan, fostered the latter's relations with the EU and the US, and brought additional financial resources.

The Russia containment policy, with a possible decrease of Russian influence in the South Caucasus, could not make Armenia and Karabakh safer. Armenia should continue its multi-vector foreign policy, not putting all eggs into one basket. The cooperation with NATO through the Individual Partnership Action Plans, the 2017 Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU (EUR-Lex 2018), and the recent intensification of relations with China are all moves in this direction.

However, at least for the upcoming decade, none of these actors could bring Armenia the necessary level of security guarantees provided by its strategic alliance with Russia. Yerevan could not participate in any US-sponsored anti-Russian policies in the region without jeopardizing the security of Nagorno Karabakh and possibly Armenia itself.

Thus, none of the Trump administration's three regional strategic goals overlap with Armenia's national interest. Of course, it did not mean that Armenia should not have

relations with the US and should not make efforts to develop them. The main issues for Armenia during 2017-2020 were the US approach to Karabakh conflict and securing a positive US administration attitude towards bringing American investments to Armenia.

The 2020 Karabakh war and its geopolitical implications for Armenia

The 2020 Karabakh war has significantly impacted the regional dynamics in the South Caucasus. Experts and pundits have not come to a unified approach regarding the reasons and implications of the war. However, many agree that the primary beneficiaries of the war were Russia and Turkey. Kremlin reached perhaps its main goal in Karabakh - to put Russian boots on the ground, while it has also significantly increased its military presence in Armenia. Turkey has cemented its presence in Azerbaijan as a large part of Azerbaijani society believes that without Turkey's overt support and involvement, Baku could not win the war. Turkey also is a part of the joint monitoring center operating in the Aghdam region of Azerbaijan, though Turkey hoped to have more military involvement in the post-war Karabakh (Crisis Group 2021, 2022).

Another recurring topic in expert discussions after the 2020 Karabakh war is the decrease of Western influence in the region. The US and France, two other OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs, did not take part in elaborating the November 10, 2020, trilateral Armenia-Azerbaijan-Russia statement, which put an end to the war. Both countries made efforts during the war to reach a humanitarian ceasefire, but with no success. The 2020 Karabakh war coincided with the Presidential election campaign in the US, and many experts believe that this was the main reason why Washington was so passive during the hostilities.

Meanwhile, the South Caucasus was not on the US foreign policy priority list for quite a long time. Ukraine was a focus of Washington in the post-soviet space, while since the early 2010s, the general shift towards the Asia - pacific has been underway. This process was accelerated under President Trump, who launched a trade war with China². Trump's 'America first' policy and his disdain for the democracy promotion were perceived as another reason for the growing decline of US involvement in the South Caucasus.

The second Karabakh war ended with catastrophic results for Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. The trilateral statement signed by Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani leaders on November 10 was tantamount to the capitulation of the Armenian sides³. During the 26 long years of negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group, several settlement plans have been elaborated and offered to the conflict sides - the phased deal in December 1997, the union state in 1998, the Key West deal in April 2001, the Kazan document in June 2011 and the Lavrov plan since 2015. However, none

² BBC. 2019. "Trump escalates trade war with more China tariffs." *August 2, 2019*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-49199559>.

³ The Prime Minister of the RA. 2020. "Statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the President of the Russian Federation." *Press releases, November 10, 2020*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2020/11/10/Announcement/>.

were as disastrous for Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as the trilateral statement of November 10, 2020.

Previous deals envisaged the return of territories considered by Armenians as a 'security zone' to Azerbaijan, but not all territories immediately, and with clear linkage with the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh. This status is to be decided either through future negotiations (December 1997 deal)⁴ or through a legally binding expression of will (Kazan document)⁵, or - as in the Key West model, Karabakh within the 1988 borders was declared as part of Armenia, but Yerevan obliged to provide a corridor from Azerbaijan proper to Nakhijevan⁶. Instead, the November 10, 2020 deal envisages the immediate return to Azerbaijan of all seven regions and accepts Azerbaijani control over 1400 square km of Nagorno-Karabakh proper. Thus, from 11450 square km of territory, only up to 3000 square km are left outside Azerbaijani control. Furthermore, there was not a single word about Karabakh's status, and Armenia agreed to provide a transport communication from Azerbaijan proper to Nakhijevan, which would be under the control of Russian border troops. The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic lost approximately 80 percent of its territory, while in the remaining parts, infrastructure was badly damaged. Some 90000 people have left for Armenia during the 2020 war, and at least 25000 cannot return as their lands are now under Azerbaijani control. Others should wait for the reconstruction of civilian infrastructure, which may take months, if not years.

