

After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security

Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Eds.)

Study Group Information



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After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security

**24th Workshop of the PFP Consortium Study Group
“Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”**

4/2023
Vienna, July 2023

Imprint:

Copyright, Production, Publisher:

Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence
Rossauer Lände 1
1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by:

National Defence Academy
Command
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Vienna, Austria

In co-operation with:

PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes
Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Study Group Information

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July 2023

ISBN 978-3-903359-63-5

Printing:

ReproZ W 23-1326
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Vienna, Austria

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Acknowledgments

This booklet, reflecting the proceedings of the 24th workshop of the Regional Stability in South Caucasus Study Group held in Reichenau/Rax (Austria) on 03–06 November 2022, would not have been possible without the most appreciated support of the Austrian National Defence Academy (by means of Mr. Benedikt Hensellek), the Austrian Ministry of Defence (thanks to the commitment of Mr. Andreas Wannemacher), as well as the voluntary intellectual contributions of all the authors and participants. The Co-chairs are thankful for those essential inputs to the work of the Study Group. We would also thank LTC Olaf Garlich, deputy director of the Operations Staff at the PFP Consortium in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, along with Mr. Bernd Speckhardt, for helping organise the logistics for this workshop. Last, but certainly not least, the co-chairs would like to also express their heartfelt gratitude to Ms. Sara Milena Schachinger, who provided indispensable assistance to the work of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group on promoting peace, security, and regional cooperation. We thank her for her steadfast support, commitment to ensuring the best quality of our products and ability to multitask.

Abstract

This Study Group Information booklet gathered the papers and policy recommendations from the 24th workshop of the PFP Consortium Study Group on Regional Stability in the South Caucasus (RSSC SG), held in Reichenau/Rax (Austria), on 03–06 November 2022. This workshop addressed “After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security”.

February 24, 2022, will remain a landmark in European history: it is the date when Russian troops massively marched over the Ukrainian borders thereby crashing the basic principles of the OSCE-based security system. NATO and the EU have strongly reacted against the Russian war in Ukraine. More specifically, the EU has started to implement rounds of sanctions against Russia, and granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, while conditionally promising a similar status to Georgia.

Experts have long ago warned that the largest geopolitical risk stemming from the new pattern of “balance of power” conflict management in the South Caucasus was that the unresolved conflicts might end up entangled with the ongoing Russia-West geopolitical confrontation. Indeed, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and the ensuing Russia-West hybrid and economic wars, threatened the current geopolitical structure and arrangements in the South Caucasus, possibly leading into inherent geopolitical choices of the regional states; cancelled the prospects for cohabitation of the European and the Eurasian integration processes; and started to create geopolitical roadblocks to regional cooperation and infrastructure connectivity.

In response, the RSSC SG deployed all its resources and efforts in attempting through its humble means avoiding a further East European conflagration. Now that the geopolitical collision which had been feared has come to pass, the Study Group turned its attention to what type of future, and what type of security would benefit the South Caucasus. For the first time in many years, this workshop considered also points of view which were not strictly geographic from the South Caucasus, but encompassed Ukraine and Republic of Moldova.

The intention of this workshop was to stimulate thinking over the fast-evolving security and strategic environment in order to advocate for regional integration and the abandonment of hegemonic “guarantees” as best option for regional security.

Introduction

Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu

It would be an understatement to say that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has upended the fragile equilibrium between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic powers. Rarely, however, do we hear about the impact of that conflict on the fate of the South Caucasus. The 24th workshop of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) was a humble attempt at redressing this omission.

The co-chairs viewed this workshop as necessary on an academic level, and, of course, at policy level. This is why the reader will find the workshop's policy recommendations listed at the end of this Study Group Information (SGI) booklet. But, it was also necessary to have this conversation at functional level, for the future of the RSSC SG itself. This is because the Russian invasion of Ukraine threatens to impede the work of the RSSC SG. As those used to our publications and workshops know, the co-chairs pride themselves in being able to welcome representatives of all sides of the conflicts in the South Caucasus, and of nearly all national origins. As sanctions against Russia make travel and attending workshops more costly and difficult, the "Track-2" diplomacy role of the RSSC SG is impacted.

Our duty of care has us wonder what might befall those who join us in our discussions, and how the politics of association may affect participation. So far, the co-chairs have been able to rely on our extensive cadre of experts to maintain this role. These experts have shown their own brand of resilience and courage to be with us, and we thank them for sharing their views here. However, there is no denying that the format of our conferences may suffer yet greater changes as the war drags on.

If this is a consequence of the war on our endeavours, one can imagine the impact of the war on the South Caucasus itself. We were overwhelmed by the questions that assailed us. We have done our best to address them during the workshop, but alas, our best can only be partially successful. These questions were evident, but deep. Can Armenia continue to rely on Russia as

security guarantor? Will Azerbaijan not find an incentive to expand its control on areas that are not strictly Azerbaijani (this question seems to be answered by Azerbaijan's recent actions, but is the motive simply bilateral, or is it a function of a greater geopolitical shift is the real question)? What can be expected from the cease-fire between Armenia and Azerbaijan in view of the ineptitude of Russian troops? Can the Russians be trusted to maintain stability?

In a previous workshop, we had praised (and marvelled) at Georgia's new-found self-confidence in her diplomacy. As an emerging mediator in the South Caucasus, she had been able to re-invent her international persona as a constructive and capable actor that privileges responsible statecraft and problem-solving. Can this role be preserved when Russia's relative weakness has been replaced by the corresponding strengthening of Azerbaijan and Turkey (not to mention the appearance of an insistent Iran) in the South Caucasus?

Iran's emergence as a variable in the South Caucasus could be chalked up to the existence of an Azeri minority at its northern border. A constructivist theoretical approach would be satisfied by this. However, and, we would say, ominously, it is the realist approach which seems to win out, here. Indeed, both Iran and Russia are embattled and sanctioned by the international community. They have come to rely on each other in their own form of evil interdependence. Any impediment in the trade routes between the two can have grave consequences, and this is how we can explain Iran's increased recklessness (and restlessness) at the problems between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This has led Armenia to position herself momentarily between Russia and Iran as a way to offset Azerbaijan. One has to wonder as to the wisdom of this solution. How can security be purchased against a perceived menace by placing oneself between two rogue states?

Part of us would jump at the chance to underscore, once again, the enduring mission of the RSSC SG, which is also its most difficult; to stimulate a capable, durable and workable "strategic persona" for the South Caucasus as a whole. This requires all countries to set aside their differences and compose a future *together* precisely as a way to preserve national independence and security. If we are able to view the South Caucasus as an actor of international relations, it will be better able to withstand the pressures and demands of

would-be hegemons, whether they be Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, or even the EU and NATO. However, the co-chairs' work and expectations in that regard seem overshadowed by a rather large question mark because of Russia's invasion.

The reader now has an idea of the magnitude of our task. A rethink of the place of the South Caucasus (and how the RSSC SG approaches the region) was urgently needed. For nearly a decade, the co-chairs of this Study Group had endeavoured to progressively *narrow down* the scope of enquiry from one workshop to the next. This was possible, for a time, by the increasing stability in the region, and the trust we managed to build among our RSSC SG participants. As the reader will see from the table of contents, we now find ourselves reverting back to the examination of much larger questions and topics. We detect a concern for the region *qua* nationally inspired contributions. For example, Ambassador Dion's text and presentation has made a notable impact among our participants merely by underscoring the need for strengthened democracy in Armenia. Similarly, Elena Marzac, Kakhaber Kemoklidze and Elguja Khokrishvili consider the regional fate of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine respectively through the prism of Russia's invasion. Such is the magnitude of Russia's folly; the South Caucasus now has to merge its dynamics with other geopolitical regions, i.e. Central Asia and the Middle East, because of 30 years of interdependence. It is ironic that this interdependence, which many of us in the Euro-Atlantic sphere have erected as harbinger of stability and peace, might be a conduit for conflict contagion.

In that higher risk of conflict contagion, we detect the return – with a vengeance – of regionalism *versus* geopolitics. Benyamin Poghosyan and Ahmad Alili essentially view the flare-up of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a combination of factors, including long-standing unresolved bilateral issues, and Great Power competition. Similarly, Daria Isachenko, Boris Kuznetsov and Yeghia Tashjian explore balancing acts that stretch from the Caucasus all the way down to India by way of Russia and Turkey. There is no escaping the tyranny of geopolitics. Realism makes a comeback in the ugliest form possible; the one that completely ignores the benefit of commercial competition and supplants it with military might.

Admittedly, we live in “interesting times”, but the co-chairs of the RSSC SG refuse to be depressed by this well-known Chinese curse. We want to reassure the reader, and the members of the RSSC SG that we will continue to strive to constructively look for answers to the most pressing issues confronting the South Caucasus and its population. This SGI is but the latest fulfilment of that promise.

Supporting Fragile Democracies¹

Stéphane Dion

Until recently, one could say that a great achievement of diplomacy and international cooperation was their ability to have practically eliminated armed conflicts between states. Civil wars within states and terrorist violence remained, however, direct wars between states had been almost fully eliminated. Then came the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and, above all, Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine.

In such troubled circumstances, we still need to exercise diplomacy and international cooperation, effectively. We must not lose faith in these essential tools, so necessary for universal objectives, such as the one on which I will focus my presentation on today: the promotion of democracy.

Facing the terrible news of the return of war to European soil, we must redouble our efforts to promote the advancement of democracy, especially in a region as exposed to conflicting pressures as is the South Caucasus. I am sure this is the reason why I had the honour of being invited to deliver the keynote address at this important workshop, which has brought together some of the best experts of the South Caucasus.

In the letter of invitation that I received from Mr. Frédéric Labarre, instructor at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, and also co-chair of your Study Group, he explained that what garnered me the honour of speaking before you today was my 72-page report entitled "Supporting Armenian Democracy", which I submitted on April 6, 2022, to the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Mélanie Joly.²

¹ Keynote address delivered at the 24th Workshop of the PFP Consortium Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus: "After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security" by Stéphane Dion, Prime Minister's Special Envoy to the European Union and Europe and Canadian Ambassador to France.

² Stéphane Dion, "Supporting Armenian Democracy", Report presented to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Mélanie Joly, in the context of the mission to explore options for Canada to better support Armenian democracy, April 2022, <https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/armenia-armenie.aspx?lang=eng>. French

This report is the result of a mission that the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs entrusted to me, on July 7, 2021, to explore options for increased Canadian support for Armenian democracy. Since Prime Minister Trudeau asked me five years ago to be his Special Envoy to the EU and Europe, I have carried out missions in many countries, including Azerbaijan and Georgia, but none have been as comprehensive as the one in Armenia, which I am going to tell you about today.

Rather than detailing the content of my report, I will explain the method, or approach, I followed, which seems to me transferable to other national contexts in addition to Armenia. What I am essentially proposing is a support plan for fragile democracies. I will describe this support plan to you, in hopes of offering a useful contribution to your workshop, notably your editorial dialogue entitled “Building Resilience against Human Security Threats and Risks”.

In doing so, I will offer you my answers to two key questions: first, why support fragile democracies? Second, how to support them effectively? The why, then the how.

Why Support Fragile Democracies?