Meanwhile, the deployment of the Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh has effectively made Karabakh a Russian protectorate. The governmental bodies of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic nominally continue their activities (President, Government, National Assembly, Defense Army), but obviously, the real kingmaker in Karabakh is now Russia. However, the new war did not solve the conflict. Despite the disastrous defeat of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, up to 3000 square km of Karabakh territory is still inhabited by Armenians and is now under Russian control. These people will never accept any status within Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijan has already stated that the status issue is closed for Baku.

The US position during the 2020 war

The decrease of the US attention towards the South Caucasus was once more emphasized during the 2020 war in Nagorno Karabakh. Besides calls to both sides to stop the fighting and the joint statements by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-chair countries Presidents

⁴ National Assembly of the RA. 1997. "OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries: Agreement on the cessation of the Nagorno-Karabakh armed conflict. Preamble." *Document No.17, December*. Accessed September 1, 2022. http://www.parliament.am/library/LGH/doc_17.pdf.

⁵ The Prime Minister of the RA. 2021. "The Origins of the 44-Day War," an article authored by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan." *Interviews and press conferences, January 4, 2021*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.primeminister.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2021/01/04/Nikol-Pashinyan-04-01/>.

⁶ CIVILNET. 2021. "A recap of the 7 plans proposed for the settlement of the Karabakh conflict." *October 23, 2021*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/637117/a-recap-of-the-7-plans-proposed-for-the-settlement-of-the-karabakh-conflict/>.

(Kremlin.ru 2020), and the failed meeting organized by the US in Washington in late October 2020, there was no tangible action by the US government.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo mentioned Turkey's active involvement in the conflict and Ankara's support to Azerbaijan, arguing that third parties should not pour additional fire and expressing its hope that Armenians can defend themselves against what the Azerbaijanis are doing⁷. However, despite all the US-Turkey tensions during the Trump era concerning the purchase of S-400 air defense systems by Turkey, Washington's support for Syrian Kurds, and the growing authoritarianism of Turkish leadership, any increase in Turkey's role in the region was in line with the US strategic interests, as it would weaken Russia.

The contours of the Biden administration policy in the region prior to the 2022 Ukraine war

The election of Joe Biden as President of the United States has raised many hopes around the world that the era of American isolationism launched by President Trump has finally ended. Almost all were looking forward to the new American drive toward multilateralism and for the US to resume its leadership role in the 'liberal world order'. America's EU and NATO allies hoped for more US engagement in Europe, and a more consistent policy towards Russia, while the US Asian allies expected a more coordinated approach towards Asia.

One of the first steps of the new administration was the decision to bring back the US into the Paris climate agreements, raising expectations of an upcoming multilateralist agenda (The White House 2021a). The South Caucasus was not an exception in this context. Given the strategic shake-up in the region as a result of the 2020 Karabakh war, regional experts sought to understand what would be the US policy toward the new status quo that emerged after the November 10, 2020, trilateral statement of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia.

The Biden administration's willingness to extend the New START Treaty for five years, which otherwise was due to expire in February 2021 (The U.S. Department of State 2018), was an indication that the new US administration would seek to find common ground with the Kremlin. Some experts argued that the extension of the New START Treaty was probably the only issue where US and Russian interests overlap, while in all other spheres, the new administration would push forward a stricter policy towards Russia. Among the Armenian expert community, there was a general understanding that regardless of the ups and downs in the US-Russia relations, the US was dissatisfied with the outcome of the new Karabakh war, which saw the US and OSCE Minsk Group sidelined, increased the Russian influence in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and made Turkey an influential player in the region.

According to this logic, the US would seek to challenge the new status quo in Karabakh, reinvigorate the Minsk Group activities, and end the Russian monopoly over

⁷ Deutsche Welle. 2020. "Nagorno-Karabakh: Fighting rages as Pompeo holds talks." *October 23, 2020*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/nagorno-karabakh-us-hosts-warring-parties-as-fighting-rages/a-55378655>.

the conflict resolution process. The US would seek to replace Russian peacekeepers with OSCE or UN mandate international forces. Meanwhile, Russia will do everything to, in practice, prevent the resumption of the OSCE Minsk Group activities and to restrict the US and France's influence over future developments in Nagorno Karabakh.

The US might start the discussion within the Minsk Group to replace Russian peacekeepers with a multination force, but any such decision, either within the UN Security Council or within the OSCE, required Russian approval. If a decision were made in Washington to decrease Russian influence in the region as a part of a Russia containment policy, the main target would not be Karabakh but Armenia itself, since now Yerevan is more dependent on Russia than at any other time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, Azerbaijan at least has Turkey to balance Russian influence. Regardless of numerous disagreements and tensions between the US and Turkey, the only leverage for the US to counter Russia in the South Caucasus is Turkey, with or without President Erdogan. Because of the limited set of options, the US would most probably lean on Turkey leverage in the region; something that could complicate Armenia's regional standing and could potentially be detrimental to Armenia's national interests. Yerevan currently is virtually squeezed between Azerbaijan and Turkey and will be squeezed more if transport links from Turkey to Azerbaijan to the Nakhijevan Autonomous Republic via Armenia's Syunik region are opened. Despite all rhetoric that this will bring advantages to Armenia, as Azerbaijani and Turkish investments will pour into the country, the strategic goal of Azerbaijan and Turkey is to weaken Armenia as much as possible. Baku and Ankara are determined to force Armenians to forget about Nagorno Karabakh and essentially be transformed into a country where the local population will only serve as a low-cost working force.

Geopolitical context around the US regional policy

As we have already mentioned, in recent years, Russia-West relations reached their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. The Ukraine crisis, Russian military involvement in Syria, the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections, and the assassination attempt of Sergei Skripal; this is not the complete list of the West's grievances towards Russia. The Kremlin has its list - NATO enlargement, military actions against the former Yugoslavia, incursion to Iraq and Libya without UN Security Council resolutions, support to the alleged coup in Ukraine in 2014, interference into Russian internal affairs to execute regime change. It seemed that relations could not deteriorate further. However, since December 2021, Russia-US and Russia-NATO tensions have increased significantly. Russia prepared two agreements with the US and NATO, demanding to revise the post-Cold War European security architecture (Zakaria 1999). Russia demands to stop NATO enlargement, scale back NATO military infrastructure in the territories of the new NATO members, and significantly restrain NATO engagement with former Soviet Republics (Pifer 2021).

Russia's demands triggered a set of high-level negotiations: direct phone conversations between President Putin and Biden (The White House 2021b), discussions at Russia-NATO council and OSCE, and talks between US Secretary of State Antony

Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. The US and NATO rejected the primary demands of Russia, calling them non-starters, simultaneously expressing their willingness to continue negotiations (Mearsheimer 2014; Herszenhorn 2022).

In parallel to these negotiations, a real drama evolved around Ukraine. The US claimed that Russia was preparing for a large-scale invasion of Ukraine and even decided to evacuate the family members of the US embassy in Kyiv. The US, UK, and some European countries started to supply Ukraine with lethal weapons, while Russia claimed Ukraine was preparing a military provocation along the contact line in Donbas.

As another tool of deterrence, the West threatened Russia to impose new, much tougher sanctions if Russia decided to launch a military attack on Ukraine. Several draft laws have been introduced in the US House of Representatives and Senate targeting Russia, including sanctions against President Putin. The Kremlin claimed that any such move would mean a 'complete rupture of relations', while some experts and pundits actively circulate the term 'Russia-West decoupling' as a potential outcome of the current crisis.