Essentially, a well-established democratic state can follow two approaches to foster democratic advances in the world. The first is thematic: it consists of choosing specific themes as priorities. The Government of Canada, for example, has decided that all of its foreign policy be viewed through a feminist lens. The promotion of women’s rights appears to us to be the best means of fostering social, economic and democratic development. To this central theme are added others, such as the inclusion of minorities, cybersecurity, or water management. Our government is, therefore, deploying programs focused on carefully chosen central themes.

The second approach is completely compatible with the first and is thus a useful complement. This approach is national rather than thematic: it consists of a well-established democratic state concentrating part of its aid on a

version: <https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/armenia-armenie.aspx?lang=fra>.

few specific countries, in order to help them promote substantial and lasting progress in their practice of democracy.

The idea is that it is not enough for well-established democracies to sanction corrupt and repressive regimes that mistreat their populations and threatened their neighbours. We must also encourage the good players, those countries that are striving, against all odds, to keep democracy alive, in conditions that people in well-established democracies can hardly imagine.

Admittedly, what these courageous democrats are doing is far from perfect, but it would be a mistake to look down on them. One needs to take into account the history of the country, the weight of its authoritarian past and its traditions, the weak entrenchment of democratic institutions and values, the precarious economic situation, or its geographic isolation in regions often grappling with instability and autocracies.

Well-established democracies should look at a map of the world, locate democracies under pressure and consider how they can effectively support them amidst the squalls and turmoil, while understanding that these democracies are attempting to persevere under extremely difficult conditions.

The proposed approach is to identify a country that is moving in the right direction – that is towards more democracy and not less – and to see how we can help it to continue and progress in this direction. This is exactly the situation of Armenia which, despite the enormous difficulties in which this country is struggling, is improving its democratic practices according to all international benchmarks, like the Democracy Index of the Economist, Freedom House, Transparency International, International Idea, etc.

The objective is, therefore, to help fragile democracies remain democracies and to improve. This is a very important issue, not only for the sake of democracy, but also for the sake of peace. I am convinced of the veracity of the Tocquevillian axiom, which says that the risks of war decrease with the advance of democracy. The more two countries in conflict move towards democracy, the more they maximize their chances of finding common ground and a peaceful settlement.

I have often been asked why my mission was in Armenia and not in Azerbaijan. My answer remains that when Azerbaijan makes decisive progress towards more democracy, Canada should consider ways to increase its presence there and support the democratic transition in Azerbaijan. More democratic states in the Caucasus could, in turn, contribute to improving peace and stability in the region.

This is why we must support fragile democracies. I now come to the how: what must be done to provide effective support?

How to Support Fragile Democracies?

The first thing that must be done is to put the question of the country's democratic practice at the heart of the mission. From this point of view, the parameters of my Armenia mission were very clearly defined. It was precisely and exclusively to assess what Canada can do to help sustain Armenia's democratic development during current critical times. Although my mission did not address the situation of Nagorno-Karabakh, I took into account that it is much more difficult for a democratic state to improve itself when it suffers the tragic human casualties, destruction and existential uncertainty of an armed conflict.

Likewise, issues of the broader region, like the influence of Russia, Turkey and Iran were outside the parameters of my mission. Nevertheless, I took into account the additional difficulties that these geopolitical constraints imply for the improvement of the Armenian democracy. Therefore, one must keep in mind the domestic and regional dynamics of a given fragile democracy.

The first stage of my Armenia mission consisted of carrying out numerous virtual consultations, in Canada, in the United States, in Armenia and elsewhere in Europe. Among my interlocutors, one will find Canadian officials and diplomats, representatives of Armenian authorities and political leadership, parliamentarians, civil organizations, Canadians of Armenian origin living in Canada or Armenia, academics and research groups, officials of like-minded countries or international organizations, businesspeople, etc. From all these consultations, four key observations had emerged.

First, the needs for the Armenian democracy are innumerable. It would be difficult to find a sector of activity within which the desirability of greater Canadian intervention was not raised. If my report had endorsed all these asks, my list of recommendations would have gone in all directions and would have thus doomed the Canadian intervention to ineffective crumbs. Essentially, it would have been a catalogue, not a strategy.

Second, there is a huge gap between the volume of expectations that have been raised on all sides, and the additional funds that the Government of Canada could realistically release.

Third, although there is no shortage of sympathy for Armenia among Government of Canada program managers, there is always a good reason not to put this country high on the priority list. What will be argued is that this country is too developed to qualify for the programs reserved for developing countries, or conversely, that its economy is too small and not dynamic enough to qualify for most strategic investments. Likewise, it will be said that countries that are politically more unstable and in worst shape than Armenia should be the ones to hold our attention, or conversely, that more stable countries are more attractive to invest in.

Fourth, a large number of like-minded countries and international organizations are already very present in Armenia and supporting this country in its development efforts. If Canada acted blindly, without coordinating closely with these numerous partners, our action would lose in relevancy or could even result in ineffective duplication.

Based on these four observations, which have emerged from my series of consultations, I developed a strategy made up of five criteria, which I consider applicable to other fragile democracies in addition to Armenia.

The first is to develop a five-year program, in consultation with the Armenian government, specifically designed for Canada to support Armenia as a fragile democracy. It is on the basis of this new criterion – that of a fragile democracy – that Armenia could stand out as a priority in our assistance programmes. Deriving from this, my first recommendation in this regard was to create an Armenia-Canada Consultation Table to plan Canada's support for Armenian democracy.

Second, Canada's overall strategy to support Armenia must be well coordinated not only with Armenians but also with the various international stakeholders and donors. The risks of duplication and poor coordination are real. It is necessary to identify the sectors of activity vital for democratic progress, where Canadian intervention and monies will have really unique and added value.

Third, for Canada's strategy to avoid dispersion in all directions, it must instead focus a significant part of its efforts on a flagship project. This project must correspond to: an expertise particularly developed in Canada; a sector vital for the improvement of a democracy; an initiative supported by Armenian authorities; a sector where Canada already has on the ground, concrete experience in Armenia; an initiative corresponding to a gap and so, where other partners are currently not present.

It turns out that there was a project underway that matched all of these criteria: the Parliamentary Centre (Canada), which was already involved in the improvement of the Administration of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia. I recommended that the Government of Canada provide the necessary resources to sustain this focused effort over the next five years. If, in doing so, Canada can help Armenia's parliamentary democracy acquire and develop more professional and efficient administrative support, Canada will have accomplished a great deal.

Fourth, in addition to this flagship project, other initiatives should be undertaken by the Government of Canada, which are desirable and complementary. I have, therefore, formulated very targeted recommendations, which respond to the requests of the Armenians, to which Canada can offer useful expertise, and which the other donor countries and international organizations do not already cover.

These targeted initiatives aim to support the Armenian Commission for the Prevention of Corruption and the Office of Human Rights Defenders in their efforts. I also proposed that Canada select and fund ten to fifteen projects a year to support NGOs, provide expertise to support Armenian efforts to protect and restore rivers and lakes, with a focus on the country's emblematic Lake Sevan, and create an internship program allowing Canadians to offer their expertise in Armenia.

Fifth, Canada's permanent diplomatic presence in Armenia must be strengthened. Although the strategy proposed in my report for materializing Canada's increased support for Armenian democracy is focused and reasonable, it will still require much more attention and effort from Canadian diplomacy than is the case today. Because of this increased volume of activity, I recommended that Canada open an embassy in Yerevan. On June 29, 2022, Foreign Affairs minister Mélanie Joly announced the opening of "a full embassy with a resident ambassador in Armenia, allowing for stronger bilateral ties and increased Canadian support for Armenian democracy."

Conclusion

In short, to best support fragile democracies, I suggest the following approach:

- To existing programs based on themes, add programs that are dedicated to the benefit of a few deserving countries that are moving towards democracy, despite enormous difficulties;
- In consultation with such a fragile democracy, propose for it a five-year plan, made up of initiatives that usefully complement what other donor countries and international organizations are doing;
- Develop a program with this country based on a core project, to which are added other carefully chosen complementary initiatives.

This is the approach that I proposed for the Armenian case, but which I recommend also for all fragile democracies. I hope it will be useful for your workshop, especially for your Editorial Dialogue on Building Resilience against Human Security Threats and Risks in the South Caucasus.

Introductory Thoughts¹

Alan Whitehorn

Hello, this is Alan Whitehorn offering greetings from Kingston, Canada. I am sorry that I cannot be with you during this timely workshop. I know how difficult it is to have thoughtful and meaningful discussions when there is so much conflict, tension and threats surrounding us. But it is even more important for all of us on all sides to keep listening, talking and learning from each other. We need to better understand both the background causes, as well as the current and future motivations. We need to comprehend both the hopes and fears of each other. In so doing, we try to plant the necessary seeds for a better tomorrow. As a political scientist, I endeavour to understand our complex and difficult realities through the analytical mind and reason. While as a poet, I seek to connect through the heart and empathy in a more personal and compassionate way. Together the modes of expression in the Social Sciences and the Arts can reveal multi-dimensional insights. I wish you the best in your deliberations and offer this new poem entitled “South Caucasus 2022”.

South Caucasus 2022

Too much disputed history fuelled by nationalist bellicosity.
Too isolating a mountainous landscape.
Yet a much sought-after geo-political strategic locale
that is surrounded by authoritarian regional powers,
with competing and aggressive imperial ambitions.
Seemingly incompatible legal demands
on national self-determination vs territorial integrity are proclaimed.
Together, they combine into an explosive mix.
A war-torn region seemingly fated for even more destructive war.
Advanced weaponry proliferating at an alarming rate.

¹ Delivered as video message at the 24th Workshop of the PFP Consortium Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus: “After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security” by Professor Alan Whitehorn, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston.

Where are the courageous voices for peace, truth and reconciliation?
Where are those that can shine a beacon of light and hope?
Instead too many recklessly point guns, artillery and drones at targeted enemies.
The grandmothers of the Caucasus continue to mourn their sons and
grandsons killed.

Too many women have been widowed.
The mountain rivers of the South Caucasus continue to flow,
but so does the bloodshed.

From diverse backgrounds,
we come together to search for a path.
We seek a better tomorrow
for our beloved children.
Above all, for our children,
to whom we wish no harm.
Let us pursue this challenging, but worthy goal.

September 28 – October 4, 2022

PART I: Georgian Security, Breakaway Territories, and NATO (?)

Imagining Georgia's Security Post-24 February 2022

Kakhaber Kemoklidze

Introduction

After Russia's unjustified and non-provoked war in Ukraine, the regional security environment became even more eclectic than it was before the 44 days war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020¹ and after the most recent escalation of violence among these adversaries in 2022.² In this new geopolitical paradigm in the South Caucasus, strategic partnerships and close ties with the West are becoming more vital for Georgia's national security and strategic interests than ever before.

In the current geopolitics, where we still have a large-scale ambiguity on how the regional security in the South Caucasus and the Wider Black Sea region are going to be shaped after the Russia-Ukraine war, Georgia remains restrained in its strategic manoeuvring towards Western integration. In Georgia, many think that after Russia's invasion in Ukraine and its strategic failures and multiple retreats from different frontlines, much of the world's unified response against Russia's actions, and most importantly, the European Union's (EU) shift in strategic thinking towards its future (Eastern) enlargement (to include Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), there is a rare opportunity for Georgia to implement decisive reforms and gain a trump card for its European and Euro-Atlantic future.

At present, public support for Georgia's EU and NATO aspirations remains quite strong.³ The majority of the society sees the Western integration as the

¹ Ali Cura (2020), *Azerbaijani army resolved 28-year conflict in 44 days*, Anadolu Agency. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/azerbaijan-front-line/azerbaijani-army-resolved-28-year-conflict-in-44-days/2056225>.

² International Crisis Group (2020), *Upholding the Ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia*. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-conflict/upholding-ceasefire>.

³ Agenda.ge (2022), *NDI survey: 75% support Georgia's EU membership, 69% committed to joining NATO*. Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2022/3551>. In the most recent poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in November 2022, "When

only chance for gaining real security, higher standards of life, democracy and proper economic development. NATO's Bucharest summit declaration in 2008⁴ and the newly opened EU candidacy prospect⁵ makes Georgia's strategic itinerary still viable even if quite challenging. Russia's ongoing occupation of Georgian territories, its soft/hard power influence on Tbilisi and permanent attempts to challenge and leverage its national security makes this road quite difficult and unpredictable. NATO's and its partner states' concerns about Georgia's ongoing occupation (which might be perceived as *de facto* veto on membership) and continued concerns over granting the Membership Action Plan (MAP), drives Tbilisi towards "out of the box" thinking aiming to find more creative and non-conventional solutions in order to overcome the existing *status quo* and move towards integration.

In this paper I try to give an insight on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspiration and whether this is indeed the true reason for Russia's concerns over Georgia. The paper also tries to examine some of the major security threats for Tbilisi under the current circumstances. How are Russian strategic interests linked to Georgia's Western path, and what were the reasons behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022? These will be some of the questions tackled by this paper.

The idea that if Georgia gives up on NATO membership and only consolidates its forces towards the EU integration could be a reasonable solution to averting current security risks, could, in fact, turn out to be a "trap" that would leave Tbilisi in a strategically ambiguous situation. These are some of

asked about the European Union (EU), 85% of Georgians either 'fully support' or 'somewhat support' joining the alliance" (IRI (2022), *IRI Georgia Poll Finds Strong Support for EU Membership, Disapproval of Russian Presence, Distrust in Political Parties*. Available at: <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-georgia-poll-finds-strong-support-for-eu-membership-disapproval-of-russian-presence-distrust-in-political-parties/>.

⁴ NATO (2008), *NATO decisions on open-door policy*. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/update/2008/04-april/e0403h.html>. At the Bucharest summit in April 2008 "NATO Allies welcomed Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership and agreed that these countries will become members of NATO. ... The Membership Action Plan (MAP) is the next step for the two countries on their direct way to membership".

⁵ EU (2022), *The European Perspective for Georgia*. The EU official web page. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/european-perspective-georgia_en?s=221.

the bigger questions often posed among analytical circles inside and outside Georgia and they are no easy questions. While it would be difficult to provide all the answers in a short paper, I will attempt to provide some insights on at least some of these key questions and will discuss some of the debates surrounding them.

What is Russia’s Strategic Thinking and What We Are Missing Here?

Much has been written – both in academic scholar, as well as in policy-oriented research – on the Russia question. How well do we know and understand Russia, its view of global and regional politics and how it conceptualizes the world around it? Does its strategic thinking shape its regional policy towards the South Caucasus, or is it based more on an *ad hoc* selective approach to the current geopolitical context?

In order to understand Russia’s strategic thinking, first it is important to identify its major strategic goals and interests. According to a prominent Russian scholar Dmitry Suslov, Russia has three major interests:

- Security
- Economic Development
- Status of Independent Great Power.⁶

Let us briefly elaborate on each of these dimensions. What exactly do they entail?

Security envisages: (1) identifying Russia as a “Nuclear giant” equal to the United States (US) by power and capacity; (2) establishing so-called buffer zones between the NATO and the Russian Federation; (3) having a capability to influence and shape geopolitical climate in its geographic proximity (including Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union countries); (4) dominating in the adjacent areas (including the Black and the Baltic Sea and in the former Soviet space); and (5) undermining trans-Atlantic (NATO and US)-centric security order in Europe.⁷

⁶ Dmitry Suslov (2021), *Russian National Strategy in a Multipolar World*, LSE Online Event. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMkpXwAwWM4&t=2010s>.

⁷ Ibid.

Economic Development implies: (1) Confrontation with the West with an easy to overcome scale of economic damage. It might be translated in the limited string of sanctions from the Western countries that Russia has already got used to and which is not detrimental for its economic development; (2) Confrontation with the West without highly sensitive and vulnerable sanctions, which might undermine not only the Russian economy, but also irritate the Russian business sector and oligarchs, turning against President Vladimir Putin himself; (3) Enhancing the relationship with some of Russia's non-Western allied countries in order to give the stimulus to its economy.⁸

Status of Independent Great Power means: (1) Keeping and enhancing Russia's status as a superpower; (2) Running domestic and foreign policy independent from any international constraints (3) Keeping Russia-centric military alliances (e.g. Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)) (4) Maintaining, and enhancing political and economic influence over its "Near Abroad", meaning that any EU and NATO alliance in this zone of influence is fully detrimental for its strategic goals; (5) Beyond its immediate neighbourhood, being globally represented in the areas such as the Middle East, African and Latin American continents, etc. (6) Using its veto power in international organizations and maintaining decision making at the international arena, independent from any constraints.⁹

All those three strategic interests of Russia largely explain its "rationale" for countering Georgia's, Ukraine's and Moldova's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations and visions. Moscow overtly considers these countries as the areas where Russia had (and still wants to have) the unilateral right to dominate. The alleged pretext that for Moscow NATO's expansion towards Europe's South-Eastern flank¹⁰ is the only real reason for their irritation and geopolitical nervousness is not a valid argument. In 2014, when Crimea was annexed, followed by armed violence in the Eastern regions of Ukraine

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Vladimir Putin (2022), "Resolve This Issue Now, Right Now.": Putin Talks Tough Against NATO Expansion, Warns Ukraine. Commentary made in the Kremlin. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dx9M0TeGQs>.

(Luhansk and Donetsk), Kyiv did not have any significant NATO aspirations. For Moscow, NATO expansion was simply an “excuse” behind which it disguised its real strategic goals and ambitions to keep Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine under its direct or indirect sphere of influence, dominance and supervision.

What Drove Russia to Invading Ukraine on February 24th, 2022?

While analysing the current Russia-Ukraine war, one of the main questions asked is why did 24th of February happen? What was Moscow’s rationale in escalating the situation in/around Ukraine at the end of February 2022? One can write long academic papers on this, but the space limitations of the current paper allow me to only engage in this briefly and provide shorter answers zooming in and out on some of the main questions. Below is an overview of some of these main points that should be taken into consideration:

“Zoom Out” Dimension

- a) From the global perspective the Kremlin thought that, in the recent years, Western liberal democracy, as a dominant political ideology, was largely weakened¹¹ and would lose its dominance in the medium term. Instead, autocracies, right-wing populism and ultra-conservatism were gaining ground. These trends opened up new geopolitical windows of opportunity that could help Moscow increase its dominance and influence in its immediate neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine). Moscow’s “ideology” does not recognize the rights of people to determine their future.¹² As a former KGB operative, President Putin seems to be inclined to think that governments should dictate their people the itinerary of where and how to go, rather than vice versa. Hence, according to this logic, Putin might have

¹¹ Lionel Barber, Henry Foy, Alex Barker (2019), *Vladimir Putin says liberalism has ‘become obsolete’*, Financial Times. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

¹² This statement was made in a private discussion with the author by one of the senior Federal Security Service (FSB) members of the Russian Federation team represented at the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) meeting in Gali (occupied Abkhazia) in 2016.

thought that if he did not act soon towards Ukraine, he could miss the chance to regain Moscow's dominance on Ukraine once again.

- b) The Kremlin thought that the US was facing unprecedented divisions and polarization internally. Putin seemed confident that largely because of this divisions and lack of leadership on the world stage, most recently, the international community shamefully abandoned Afghanistan and that the US lost its status as a world "superpower". Putin also realized that Washington's redirection of its attention to its (new) geostrategic rival China, upcoming mid-term elections in the US senate, and most importantly, President Joe Biden's clear opposition to sending American troops to Ukraine, seemed to create the "right time" to make a move against Ukraine and fill in the existing geopolitical vacuum in the region.
- c) Moscow thought that the EU and NATO were also largely divided and vulnerable. Russia thought that since they managed to build the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (even if it eventually became non-operational), despite strong opposition from some European states and the US, the same would be the case in Ukraine too. Kremlin felt confident that the Western division and indecisiveness over Ukraine would be even more prevalent in this case. Thus, Russia seemed quite confident that with the distraction of French President Emmanuel Macron with elections in France earlier this year and the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's party's reliance on the voters who were interested in getting the low-priced gas via the Nord Stream 2,¹³ it would be the right time to make bold decisions towards Kyiv.
- d) Personal ambitions of President Putin himself cannot be understated either. In his late 60s Putin thought that he could write a remarkable chapter in the history of modern Russia by reinstating its dominance in the area it considers its "sphere of influence". He thinks that his personal trauma when in the Dresden Stasi office on December 5th, 1989 when the Berlin wall fell and there was no one in Moscow to

¹³ Liz Cookman (2022), *Nord Stream 2: Why Russia's pipeline to Europe divides the West*, Aljazeera. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25/ukraine-russia-what-is-nord-stream-2-and-why-is-it-contentious>.

give their officers in Berlin proper instructions,¹⁴ could somehow be reimbursed by some sort of reassertion (resurrection) of the Russian power on the world stage.¹⁵ Mr. Putin believed that it is time to make another bold step in geopolitics and test the Western fragility again.

“Zoom In” Dimension

- a) Russia viewed, and still views Ukraine as the vital part of its history and Slavic roots. As Zbigniew Brzezinski once said “without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.”¹⁶ Moscow thought that through historical, demographic,¹⁷ and social-cultural ties with the Ukrainians, they have moral right to consider Ukraine as their subordinated “sister nation”. As Putin himself pointed out in his recent article (2021), “Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus” who have the same “historical and spiritual space.”¹⁸
- b) Since 2014, after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the opinions of Ukrainian citizens have become more pro-Western than before. According to the International Republican Institute (IRI), in December 2021, polls showed that 58% of the Ukrainians supported joining the EU, while 21% preferred joining the Russia-led Customs Union. With regard to NATO, 54% of the population was in favour of joining the alliance.¹⁹ The annexation of Crimea and the protracted

¹⁴ Chris Bowlby (2015), *Vladimir Putin's formative German years*, BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32066222>.

¹⁵ Mary Ilyushina (2021), *Vladimir Putin claims collapse of the Soviet Union forced him to work as a taxi driver*, SBC News. Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/vladimir-putin-says-ussr-collapse-forced-him-to-work-as-taxi-driver/>.

¹⁶ Simon Saradzhyan (2014), *Does Russia Really Need Ukraine?*, National Interest. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/does-russia-really-need-ukraine-9944>.

¹⁷ According to the World Population Review 2022, 17% of Ukrainian population are ethnical Russians. Available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/ukraine-population>.