These tensions were underway under the background of the general transformation of the post-cold war world order. American undisputed hegemony is over, and the world slowly moves towards a new, multipolar global order with multiple centers of powers competing and cooperating with each other (Mearsheimer 2018). The US political elite understands that America's rival is China in the long-term perspective, not Russia. Even if Russia is one of the poles in the emerging global order, it will be less influential than China (ODNI 2022).

While great powers flexed their muscles for the upcoming battles over the nature of the world order, the medium and small powers sought to assess the potential implications of Russia-West decoupling. In this context, the South Caucasus is an interesting case. Being part of the Soviet Union and after 1991, perceived by Russia as a legitimate zone of its special interests, the region has become a flashpoint for regional rivalries. In the first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the security architecture was relatively straightforward. The US supported the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan partnership versus the Russia-Armenia alliance, while Iran was de jure neutral but de facto supported the Russia-Armenia alliance.

Despite being fully anchored in the Russian sphere of influence, Armenia developed modest cooperation with the West, signed IPAPs with NATO, joined the EU Eastern Partnership initiative, and signed the CEPA with the EU in 2017 (EUR-Lex 2018). Azerbaijan pursued a balanced foreign policy, developing partnerships with Turkey and Russia and launching energy cooperation with the West.

Regional security architecture started to change in 2016. The key driver was Turkey's strategy to transform itself into an independent regional player and bid farewell to its position as the sole provider of US interests in the Middle East, South Caucasus, Black Sea region, and Western Balkans. Russia sought to use this momentum and pull Turkey away from the US and NATO as much as possible, clearly understanding that Turkey would not leave NATO. As a result of that understanding between Russia and Turkey and the strategic blunders made by the Armenian governments, Russia allowed Azerbaijan and Turkey to start a joint war against the unrecognized Nagorno Karabakh Republic and change the regional status quo. After the signing of the November 10, 2020,

trilateral statement, Russia and Turkey continued to steer the developments in the region, pushing for restoration of communications, the start of Armenia-Azerbaijan border delimitation, and demarcation, and normalization between Armenia and Turkey.

The Victory of Joe Biden in the November 2020 elections seemed to bring the usual patterns of the US foreign policy back to the pitch. The notion “America is back” is perceived as a willingness to increase American involvement in the different parts of the world. The Biden vision of the 21st century geopolitics as a battle between democracy and authoritarianism arguably implies more US involvement in the Post-Soviet space to deter and counter authoritarian Russia. The word democracy is perhaps the most often used term in the “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance” published by the new administration in March 2021 (The White House. 2021c). Here Russia and China were defined as the main adversaries of the US, and in this context, they continued the ‘Return of the great power competition’ notion embedded in the 2017 US national security strategy.

The war in Ukraine and its impact on the US regional US policy

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine. Russian troops entered Ukraine from different directions - Crimea, Belarus, and mainland Russia. Russian actions created an acute crisis in West-Russia relations. The US, European Union, United Kingdom, Canada, and some Asian allies of the US, such as Japan and Australia, imposed severe sanctions on Russia, including cutting many Russian banks from the global financial messaging system SWIFT⁸. The Western powers significantly increased the supply of lethal weapons to Ukraine, including anti-tank missiles and portable anti-aircraft missiles.

The war in Ukraine unfolds within the tectonic transformations in the world order. The post-Cold War order was based on absolute US hegemony, dubbed by Charles Krauthammer as the “Unipolar Moment” in his famous Foreign Affairs magazine article (Krauthammer 1990). This era was marked by US efforts to extend the area of liberal democracies to cover former members of the Socialist camp in Europe. The enlargement of NATO and EU were the primary tools of this strategy.