¹⁸ Vladimir Putin (2021), *Article by Vladimir Putin “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”*. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

¹⁹ IRI (2021), *IRI Ukraine Poll Shows Support for EU/NATO Membership, Concerns over Economy and Vaccines for COVID-19*. Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/iri-ukraine>.

conflicts in Lugansk and Donetsk regions made even the Eastern cities of Ukraine, where predominantly Russian speakers lived, more antagonistic towards Russia.

- c) Over the last two years (2020–2021) Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky managed to largely undermine the Russian soft power instruments in Ukraine through several measures. (1) The Parliament of Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada) managed to pass a law granting the Ukrainian language the status of the only official language in Ukraine, significantly diminishing the status of the Russian language within the country.²⁰ (2) In January 2019, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew made a decision to grant the Ukrainian Orthodox Church official independence. As a result, the Ukrainian church separated from the Russian Orthodox church that it was tied to for centuries.²¹ (3) The adoption of the so-called anti-oligarch legislation which targeted Ukraine’s financial tycoons and tied them up to the rule of law, largely restricting their influence over the local politics.

- d) Following the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine, with the support of the Western countries (especially the US), the Ukrainian military has increased its armament and developed its infrastructure. As a result, it has become a significant balancer of Russia’s military strategic dominance in the region and in the Black Sea. Russia has viewed with caution (NATO member) Turkey-Ukraine cooperation in the military sphere, including the purchase and later agreement on the co-production of one of the most efficient Turkish Stricker drones – Bayraktar TB2. Together with the large-scale delivery of defensive armaments from Western allies to Kyiv, this has raised Moscow’s concerns over a “Hannibal at the gates” scenario.

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²⁰ Andrew Roth (2019), *Ukraine adopts language law opposed by Kremlin*, The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/25/ukraine-adopts-law-enforcing-use-of-ukrainian-in-public-life>.

²¹ Francesca Paris (2019), *Ukrainian Orthodox Church Officially Gains Independence From Russian Church*, NPR. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/05/682504351/ukrainian-orthodox-church-officially-gains-independence-from-russian-church>.

- e) Since 2014, significant work has been done by the Ukrainian and Western security/intelligence agencies in order to neutralize (or fully demolish) Russian spy cells in Ukraine to much of Moscow's annoyance. Historically, the Russian security officials have always relied on the security and intelligence operations within the post-Soviet space. For Russia this was a clear signal that in the coming years it could stay largely blind on the Ukrainian soil, losing much of its intelligence leverage on Ukraine's political and business elites.

- f) The Minsk 2 agreements, reached in 2015, were considered as a "Trojan Horse" of Moscow ready to be offered as a gift to Ukraine. Kremlin's calculation to force Kyiv to "legitimize" its proxy regimes in Eastern Ukraine, grant them "special status" and equip them with a veto power on Ukraine's foreign policy directions has failed. Ukrainian government managed to maintain textual ambiguity in this agreement in order to maintain some diplomatic leeway and continue to run a pro-Western foreign policy. Here Moscow's strategic calculus was to use Minsk 2 as the key detrimental factor against President Zelensky.²²

All in all, Russia's rationale in escalating military violence against Ukraine was more driven by the assumption that Moscow was losing its strategic leverage on Kyiv and if it did not act swiftly, the geopolitical "costs" for getting back Ukraine would be far more severe. The same assumption was made by Moscow in 2008, when invading Georgia and occupying its two territories (Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia). At the time, Kremlin assumed that Georgia's strong determination to move towards NATO membership, the April 2008 Bucharest summit declaration²³ opening up of a window of opportunity for Tbilisi to become a member of the alliance in the future, and the risk of EU's further enlargement in the South Caucasus, would fully undermine Russia's influence on Georgia.

²² Duncan Allan (2020), *The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine*, Chatham House, Research Paper, ISBN: 9781784134006A. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine-0/background-minsk>.

²³ NATO (2008), *NATO decisions on open-door policy*. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/update/2008/04-april/e0403h.html>.

As of today, Russia's military presence on the territory of Georgia could be considered as a *de facto* veto against Tbilisi becoming a NATO member state. Despite this obvious impediment for Tbilisi, Georgian public's continuous support for full NATO membership remains strong and may serve as a driver of the "out of the box" thinking towards reaching its strategic goals.

Are the Two Occupied Regions of Georgia a "Veto" on Georgia's Membership in NATO?

In October 2020, two scholars working on international relations and security, very much familiar with the issues related to the South Caucasus region and Georgia (Luke Coffey and Alexis Mrachek), wrote an article²⁴ on the possible solution to Georgia's NATO membership under the current circumstances where Georgia has two regions where Russian military bases are stationed.²⁵ These authors were considering the idea of inviting Georgia (with its occupied regions) to join the alliance, but effectively only covering the territories under Tbilisi's control under NATO's Article 5.²⁶ This idea was also based on the historic precedents (the case of Turkey and Greece in 1952; the case of the US on the Islands of Hawaii; the case of the United Kingdom (UK) on Falkland Islands, and the case of France on Algeria). Based on these existing practices, NATO would amend Article 6²⁷ defining

²⁴ Luke Coffey, Alexis Mrachek (2020), *End the Russian veto on Georgian accession*, Atlantic Council. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/nato20-2020/end-the-russian-veto-on-georgian-accession/>.

²⁵ In occupied Abkhazia there is a 7th military base (located in Gudauta district) and in occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia there is 4th military base (located in Tskhinvali district) of Russian Federation. Both military bases are part of Russia's South Military District.

²⁶ NATO (2022), *Collective defense and Article 5*. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm. "The principle of collective defense is enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Collective defense means that an attack against one Ally is considered as an attack against all Allies."

²⁷ NATO (2022), *The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington D.C. – 4 April 1949*. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm. "Article 6: For the purpose of Article 5, an armed attack on one or more of the Parties is deemed to include an armed attack: on the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, on the Algerian Departments of France, on the territory of Turkey or on the Islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer". Article 6 has amendment references: "(1)The definition of the territories to which Article 5 applies was revised by Article 2 of the Protocol to the North Atlantic

the particular territories of the member state where the collective defence principle of Article 5 could be applied. Coffey and Mrachek (2020) argued that Article 6 would need to temporarily exclude Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia from the application of Article 5 and this amendment could be carried out during Georgia's accession-protocol process. They emphasized the importance of making a clear note within the text that the amendment to Article 6 would only be a "temporary" measure, until official Tbilisi manages to fully restore its internationally recognized territorial borders by peaceful means.²⁸ Despite the fact that the idea looked quite promising and fresh, it was not widely discussed among the Georgian public at the time, but still triggered some discussions within the expert community.²⁹

Georgian government looked at this issue with caution as it had its own political turbulences and risks to deal with. Through the Russian disinformation campaign and orchestrated propaganda, the idea could be portrayed as an alleged "green light" from Tbilisi to give up on its territorial integrity and historic parts of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.³⁰ The latter could be quite a damaging factor for the government as it would undermine on the one hand, trust in government and popularity in the eyes of the Georgian community, and on the other hand, the latter's perception on the need for the NATO membership itself.

Treaty on the accession of Greece and Turkey signed on 22 October 1951; (2) On January 16, 1963, the North Atlantic Council noted that insofar as the former Algerian Departments of France were concerned, the relevant clauses of this Treaty had become inapplicable as from July 3, 1962."

²⁸ Luke Coffey, Alexis Mrachek (2020), *End the Russian veto on Georgian accession*, Atlantic Council. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/nato20-2020/end-the-russian-veto-on-georgian-accession/>.

²⁹ Based on the private conversations with some Georgian diplomats earlier, the idea on joining NATO with Article 5 only covering territories controlled by Tbilisi was discussed earlier (without much publicity) among some Georgian diplomats focusing on security issues.

³⁰ Even when the discussion of the idea was triggered by the American experts, the Russian disinformation campaign was swiftly activated against it in Georgia. The idea was immediately portrayed as the possible "betrayal" of the Georgian national (security) interests in favor of NATO and the West. The case was presented in the way as if the West wants Georgia to be a "puppet" within NATO, without its historic territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

In practical terms, this idea was very challenging and difficult to implement. Georgia already had made two legally binding pledges on the non-use of force to restore its territorial integrity in 2010 by then President Mikhail Saakashvili³¹ to the European Parliament and by the new government's (the ruling Georgian Dream party together with the opposition) bipartisan interparliamentary resolution in 2013.³² Hence legally binding pledges, made during two different administrations of the Georgian government, were already a strong argument that in the future Tbilisi would not try to get these territories back by force. In practice, it meant that any future Georgian government who would decide to regain effective control of the occupied territories by force would not have any international political and military support. It is noteworthy that in the case of Georgia having international political support in any matter related to the occupied territories is and will always be vital. Hence, from a political perspective, we could assume that having NATO Article 5 covering only the areas controlled by the central government of Georgia would not change any practical rationale for Tbilisi to maintain the peace dialogue with the *de facto* authorities as it gained large-scale security guarantees from NATO.

In implementing this political project Georgian government would need to rely on the whole government and whole society. It would need to take a holistic approach. It would need a supra-partisan political consolidation on this matter by all pro-Western (pro-NATO integration) political forces from the opposition to make sure that the ruling party's room for political manoeuvres and bold decisions will not be undermined by its internal political opponents. Domestically, together with the entire Georgian government's efforts and well-planned strategic communication, making the other sectors (oppositional parties, think tanks, expert communities, Orthodox church, NGOs and all relevant stakeholders) part of the process, would be vital for the success of the project. In this regard, the Georgian government would need to mobilize its supporters among partner states, especially within

³¹ Civil.ge (2010), *Georgia Makes 'Unilateral Pledge' of Non-Use of Force*. Available at: <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22880>.

³² Civil.ge (2013), *Parliament Adopts Bipartisan Resolution on Foreign Policy*. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/122665>. The resolution text was “*confirming* Georgia's commitment for non-use of force, pledged by the President of Georgia in his address to the international community from the European Parliament in Strasburg on November 23, 2010”.

NATO. During the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine this task can be seen as “mission impossible”, but if we looked at the crisis through the lens of opportunities it might be one of the rare chances to push the international community and partner states to consider granting NATO’s security “umbrella” to Georgia more seriously.

It is noteworthy that for the effective implementation of such (big) ideas and for the consideration of the “out of the box” thinking concerning such “grand” projects, it is important for the politically eclectic and largely divided Georgian society to have a stable domestic political environment. At the moment, Georgia is facing multiple security risks and ongoing challenges: the results of the five days war of August 2008 still drive Georgian society to fear another military confrontation with Russia. Several thousand Russian military troops and FSB Border Guard officers are still operating within the occupied regions and across the occupation line/Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) in both directions.³³ The so called “borderisation” process which has already turned into “creeping annexation” is being used as a leverage by Moscow against Tbilisi. Furthermore, permanent hybrid warfare (including massive disinformation and propaganda campaigns³⁴ and in some cases aggressive cyberattacks³⁵) makes Georgia vulnerable to everyday security risks. The most recent figures, concerning the state of democratic institutions in Georgia,³⁶ the deep polarization of the Georgian political spectrum and society, the unprecedented deterioration of the friendly and partnership relations with the Western strategic allies and friends have made Georgia weaker than ever. As for Russia, the Kremlin thinks that the less close Georgia is to the West, the more vulnerable and easier to manipulate the Georgian society will be. Weaker Georgia in terms of democracy, with damaged and

³³ Amanda Paul, Iana Maisuradze (2021), *Thirteen years on – 20% of Georgia is still occupied by Russia*, Euractive. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/opinion/thirteen-years-on-20-of-georgia-is-still-occupied-by-russia/>.

³⁴ Michael Godwin (2022), *Countering Disinformation in Georgia’s Fight against the Kremlin*, Georgia Today. Available at: <https://georgiatoday.ge/countering-disinformation-in-georgias-fight-against-the-kremlin/>.

³⁵ Ryan Browne (2020), *US and UK Accuse Russia of Major Cyber Attack on Georgia*, CNN. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/20/politics/russia-georgia-hacking/index.html>.

³⁶ Civil.ge (2022), *Georgia’s Score Continues to Fall in Democracy Index*. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/472269>.

significantly weakened relationship and ties with the West, makes Georgia even further away from the EU and NATO membership.

Conclusion / Recommendations

In light of the current war of Russia in Ukraine, Georgia's goal to get strong and sustainable security guarantees from the West is becoming even more vital. In this regard, the EU and NATO membership are the right and safer solutions for both Georgia and Ukraine. The analyses provided in this paper regarding some of the main reasons for Russia's escalation of the conflict in Ukraine makes us to assume that Ukraine's alleged NATO membership was not the real reason for this war. The same conclusion could be drawn in the case of Georgia, which was punished by Moscow in August 2008 for its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. In reality, Russia does not want either of these countries to become integral parts of the Western alliance (EU/NATO). Moscow sees it as a geopolitical/strategic defeat of Russia.

The sooner the international community realized this and kept the doors open, the easier it would be for both Georgia and Ukraine to reach sustainable security, peace, and prosperity. The occupation of territories of both of these countries should not be a "geopolitical impediment" for them to get full membership of the EU and NATO. As long as the Western states showed Moscow that this leverage worked, more pressure and instability Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine would endure.

The 2008 Bucharest summit declaration that Georgia and Ukraine will become full members of the alliance should be implemented. For this very reason Tbilisi and Kyiv should be ready for "out of the box" thinking. In this regard, the idea elaborated by Coffey and Mrachek on amending the NATO Article 6 and making Article 5 cover only the areas under effective control of the central government in Tbilisi should be taken seriously both by the government of Georgia and by the international stakeholders. Georgia should be more pro-active to test the waters in this regard and push for its own agenda with NATO's and member states' leadership regularly. In the meantime, Georgia should strengthen its democracy, implement an active reforms agenda, get the EU candidacy status, and significantly improve the relationship with its allies and friends in the West. Without the active support of the US as the vital strategic ally and "lobbyist" of Tbilisi it will be almost impossible to push forward with fresh ideas in support of Georgia's swift

NATO membership. Besides the reforms, which are very much needed for strengthening democracy, Georgia's government should unify the Georgian society on the supra-partisan issues such as NATO and EU memberships. Without a holistic approach, political polarization and further divisions in Georgia will continue. The Government of Georgia should lead the process on consolidating Georgia's divided political spectrum around such issues and should convince both domestic and international audiences that this is an achievable goal. When there is a will, there is always a way.

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How Does South Ossetia Feel Today about Neighbouring Russia?

Angelina Gromova

After February 24, 2022, when Russia declared a military operation and intervened in Ukraine, the world community was shocked. The state of shock and the impossibility to believe in the presence of war was caused in Ukrainian and Russian societies, as well as in the neighbouring states and territories. In a state of war the usual dogmas of international law aimed at providing human security, collapse. However, what happened on February 24, has forced many to revise their views on collective security, including post-Soviet states.

In this article, we are going to observe the security of partially recognized republic of South Ossetia. It needs to be noticed that in general the attitude towards Russia in the republic has not changed – more than 50% of the population has a positive view on Russia as an actor who helps to prevent the possible risks of “Georgian aggression.”

It should be noted that nowadays Russia does not seem to be interested in achieving the unity. Despite the fact that the referendum on the accession of the Republic of South Ossetia to Russia, expected to be held on July 17, 2022, was suspended by the president of S.O. Gagloev who was asked by Russia to do so. At present, we believe that Russia is not interested in any movement in South Ossetia because of the following reasons:

1. There is currently no threat to the Russian base in the South Ossetia.
2. In modern Russia, the ideological side has been focusing on “Slavism” for a long time; as a result, for the Russian side, the “Ukrainian question” turned out to be more “urgent” than Caucasian issues.
3. A referendum in South Ossetia to “join” the Russian Federation can be considered only after the end of the “military operation” in Ukraine.

Speaking about the internal situation in South Ossetia, we have to focus on the past elections. The former head of the republic, Anatoly Bibilov, was replaced by Alan Gagloev, who has been president since May 24, 2022. In general, the election procedure was fairly transparent, but as a president, Alan Gagloev has presented himself rather inertly. However, during his presidency, several steps were taken towards a “thaw” of relations between Georgia and South Ossetia. In particular, in the period from June 13 to 17, 2022, South Ossetia opened the road with Georgia through the Leningorsky and Dzausky regions in order to celebrate the Ossetian holiday and have a chance to cross the borders on foot. Possibly, even some economic cooperation may be expected within these regions, however only through exchange of agricultural products.

It should be noted that considering the security and weak cooperation between South Ossetia and Georgia the most successful field has been medicine (the Georgian government provides a special treatment program for residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia).

However, at present, it is very difficult to speak about any other positive shifts in South Ossetian-Georgian relations except for the mutual accessibility of their land borders, agricultural exchanges and medicine.

With the start of the military operation in Ukraine, there was not an “Ossetian mobilization”. However, a deep feeling of anxiety could be felt since the unofficial data were published on the @populationdemography telegram channel that in the neighboring North Ossetia the losses were on the third place within the whole Russian Federation. In South Ossetia, according to the Ministry of Defense of South Ossetia on October 26, 2022, there was no mobilization. However, about two thousand men were mobilized, part of them were Russian serving men, part of them were army volunteers.

It should be noted that despite the growing anxiety during recent events, there has been no sharp criticism of Russia in the South Ossetian society. Firstly, since South Ossetia sees Russia as a guarantor of security since the 2008 shelling. Secondly, for Russia, South Ossetia is an important outpost, since the South and North Ossetia rely on historical, cultural, regional and economic integrative processes developing on regular basis. In contrast to the direct dialogue between the two republics, there is no direct dialogue

between Tskhinvali and Tbilisi, which does not improve ties and cooperation. On the contrary, Georgia's pro-NATO rhetoric is becoming a cause for concern in terms of security in South Ossetia.

It should be noted that at the beginning of the conflict, Georgia showed itself as a state with democratic values, which contributed to the non-aggravation of the security situation in the region. Firstly, it did not take aggressive actions towards the South Ossetia, and secondly, Georgia accepted thousands of Russian refugees fleeing the Russian regime despite the absence of official diplomatic relations.

At present, given the security risks, we can conclude the following:

1. In general, the situation in the region has not changed. The population of South Ossetia has a positive attitude towards the Russian Federation and is developing integration with North Ossetia in many areas.
2. The current *status quo* allows security in the region.

It is possible that a more transparent and open dialogue between Tbilisi, Tskhinvali and Moscow would help increase the level of security in the region, but at present such a scenario is unlikely to be implemented. However, given the generally positive image of Georgia in North Ossetia, the development of regional economic cooperation between the three regions would allow maintaining a higher level of trust and security.

Georgia and the Search for Long-Term Security

Elguja Khokrishvili, Michael Sarjveladze

Introduction

Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine changed the entire international security environment. Depending on the outcome of the war, it could eventually undermine Russia's dominance across the South Caucasus region or reinforce it. The major geopolitical threats Georgia is facing today relates to the risk of regional instability, the occupation of its regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (so called South Ossetia), and the extremely polarized domestic political environment. Georgia's chances for obtaining the EU candidate status have been put on hold largely due to shortcomings on domestic political and economic reforms.¹ In view of the increasing geopolitical threats in the region, the issue of Georgia's neutrality as a strategic option is again being brought to the fore by some political groups, a favourite mantra of Georgian anti-Western forces.²

The Cold War experience shows that the Soviet Union viewed neutrality and non-bloc status as a form of strategic denial of states to Western powers. Russia is currently confronting both Georgia and other Eastern European states with new realpolitik challenges that once again sharpen the difference between states inside and outside NATO alliance. Therefore, some historical cases can offer certain criteria for today's debate on neutrality as an alternative security strategic option for Georgia.

¹ Kornely Kakachia, Bidzina Lebanidze & Shalva Dzebisashvili (2020). Game of (open) Doors: NATO-Georgian Relations and Challenges for Sustainable Partnership, Policy Paper No.18, Georgian Institute of Politics, September 2020.

² Civil Georgia. (2022). Self-styled Patriots Reiterate Moscow's Georgia Neutrality Demand. <https://civil.ge/archives/467888>. Accessed 21 Sep. 2022. In January of 2022, the Alliance of Patriots, a Kremlin-friendly party, joined with some 40 less influential politicians and political groups to form a coalition calling on Georgia to abandon its path of Euro-Atlantic integration and embrace neutrality.

While it is too early to worry about Georgia’s changing course, this paper intends to answer the following questions:

- What are the past policy experiences of the European neutral states suggesting to the contemporary debate on neutrality?
- Could neutrality as a security strategy be sustainable and compatible with Georgia’s sovereignty and independence?
- What are effective alternatives for Georgia in terms of security guarantees in the future?

The results of our analyses provide the following insights. First, before Georgia joins NATO there are no options that would fully guarantee the security of the state. Second, to ensure its own security Georgia should strengthen political and economic, integration with the West (EU, USA, NATO) and implement coherent internal reforms. Third, the development of economic cooperation with strategic partners in the region (Azerbaijan and Turkey), as well as with other Black Sea countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine) are not only desirable but also indispensable on the way to NATO membership.

Different Approaches to Neutrality

Neutrality is based on international law, and it consists of a state committing itself in advance not to support any side in a present or future armed conflict.³ In the history, formal neutrality agreements attempted to prevent a repeat of a major European war. For our analysis, two historical cases of Austria and Finland are interesting. Austria falls into one category, which adopted the legal status of “permanent neutrality.” Finland belongs to the second category, which has adopted a non-aligned status with a “neutrality policy” in peacetime. Of course, the historical and geographical contexts are very different, but nevertheless, these past experiences offer certain political lessons on Georgia’s neutrality as a security strategy that are potentially interesting to debate.

³ ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross. “Convention (V) respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907”. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2022.