The 9/11 attacks shifted the US focus to the war on terror in the Greater Middle East, but democracy promotion and the NATO and EU enlargement remained a priority for the Bush and Obama administrations. However, the world financial crisis of 2008 marked the beginning of the end of the “Unipolar Moment” (Zakaria 2008). It showed the limits of US geostrategic might, while other players, most notably China, Russia, and India, started their rise. The US sought to answer to the rise of China by launching the strategy of ‘Pivot to Asia’ in 2011 (Lieberthal 2011), while the Trump administration acknowledged the transformation of the world order towards multipolarity by embracing the notion of ‘great power competition’ in its strategic documents. The term is also crucial for the Biden administration, which overtly designated Russia and China as the

⁸ The Council of the EU and the European Council. 2022. “EU sanctions against Russia explained.” Accessed October 16, 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>.

main rivals of the US in its “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” published in March 2021.

Meanwhile, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia firmly believes that Russia should be one of the main pillars of the emerging multipolar world with the US and China. From the Russian perspective, the West used the moment of Russian weakness in the 1990s to shape the European security architecture in such a way as to violate vital Russian interests. Since President Putin’s famous Munich Security Conference speech in 2007 (Kremlin.ru 2007), Russia launched consistent efforts to upend the post-Cold War security architecture of Europe, demanding the recognition of its legitimate special interests in its neighborhood. The Russia - Georgia war in 2008 and Ukraine crisis in 2014 were the manifestations of Russian growing assertiveness and resentment over the post-Cold War European security architecture.

Meanwhile, the Russian leadership probably believes that without control over Ukraine, or at least without pro-Russian Ukraine, Russia has no chance of becoming an equal pole with the US and China in the coming multipolar world. Late Zbigniew Brzezinski captured this moment in his seminal work *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, arguing that “Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire.”⁹

Where does Armenia stand in all this turmoil? Armenia suffered a severe geopolitical setback in 2020 due to a humiliating defeat in the 2020 Karabakh war. The loss of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic-Iran border and the approximately 75 percent of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic’s territory significantly reduced the geopolitical potential of Armenia. The war resulted in a significant increase in Russian influence over Armenia. Currently, Russia is the sole guarantor of the security of Armenians living in Nagorno Karabakh. It also protects parts of the Armenia-Azerbaijan borders by deploying small military units in Ararat and Syunik provinces alongside Armenia-Nakhichevan and Armenia-Azerbaijan borders (Broers 2022; Hess 2022). Armenia faces multiple security challenges. It should prevent the exodus of Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh and manage the complex process of Armenia-Azerbaijan border delimitation/demarcation and Armenia-Turkey normalization process. Yerevan should not allow Azerbaijani and Turkish large-scale economic penetration in Armenia, especially in Syunik province, as Ankara and Baku do not hide their intentions to impose *de facto*, if not *de jure*, control over the Syunik to unite the ‘artificially separated Turkic world’ (Donmez and Rehimov 2021).

The immediate consequence of the ruined Russia-West relations will be the restricted flexibility of Armenia in its relations with the West. Yerevan should do everything not to cancel its relations with the Euro-Atlantic community, but keeping the same level of relations will be challenging, if not impossible. Armenia will also suffer economically due to the West’s economic war against Russia. It is too early to assess the potential damage to the Russian economy and provide detailed assessments of its implications for

⁹ The Guardian. 2014. “The significance of Ukraine on the geopolitical chessboard.” *March 20, 2014*. Accessed June 1, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/20/significance-ukraine-geopolitical-chessboard>.

Armenia. However, the impact of the 2014 Russian economic crisis on Armenia, which was triggered by limited Western sanctions, may tell us that Armenia will face serious ramifications.

Armenia cannot avoid the consequences of the Russia-Ukraine war entirely. However, Yerevan should avoid a complete rupture of its relations with the West while not irritating Russia. In this regard, discussions and votes in international bodies on the situation in Ukraine are pivotal moments for Armenia. No one should expect Armenia to vote for an anti-Russian resolution, as that vote will immediately put Armenian vital national interests under the threat. Meanwhile, the vote against the resolutions may put Armenia against the West.