A Permanent Neutrality

After the defeat of the Third Reich in World War II, Austria was able to establish itself as a sovereign state only in 1955, when Soviet and Allied forces left the Austrian territory, and this was associated with the declaration of Austria's neutrality in its constitution and the ratification of the Austrian State Treaty.⁴ The Austrian case is generally considered to be that defined as "permanent neutrality." Austria's status was not established in any other bilateral or multilateral treaty, but by a unilateral declaration of the Austrian Parliament through the so-called Neutrality Act. An important feature was its explicit recognition by other states. No guarantees of Austrian neutrality or guarantees of the territorial integrity of the Austrian state were given by external powers.⁵

The Non-Bloc Policy of Neutrality

After wars against the Soviet Union Finland has been forced to practice neutrality.⁶ In 1948, Finland acceded to a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union that contained a security commitment not to join any alliance deemed hostile to either party. During the Cold War Finland was limited in the full exercise of its sovereignty, and its opinions of Soviet policy were subdued. The term "finlandization" expressed this very fact. However, Finland retained its Western democratic system, market economy and sense of European identity during the Cold War and beyond. After 1989 in a new geopolitical reality, Finland decided to distance itself from a policy of neutrality.⁷

Neutrality or non-bloc status in the post-Cold War Europe was no longer significant in terms of security policy. Despite its policy of military

⁴ Roy Allison (2022). Ukraine and state survival through neutrality, *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 6, November 2022, Pages 1849–1872.

⁵ Franz-Stefan Gady (2014). Austrian neutrality: a model for Ukraine, *The National Interest*, 6. March 2014. <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/austrian-neutrality-model-ukraine-10005>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2022.

⁶ Especially the fierce resistance of Finland in 1939–40 and 1941–44, helped ensure the survival of the country's independence.

⁷ Allison, *Ukraine and State survival*...

nonalignment, Finland, like Sweden,⁸ pursued a strategy of gradual convergence with NATO, while remaining a non-member.⁹

Georgia's NATO Membership Perspective: Close Cooperation but No Membership

Over the past two decades, NATO membership has become deeply rooted in Georgia's foreign policy thinking. There has been a broad consensus among almost all Georgian political parties to support Georgia's membership in NATO and the European Union.¹⁰ The consensus on Georgia's NATO membership is backed by the majority of population in all respective public opinion surveys of the last ten years. Georgia has actively participated in several NATO-led missions, and it joined NATO's Enhanced Opportunity Partnership, the highest partnership status that the alliance can grant to non-members, which includes both military and political cooperation. Georgia, like Ukraine, was promised NATO membership at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, but fourteen years later both countries were still waiting to join the Alliance.¹¹

Given the Alliance's mutual defence obligations, NATO is reluctant to admit countries that have territorial disputes or unsettled borders, because this could trigger a large-scale military conflict. Russia is the main culprit, but it is nevertheless a geopolitical reality that cannot be ignored. The crucial question is; would NATO be willing to exempt the occupied regions from its collective defence clause, or would Georgia be willing to give them up *de jure* if that was the price of joining the Alliance?¹² Historical experience provides

⁸ Swedish neutrality is considered as historically grown. It is not legally defined and does not rely on international guarantees.

⁹ Allison, Ukraine and State survival...

¹⁰ Centre for Insights in Survey Research (2022). Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia, A project of International Republican Institute, Sept. 2022. <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-georgia-september-2022/>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2022.

¹¹ Mark Temnycky (2021). Time to Offer Ukraine and Georgia a Path to NATO Membership, The Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), <https://cepa.org/article/time-to-offer-ukraine-and-georgia-a-path-to-nato-membership/>. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

¹² Henrik B. L. Larsen (2021). Why NATO should not offer Ukraine and Georgia MAPs, War on the Rocks, June 8, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/why-nato-should-not-offer-ukraine-and-georgia-membership-action-plans/>. Accessed 28 Nov. 2022.

a clear example in the case of Germany, when only the Western part of Germany joined NATO in 1955 and the NATO Charter did not apply to East Germany. However, after the reunification of Germany in 1991, the NATO Charter was also extended to East Germany. There are other examples of NATO members that do not place their entire territory under Article 5 protection, including the US (Guam, Hawaii), the UK (Falkland Islands) and France (Reunion Island). Although there is a difference between these and the Georgian cases, a similar mechanism could be developed for Georgia. For example, some scholars and experts have proposed a model that envisaged Georgia's admission to NATO without providing security guarantees for the occupied territories.¹³

The occupation of Georgian territory by Russia is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon, so that some sort of unconventional thinking is needed about Georgia's future NATO membership. If the Georgian government did not signal to the capitals of the allies that it is ready to join the Alliance without Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region being subject to the protection of Article 5 until these occupied territories have been peacefully returned to Georgia, no initiatives can be expected from the Alliance on this issue.¹⁴

Most Georgians view the issue of integration into NATO in the context of the occupied territories. They believe that NATO membership would be tantamount to Georgia giving up these territories for good.¹⁵ Although the

¹³ Jam-news (2019). Former NATO Sec-Gen: Georgia should consider joining NATO without Article 5 applying to disputed regions. 11.09.2019. <https://jam-news.net/former-nato-sec-gen-georgia-should-consider-joining-nato-without-article-5-applying-to-disputed-regions/>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2022. Similar proposals were expressed by Lieutenant General (Retired) Ben Hodges and former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, as well as Heritage Foundation report's author Luke Coffey. They all have suggested that the Georgian government should consider joining NATO without protecting the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. See for instance: Luke Coffey (2018). How to Admit Georgia to NATO – Without Triggering a War. <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/how-admit-georgia-nato-without-triggering-war>. Accessed 26 Sep. 2022.

¹⁴ Ani Chkhikvadze (2019). Former NATO Chief Suggests German Model for Georgia to Join Alliance. Voice of America. 12 Sep. 2019. https://www.voanews.com/a/europe_former-nato-chief-suggests-german-model-georgia-join-alliance/6175632.html. Accessed 14 Dec. 2022.

¹⁵ Centre for Insights in Survey Research, Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia...

overwhelming majority of Georgians support NATO membership, there is no guarantee that, in the event of a referendum, a significant proportion of the Georgian population would vote in favour of Georgia's NATO membership without breakaway territories. The Kremlin is aware of this and tries to exploit any weakness of Tbilisi in this regard to gain influence over Georgian politics.¹⁶ The latest media monitoring report on Russian propaganda documented a significant increase in the intensity of anti-Western and pro-Russian statements in the Georgian media over the past year, which has unsettled a large part of the population.¹⁷

Why Neutrality Is Not an Option for Georgia?

Historical experiences with neutrality and non-aligned status of European states provide several important lessons. The formal declaration of neutrality would create a form of “permanent neutrality” (like Austria's neutrality law or Moldova's constitutional commitment) that would keep Georgia out of NATO. In other words, it would play in the hands of Russia which is trying to get a non-alignment or neutral status for Georgia. The paradox of Finland and Sweden abandoning their non-bloc status and seek NATO membership in 2022 confirmed that the Russian attack on Ukraine has changed the threat perception of neutral European states. This means that the neutrality of Georgia would imply giving up its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and in effect a capitulation to Russia.

The most common argument against neutrality – and probably the least convincing – points to Georgia's historical experience with “neutrality”, which ended in disaster. Georgia proclaimed neutrality in 1918 and in 1920, she signed the Moscow Treaty with the Soviet Union, whereby Russia recognised Georgia's independence and agreed to Georgian territorial claims. In return, Georgia undertook the obligation not to station anti-Soviet troops on its territory. Nevertheless, the above facts did not help Georgia when Bolsheviks occupied the country on 25 February 1921.¹⁸

¹⁶ Kakachia et al., Game of (open) Doors: NATO-Georgian...

¹⁷ Tamar Kintsurashvili & Sopo Gelava (2019). Anti-Western Propaganda-2019. <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/173>. Accessed 4 Nov. 2022.

¹⁸ Civil Georgia (2018). The Devil's Whip – scathing eye of the first Republic of Georgia, 13 Jun. 2018. <https://civil.ge/archives/258193>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2022.

In 1994, the Republic of Moldova declared itself a permanently neutral country through its Constitution. This status was included in all national security and defence documents. The Russian military presence in Transnistria – *de jure* a part of the Moldovan state – can be seen as a constant violation of this neutrality. Therefore, neutrality has arguably helped to maintain insecurity in Moldova, as Russia retained the ability to freeze the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict.¹⁹ Given Moldova’s increased vulnerability as a neutral state, it is more obvious that neutrality cannot be enforced, and Russia cannot be trusted.

Georgia’s neutrality is a Russian demand, and it would be a forced concession under territorial occupation or an existential threat to its political independence. It follows that for a neutral Georgia, the question of defence is related to the type of guarantees required for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. This would necessarily depend on an eventual withdrawal of the Russian military from the occupied Georgian regions. Only such “model of security guarantees” could be accepted where Western nuclear powers would act as guarantors. The dilemma, however, is that Western states will clearly rule out offering Georgia guarantees along the lines of NATO’s Article 5. The only possibility for Georgia would be that at least one Western nuclear power, (USA or UK) would give her legally binding security guarantees.²⁰

Finally, the neutrality debate in Georgia has always been equated with a pro-Russian policy, as it has regularly been conducted by parts of Georgian society that harbored pro-Russian sentiments; Russia itself has often supported the idea of a neutral Georgia.²¹ The discussion on neutrality as an alternative to Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration has so far not gained significant

¹⁹ Svetlana Cebotari (2022). The Republic of Moldova between Neutrality and NATO Membership Status. *Postmodern Openings*, Editura Lumen, Department of Economics, vol. 3, pages 83–91, October. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/lum/rev3rl/v3y2010ip83-91.html>. Accessed 26 Nov. 2022.

²⁰ Allison, Ukraine and State survival...

²¹ In 2020 before parliamentary elections, at least three parties have begun to advocate military neutrality or non-alignment as the optimal option for Georgia’s foreign policy. Of these three parties, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), a Kremlin-friendly party is the most important, as the APG is the only party that was able to clear the five per cent hurdle in the 2016 and 2020 elections and won six seats in parliament.

political traction and has not become part of the dominant discourse in Georgian society.²² An agreement on neutrality could only happen if most Georgians sought and accepted it. At present, neutrality is the preference of a minority among the Georgian public. A new public opinion survey from August 2022 found that a majority remained confident that Georgia would benefit more from EU-NATO integration than from closer ties with Russia. A plurality has also said that Russia and the occupied regions prevented Georgia from getting NATO membership. The Eurosceptic forces in Georgia are still a minority.²³

Georgia in Search of Effective Security Alternatives

Over the past decade, Georgia has avoided a confrontation with Russia and tried to pursue a balancing policy. Georgia generally reacted with restraint to Russia's war against Ukraine. The reasons for this restraint are to be traced to Russia's influence on the South Caucasus region and its key role in the regional conflicts. Georgia refused to participate in the international sanctions against Russia and it has officially taken the position that it will stay out of the war.²⁴

Even before the war the government has pursued a "let's not irritate Russia" policy through self-restraint and economic *rapprochement*. Georgia's apparent neutrality is often criticised by policy experts calling it as a euphemism for the "*finlandization*" of the country.²⁵ However, Russia has continued to use military, political and informational tools to achieve its goals in the South

²² Levan Kakhishvili (2020). Georgian party political discourse on foreign policy non-alignment: How has the meaning changed since 1992?, Policy Memo No 38, Georgian Institute of Politics. <https://gip.ge/publication-post/georgian-party-political-discourse-on-foreign-policy-non-alignment-how-has-the-meaning-changed-since-1992/>. Accessed 4 Nov. 2022.

²³ Centre for Insights in Survey Research, Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia...

²⁴ Civil Georgia. (2022). Georgia won't Join Russia Sanctions, PM Says. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/475153>. Accessed 27 Sep. 2022.