The US policy in the region in the context of the Ukraine war

As of now, the Biden administration has not elaborated a new strategy for the South Caucasus. The US would not like to see Russian influence increase here; meanwhile, it is not in a position to force its desirable solutions in the region. Most probably, the US will imply a cautious approach, seeking to decrease Russian presence in the region through persistent efforts to push forward for continued liberal reforms in Armenia and Georgia using the US assistance and the US leading role in the international financial institutions as leverage to influence the policy of governments. The US views the EU involvement in the region through the Eastern Partnership initiative as an essential supplement to push forward this agenda and welcomes the recent EU announcement on the new aid package for the regional powers.

The US continues to believe that the economic cooperation between regional states will not only contribute to the de-escalation of the situation but, in the long-term perspective, will result in the decrease of Russian influence in Armenia as Yerevan will feel less threatened by Azerbaijan and Turkey and thus will have fewer incentives to be militarily tied with Moscow. In this context, the US will support the restoration of communication routes in the South Caucasus and establishing economic ties between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Armenia and Turkey (Vartanyan 2022).

As for the role of Turkey, the Biden administration may hate President Erdogan and desire his removal from power in the upcoming Presidential elections, but this does not mean that the US will act against the increase of Turkey's role in the region. Regardless of who sits in the Ankara Presidential Palace, more Turkish influence in the South Caucasus means less Russian presence, and all actors know this truth quite well.

Conclusion and discussion

The modern US foreign policy in the South Caucasus before and after the Artsakh war of 2020 is being transformed, trying to constructively resolve the unstable political situation and geopolitical risks in the post-Soviet space.

The issue of state-building and nation-building in the post-Soviet space continues to be debatable, since the South Caucasus has again become a place of confrontation

between the leading geopolitical and regional powers, primarily the United States and Russia.

The author seeks to trace the process of increasing the strategic importance of the South Caucasus as a crossroads of transport and transit energy communications in the era of the post-bipolar world.

This problem has been little studied and requires further study, since the South Caucasus began to occupy a special place in the foreign policy interests of the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran and other countries. As a research task, the authors determined an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the US strategy in relation to the republics of the South Caucasus, taking into account a number of domestic political factors and understanding the doctrinal guidelines of Russia. In this regard, the strength of modern US foreign policy is understood as the ability to use its resources in the external environment, both real and potential, to achieve the desired goals in the South Caucasus.

Acknowledgements

This article was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.

References

- Broers, Laurence. 2022. "Is Azerbaijan planning a long-term presence in Armenia?" *Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 26 September 2022. Accessed Oktober 1, 2022. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/azerbaijan-planning-long-term-presence-armenia>.
- Crisis Group. 2021. "Post-war Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh." *Report 264: Europe & Central Asia*, June 9, 2021. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/264-post-war-prospects-nagorno-karabakh>.
- Crisis Group. 2022. "Nagorno-Karabakh: Seeking a Path to Peace in the Ukraine War's Shadow." *Briefing 93: Europe & Central Asia*, April 22, 2022. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/nagorno-karabakh-seeking-path-peace-ukraine>.
- Danielyan, Emil. 2008. "Iran-Armenia Gas Pipeline Inaugurated." *RFE/RL, Inc., December 1, 2008*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/1598643.html>.
- Donmez, Beyza Binnur, and Ruslan Rehimov. 2021. "New Azerbaijani connecting corridor set to unite entire Turkic world." *Anadolu Agency*, October 26, 2021. Accessed Oktober 1, 2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/new-azerbaijani-connecting-corridor-set-to-unite-entire-turkic-world/2403788>.