²⁵ Kornely Kakachia, Bidzina Lebanidze, Hanna Shelest, Maksym Khyhko, Ahmad Alili, Anar Valiyev & Salome Kandelaki (2022). The Black Sea Security after Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Views from Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. 10.13140/RG.2.2.32911.66729. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363852146_The_Black_Sea_Security_after_Russian_Invasion_of_Ukraine_Views_from_Ukraine_Georgia_and_Azerbaijan/citation/download. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Caucasus unsettled conflicts. The ongoing “*creeping occupation*” (illegal shifts of the *de facto* borderline) of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali is the Kremlin’s tactic to undermine Georgia’s sovereignty.²⁶

Despite the increasingly stronger Common Foreign and Security Policy role of the EU, the Union cannot be an alternative to NATO in terms of hard security.²⁷ The EU membership also entails an obligation to respect the territorial integrity of member states.²⁸ In contrast to NATO, an important difference is that in the event of an armed attack, the EU states do not necessarily have to enter the war and can limit themselves to purely civilian measures. The EU’s mutual assistance clause has never been used in the case of a military attack, and even some neutral EU states are seeking NATO membership due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The EU membership is thus not a realistic security guarantee for Georgia. However, the EU candidate status would give Georgia the opportunity to be seen as an integral part of the Western community and it would give her the chance for greater political cooperation on security issues, as well as the strengthening of state institutions. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for Georgia to demonstrate through its actions her strategic commitment to the European integration.

Conclusion

In the 30 years since its independence, Georgia has tried to escape from Russia’s sphere of influence by turning towards NATO and the EU. It is not only a values-based conviction, but also a historical choice of the country. Some 15 years after the 2008 NATO Summit that stated that Georgia would become a member there is still no timetable for Tbilisi to obtain the Membership Action Plan (MAP).

²⁶ So-called ‘borderisation’ of occupied territories has become an unstoppable reality restricting freedom of movement across the *de facto* border, briefly detaining and fining dozens of people for ‘illegal’ border crossings. (Kakachia 2018).

²⁷ Kakachia et al. The Black Sea Security after Russian Invasion of Ukraine...

²⁸ European Union (2022). Article 42(7) TEU – The EU’s mutual assistance clause, 06.10.2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/article-427-teu-eus-mutual-assistance-clause_en. 2022. Accessed 7 Nov. 2022.

The war in Ukraine has increased the threats against Georgia's security and in the absence of a clear prospect of NATO membership the question arose whether neutrality could be effective as a security policy for Georgia. The most serious arguments against Georgia's neutrality are, firstly, the rejection by the majority of the population of a forced "*finlandization*" of the country, and, secondly, the lack of practical and credible mechanisms of neutrality in the contemporary context, as Georgia's neutrality could not be guaranteed by major Western nuclear powers. The recent cases of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova showed that Russia could ignore the neutral status and carry out aggressive actions in spite of it. Therefore, a formal recognition of neutrality, which can be attractive in theory, would not help Georgia to resolve the conflicts and strengthen its security. Therefore, Georgia should avoid the neutrality trap at any cost.

The ambition to join NATO is not only about security, but also about the democratic development of the country. Integration into NATO is closely linked to a commitment to democratic values. The NATO Enlargement Study stated that candidates must "promote and support democratic reforms, including civilian and democratic control over the military."²⁹

Despite NATO's promise, Georgia needs to convince sceptical NATO members of its value by implementing the reforms demanded by NATO and the EU to further strengthen her resilience against internal and external threats. On the path to Euro-Atlantic integration, the continuation of military, economic and political reforms by the government will be the basis for Georgia's success.³⁰

²⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2008). 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement. 05.11.2008. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24733.htm. Accessed 28 Nov. 2022.

³⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022). BTI 2022 Country Report – Georgia. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung. https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2022_GEO.pdf. Accessed 14 Nov. 2022.

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Turkey, Russia, and Iran in the South Caucasus: How Manageable Is Their Competition amidst the Ukraine War?

Daria Isachenko

Introduction

In December 2021, Moscow hosted the first meeting of the South Caucasus regional platform 3+3. The idea behind this initiative has been to bring together Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia together with their important neighbours – Turkey, Russia, and Iran – to deal with the questions of security and transportation links in the region.¹ Despite having a heavy historical legacy of rivalry, Turkey, Russia, and Iran have recently gained significant experience to manage their differences. In Syria, for instance, the three established the Astana Format in 2016. What binds this competitive triangle together is primarily the idea that they can best safeguard their interests in the neighbouring regions by limiting the access to the Western actors.

The involvement of the West in the South Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been greatly fluctuating.² However, the emergence of parallel negotiation tracks in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the 2020 war attests the increasing attention by the US and the EU in the

¹ Georgia has been reluctant to join this regional initiative because it sees itself as being part of the wider Black Sea region, as opposed to being constrained within the South Caucasus. Cf. Kemoklidze, Kakhaber (2022): Security and Economic “Cross-Pollination”: The Case of Georgia. In: Labarre, Frederic; Niculescu, George (Eds.): Peace Building through Economic and Infrastructure Integration in the South Caucasus. Vienna: Study Group Information – Austrian National Defence Academy in co-operation with the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, 85–98.

² German, Tracey C. (2007): Visibly Invisible: EU Engagement in Conflict Resolution in the South Caucasus. In: *European Security* 16 (3-4), 357–374; Rumer, Eugene; Sokolsky, Richard; Stronski, Paul (2017): U.S. Policy Toward the South Caucasus: Take Three. CEIP, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/31/u.s.-policy-toward-south-caucasus-take-three-pub-70122>; Stronski, Paul (2021): The Shifting Geography of the South Caucasus. CEIP, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/23/shifting-geography-of-south-caucasus-pub-84814>.

developments of the region. Especially after 24 February 2022, the South Caucasus gained in value for the West not only because of alternative energy resources but also as a geopolitical arena to contain Moscow.

Amidst the ongoing confrontation between Russia and NATO, it is worth addressing the question what implications the Ukraine war is likely to have on the regional competition between Turkey, Russia, and Iran? What is it that keeps Ankara, Moscow, and Teheran in the South Caucasus? How do they manage their interests? What role does Russia play in this uneasy triangle? These questions are of particular importance, especially given a widespread conviction that Russia's war against Ukraine is undermining Kremlin's role elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, primarily so in the South Caucasus.³

What Is at Stake for Russia, Iran, and Turkey in the South Caucasus?

Whereas in the West, the South Caucasus has often been described as Russia's "backyard", in Moscow's view the region has been "the most daunting source of all military threats for Russia for 30 years".⁴ This has to do with an intricate connection between the South and North Caucasus that makes the region as a whole a domestic issue for Russia in terms of its own security.⁵ From Moscow's perspective, the problem is not only the possibility of NATO expansion in the South Caucasus but also the use of conflict potential in the North Caucasus by the Western actors with the intent of questioning Russia's territorial integrity. In his speech on 24 February 2022, Russia's president Vladimir Putin explicitly mentioned the involvement of "the so-called collective West" that was "actively supporting separatism and gangs of mercenaries in southern Russia" in the 1990s and the early 2000s.⁶

³ Tafuro Ambrosetti, Eleonora (2022): Russia's Declining Power Shakes the South Caucasus. ISPI: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, <https://www.ispi-online.it/en/publicazione/russias-declining-power-shakes-south-caucasus-36637>.

⁴ Sushentsov, Andrey; Neklyudov, Nikita (2020): The Caucasus in Russian foreign policy strategy. In: *Caucasus Survey* 8 (2), 127–141.

⁵ The complicated place of the North Caucasus in Russia has been aptly described as "Inner Abroad". Halbach, Uwe (2015): Russland im Süd- und im Nordkaukasus: Zwischen "Nahem Ausland" und "Innerem Ausland". In: *Osteuropa* 7 (10), 383–406.

⁶ Address by the President of the Russian Federation (2022): The Kremlin, Moscow, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

Russia, thus, perceives the two parts of the Caucasus, the North and the South, as indivisible since both constitute “a unified sphere of interest, source of vulnerability, and field of responsibility”.⁷ Given the predominant security focus in how Russia views the Caucasus its policy has been marked by a mixture of hard power means such as having military bases, sending peacekeeping forces and stationing of border guard troops on external borders of the former Soviet Union.⁸ In addition to security concerns, the region also matters to Russia in terms of economic ties, presence of diaspora, and connections to other regions such as the Caspian Basin and the Black Sea.

When it comes to Ankara, its vital security interests currently lie elsewhere: the potential threat to its territorial integrity Turkey sees as stemming from Syria and Iraq, while in the Aegean Sea tensions between Turkey and Greece revolve around the sovereignty question. Turkey’s quest for a greater role in the South Caucasus is, however, connected to Ankara’s power projection, more specifically to its aspiration for “strategic autonomy”.⁹

Turkey’s special bond to the South Caucasus created its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan that has been strengthened after the 2020 war and documented in the Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between Ankara and Baku signed in June 2021. Furthermore, Turkey’s connection to the region includes trilateral schemes of cooperation, including on defence and security, together with Azerbaijan and Georgia. The three are also bound by major energy projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) as well as Trans-Anatolian (TANAP) and Trans-Adriatic (TAP) natural gas pipelines.

Of particular importance for Turkey is that the South Caucasus presents Ankara with a gateway to Central Asia. In fact, in the foreign policy thinking of Ankara both the South Caucasus and Central Asia are closely connected and

⁷ Sushentsov, Andrey; Neklyudov, Nikita (2020), op. cit, 4.

⁸ Naumkin, Vitaly (2002): Russian Policy in the South Caucasus. In: *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 1 (3), 31–37.

⁹ Notte, Hanna; Kane, Chen (2022): Russian-Turkish Relations and Implications for U.S. Strategy and Operations. CNS Occasional Paper #56, <https://nonproliferation.org/op56-russian-turkish-relations-and-implications-for-u-s-strategy-and-operations/>.

treated accordingly as an indivisible space.¹⁰ Both regions form the basis of the “Turkic World” that in Ankara’s view used to cover the geographic range “from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China”.¹¹ Capitalising on the Turkic connection, the Turkic Council was established in 2009 that apart from Turkey includes Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Among observer states are currently Hungary and Turkmenistan. In 2021, the Turkic Council was renamed into the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), signalling the growing agenda of the “Turkic World”.

Unlike Turkey, Iran does not have strategic energy connections in the region, nor multilateral institutional frameworks. But similar to Russia’s security concerns, Iran also views the South Caucasus as a source of external threats that may affect Iran’s territorial integrity in the already unfriendly regional surrounding. In this regard, particularly worrying for Iran is the ongoing cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel. This is assessed by Teheran as being targeted against Iran itself which brings the risk of an additional layer of confrontation to the South Caucasus.¹²

Thus, Turkey, Iran and Russia have not only high security stakes in the South Caucasus but also power projection ambitions with the 3+3 platform serving as a ‘*check and balance*’ tool. If Russia’s role is assumed to be diminishing, what implications this might have for the rivalry between Turkey and Iran in the region? It is thus worth examining the triangle in terms of their bilateral partnerships. Russia’s relations with Turkey have been characterised as “fragile and flexible”.¹³ Compared to Turkey’s relations with Iran, fragility in the Ankara-Moscow partnership is however less of a problem because it is sustained

¹⁰ Köstem, Seçkin (2019): Geopolitics, identity and beyond: Turkey’s renewed interest in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In: Erşen, Emre; Köstem, Seçkin (Eds.): Turkey’s pivot to Eurasia. Geopolitics and foreign policy in a changing world order. Abingdon: Routledge (Rethinking Asia and international relations), 111–128.