- EUR-Lex. 2018. "Comprehensive and enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part." *Official Journal of the European Union* L 23/4: 4-466. http://data.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2018/104/oj.
- Herszenhorn, David M. 2022. "US, NATO deliver written replies to Russia on security demands: Western leaders have called many of the demands non-starters." *POLITICO*, January 26, 2022. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-delivers-written-reply-to-russia-on-security-demands/>.
- Hess, Maximilian. 2022. "Russia Can't Protect Its Allies Anymore: Moscow is overstretched in Ukraine and Armenia is suffering the consequences." *Foreign Policy*, September 22, 2022. Accessed October 1, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/22/russia-armenia-azerbaijan-war-nagorno-karabakh/>.
- Kochnakyan, Artur et al. 2014. Armenia Power Sector Policy Note. *World Bank: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/488891467998515807/pdf/94-187-REVISED-WP-P133834-PUBLIC-Box391432B-Armenia-Power-Policy-Note-full-version-very-final-ENGLISH.pdf>.
- Krauthammer, Charles. 1990. "The Unipolar Moment." *Foreign Affairs*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1990-01-01/unipolar-moment>.
- Kremlin.ru. 2007. "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy." *Munich Security Conference, October 2, 2007*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/copy/24034>.
- Kremlin.ru. 2008. "Interview given by Dmitry Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Russia, NTV." *President of Russia, August 31, 2008*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/48301>.
- Kremlin.ru. 2020. "Statement of the presidents of Russia, the United States and France on Nagorno-Karabakh." *President of Russia, October 1, 2020*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64133>.
- Kucera, Joshua. 2018. "Bolton visits Caucasus amid anti-Iran campaign: All three countries lack American ambassadors." *Eurasianet, October 23, 2018*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/bolton-visits-caucasus-amid-anti-iran-campaign>.
- Lieberthal, Kenneth G. 2011. "The American Pivot to Asia." *The Brookings Institution, December 21, 2011*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2014. "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin." *Foreign Affairs* 93 (5) (September/October): 1-12.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2018. *The great delusion: Liberal dreams and international realities*. Yale University Press.
- Mehdiyev, Mushvig. 2018. "US Supports Southern Gas Corridor to Ensure "Strong Europe"." *Caspian News, February 19, 2018*. Accessed September 1, 2022.

- <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/us-supports-southern-gas-corridor-to-ensure-strong-europe-2018-2-17-20/>.
- Miller, Christopher. 2018. "U.S. Confirms Delivery Of Javelin Antitank Missiles To Ukraine." *RFE/RL, Inc.*, April 30, 2018. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/javelin-missile-delivery-ukraine-us-confirmed/29200588.html>.
- Nuruzzaman, Mohammed. 2020. "President Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign and Iran's Endgame." *Strategic Analysis* 44: 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2020.1841099>.
- ODNI. 2022. "2022 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community." *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, March 8, 2022. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2022/item/2279-2022-annual-threat-assessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community>.
- OSCE. 2009. "Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries." *Minsk Group*, July 10, 2009. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.osce.org/mg/51152>.
- Pifer, Steven. 2021. "Order from chaos. Russia's draft agreements with NATO and the United States: Intended for rejection?" *The Brookings Institution*, December 21, 2021. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/12/21/russias-draft-agreements-with-nato-and-the-united-states-intended-for-rejection/>.
- The U.S. Department of State. 2018. "New START Treaty." *February 5, 2018*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/new-start/>.
- The White House. 2021a. "Paris Climate Agreement." *January 20, 2021*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/20/paris-climate-agreement/>.
- The White House. 2021b. "Statement by Press Secretary Jen Psaki on President Biden's Phone Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia." *December 30, 2021*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/30/statement-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-on-president-bidens-phone-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia/>.
- The White House. 2021c. "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance." *March 03, 2021*. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>.
- Vartanyan, Olesya. 2022. "Türkiye, Armenia Take Tentative Steps toward Normalisation." *Commentary: Europe & Central Asia*, 18 July 2022. Accessed Oktober 1, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenia/C3%BCrkiye/turkiye-armenia-take-tentative-steps-toward-normalisation>.
- Wallsh, David. 2020. "The 'maximum pressure' campaign undermines Trump's national security strategy." *Atlantic Council*, February 12, 2020. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-maximum-pressure-campaign-undermines-trumps-national-security-strategy/>.
- Zakaria, Fareed. 1999. *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400829187>.

- Zakaria, Fareed. 2008. "The Future of American Power: How America Can Survive the Rise of the Rest." *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008. Accessed September 1, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2008-05-03/future-american-power>.
- Zarifian, Julien. 2009. "Iran and Its Two Neighbours Armenia and Azerbaijan: Resuming Relationships under America's Suspicious Eyes." *Iran & the Caucasus* 13 (2): 383-399.