¹¹ Erşen, Emre (2013): The Evolution of ‘Eurasia’ as a Geopolitical Concept in Post-Cold War Turkey. In: *Geopolitics* 18 (1), 24–44.

¹² Poghosyan, Benyamin (2022): Azerbaijan becomes a new battlefield for Iran-Israel rivalry. In: *Armenian Weekly*, 16 November 2022, <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/11/16/azerbaijan-becomes-a-new-battlefield-for-iran-israel-rivalry/>.

¹³ Suchkov, Maxim (2020): Russia and Turkey: Flexible Rivals. CEIP: Carnegie, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/81330>.

by an intricate web of interdependencies. In other words, Turkey-Iran relations are less interdependent and therefore are more prone to uncontrollable tensions. Relatedly, it is possible to assume that if we look at the triangle as a whole it is Moscow's relations with Ankara that serve as means to balance the rivalry between Ankara and Teheran.

Turkey-Russia Relations

Russia does not consider Turkey as a “strategic ally”, but Ankara has become “a very close partner” for Moscow.¹⁴ This relationship gained in force since the summer 2016 as Turkey sought dialogue with Moscow over Syria after the fighter jet crisis in November 2015. The high degree of “leadership diplomacy” between Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, certainly matters. Nevertheless, this partnership cannot be reduced to mere personal chemistry. Instead, it is based on three key pillars: predictability, prospects for future cooperation, and the management of an interdependent power balance.

A foreign leader that Putin praises most is indeed Erdogan. On 17 December 2020, Putin highlighted what it is that he appreciates about the Turkish leader: “He [Erdogan] keeps his word like a real man. He does not wag his tail. If he thinks something is good for his country, he goes for it. This is about predictability”.¹⁵ This key lesson came at a price. In the fall of 2015, with Russia's intervention in Syria, Putin also counted on Erdogan. At that time, however, their interests in Syria were irreconcilable. Importantly, the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet by Turkish air forces on 24 November 2015 did not cause the unprecedented crisis, but was rather symptomatic of a dire state of Moscow-Ankara relations back then.¹⁶ While Putin famously referred to the incident as a “stab in the back”, a more important reason, however, was presumably Erdogan's decision to turn to NATO rather than Putin following the shooting down, although Moscow had been willing to

¹⁴ “Rossija nikogda ne nazyvala Turciju strategicheskim sojuznikom, zajavil Lavrov” [Russia has never called Turkey a strategic ally, Lavrov said], RIA Novosti (online), 14 October 2020, <https://ria.ru/20201014/sojuznik-1579720492.html>.

¹⁵ “Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference”, press release, Novo-Ogaryovo, Moscow, 17 December 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/64671>.

¹⁶ Özertem, Hasan Selim (2017): Turkey and Russia: A Fragile Partnership. In: *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (Winter), 121–134.

cooperate with Ankara on “the issues that were sensitive to Turkey”, even though they did “not fit into the context of international law”.¹⁷

Turkey on the other hand learned that the break-up of relationship with Russia is more costly than the price of maintaining it.¹⁸ The re-established dialog with Moscow after normalisation in 2016 has allowed not only the return of Russian tourists to Turkey, but, more importantly, the conduct of Turkey’s military operations in Syria. Moscow in turn has benefited from Ankara’s involvement in the Astana Format, which given Turkey’s links with Syrian opposition groups effectively legitimised this platform, as well as from the resumption of the TurkStream natural gas pipeline construction. What helped Moscow and Ankara to overcome their differences was thus not only understanding and addressing each other’s security concerns, but the future prospect of mutual benefits that this partnership brings to them.¹⁹

Syria has thus become the glue that holds the Moscow-Ankara partnership together. It has contributed to the strengthening of not only bilateral relations that include further cooperation in nuclear technology and acquisition of complex weapons systems, but also to the expansion of regional conflict management schemes. If the balance is upset in one of these areas, it may well spill over into others, including regional conflicts, particularly in the Middle East and South Caucasus. Whereas the Russian leadership seems to make no illusions about Turkey’s anchoring in the West via Ankara’s NATO membership, whereby Moscow’s feeling of military superiority also plays a

¹⁷ “Vladimir Putin’s Annual News Conference”, press release, Moscow, 17 December 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50971>.

¹⁸ Aydın-Düzgüt, Senem; Balta, Evren; O’Donohue, Andrew (2020): Turkey, Russia and the West: Reassessing Persistent Volatility, Asymmetric Interdependence, and the Syria Conflict. Istanbul Policy Center.

¹⁹ This idea is based on the concept “shadow of the future”, elaborated by Robert Axelrod, that explains the emergence of cooperation where trust is not a necessary requirement. More important are the repeated interactions and the mutual rewards hoped for from future cooperation. In the mid-1990s, for example, the prospect of a profitable collaboration in the energy sector (Blue Stream) helped Russia and Turkey to reconcile their security interests regarding the PKK and Chechnya. Cf. Isachenko, Daria (2021): Turkey and Russia: The Logic of Conflictual Cooperation. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. SWP Research Paper 2021/RP 07.

role,²⁰ it is above all the increasing interdependencies that make it costly for both sides to turn from cooperation to conflict.

Turkey-Iran Relations

Like Ankara-Moscow partnership, relations between Turkey and Iran are also marked by conflict and cooperation.²¹ However, as mentioned above, the relationship between Ankara and Teheran is less interdependent that makes it less solid as well as less manageable. Furthermore, one of the key dynamics that influences Teheran's relations with Ankara is Turkey's ambivalent connection with the West. At stake here is the question whether Turkey acts on its own or on behalf of the West.²² That Turkey is a NATO member also matters to Russia. For the Kremlin Turkey is anchored in the West but it is keen on making consistent use of instances when Turkey's interests are at odds with Ankara's NATO partners. Besides, interdependent ties between Turkey and Russia, which have also been growing since the start of the Ukraine war, are likely to keep this partnership afloat. For Iran, Turkey's relations with the West are more suspicious.

What used to bind Turkey and Iran together in the Middle East, for instance, was the perception that they both would be excluded from the regional order that would be dominated by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and the US.²³ This dynamic has changed with Ankara striving for normalisation in the Middle East, also including with Israel.

²⁰ Bordachev, Timofei (2020): Horoshij vrag Turcija [Good enemy Turkey]. In: *Russia in Global Affairs*, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/horoshij-vrag-turczija/>.

²¹ Azizi, Hamidreza; Çevik, Salim (2022): Turkish and Iranian involvement in Iraq and Syria: Competing strategies, rising threat perceptions, and potentials for conflict. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP Comment 2022/C 58).

²² For a review of how Turkey's connection to the West is viewed in Ankara's policy towards the South Caucasus see, among others, Markedonov, Sergey (2016): *Russia-Turkey Relations and Security Issues in the Caucasus*. Valdai Discussion Club (#45 Valdai Papers), <https://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/russia-turkey-relations-and-security-issues-in-the-caucasus/>.

²³ Dalay, Galip (2021): *Turkish-Iranian Relations Are Set to Become More Turbulent*. German Marshall Fund, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkish-iranian-relations-are-set-become-more-turbulent>.

Turkey's growing role in the South Caucasus and Central Asia are also viewed with more suspicion in Teheran than in Moscow. Officially, Russia is not worried about Ankara's intentions with a supranational Turkic vision in the shared neighbourhood, as Moscow counts on the fact that none of the countries concerned would be willing to give up their sovereignty.²⁴ Perhaps paradoxically, but the multi-vector policy, that is diversification of foreign policy ties by post-Soviet states, which has been viewed by Moscow as being directed against Russia, may be seen as a comfort for the Kremlin after all. The case in point, for instance, is Azerbaijan that in addition to its very close partnership with Turkey is no less interested to build up the relationship with Russia not least to balance the partnership with Turkey. Iran, by contrary, views Turkey's policy through the prism of pan-Turkism. The Zangezur Corridor, for example, is considered as a "Turan project". At issue for Iran is, however, not only pan-Turkic ambitions of Ankara, but also the risk of being excluded from the South Caucasus.²⁵

Implications

Even before the Ukraine war, the South Caucasus has been known as "the most notoriously fractured of the post-Soviet regions" with a dynamic variety of enmity and amity relationships.²⁶ As a consequence of unresolved security issues as well as mutually exclusive integration projects, the South Caucasus has also suffered analytically from the priority focus on the "great game" framework, often at the expense of the due attention to the local agency.²⁷ The present confrontation between Russia and the West has undoubtedly sharpened the expectations towards others along the lines of "you

²⁴ "Lavrov ocenil politiku Turcii na postsovetском prostranstve" [Lavrov evaluated Turkey's policy in the Post-Soviet space], RIA Novosti (online), 19 February 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210219/turtsiya-1598246454.html>.

²⁵ Veliyev, Cavid (2022): Iran's Frustrations With the Zangezur Corridor. Eurasia Daily Monitor, <https://jamestown.org/program/irans-frustrations-with-the-zangezur-corridor/>.

²⁶ Broers, Laurence (2018): The South Caucasus: Fracture without End? In: Anna Ohanyan (Ed.): Russia abroad: Driving regional fracture in post-Communist Eurasia and beyond. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 81–102.

²⁷ For a critical review see, among others, Toal, Gerard (2017): Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; Cooley, Alexander (2012): Great Games, Local Rules. The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia. Cary: Oxford University Press.

are either with us, or against us". Yet, the foreign policy choices of the Western actors as well as of the South Caucasus states cannot ignore the complicated layer of the Turkey-Russia-Iran triangle in the regional geography.

In this context, it is important to distinguish between spheres of influence and spheres of interests.²⁸ Turkey, Russia and Iran certainly vie for influence in their neighbourhoods. In their self-perceptions, and with various degrees of success as well as with different instruments, they also aim to safeguard their interests that they assess as being vital. In this regard, while assessing the future prospects of security in the South Caucasus, it is also important to consider how the diminishing influence of one of the actors in the Turkey-Russia-Iran triangle is likely to impact ambitions of the other, and, equally important, how the diminishing influence of one of the actors will play out on the defence of those interests that matter.

²⁸ Trenin, Dmitri (2009): Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence. In: *The Washington Quarterly* 32 (4), 3–22; Ortmann, Stefanie (2020): Spheres of Influence. In: Moisio, Sami; Koch, Natalie; Jonas, Andrew E. G.; Lizotte, Christopher; Luukkonen, Juho (Eds.): *Handbook on the changing geographies of the state. New spaces of geopolitics*. Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 313–324.

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PART II: Nagorno-Karabakh as Once and Future Powder Keg?

Perspectives of Nagorno Karabakh Conflict Settlement Process after the September 2022 Azerbaijani Attack against Armenia

Benyamin Poghosyan

On September 13, 2022, Azerbaijan launched a new attack against Armenia in multiple directions, shelling military and civilian infrastructure and seeking to advance into the Syunik, Vayots Dzor, and Gegharkunik regions. Everyone following the developments in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations expected the escalation; however, the scope of hostilities was unprecedented and went beyond that of the April 2016 four-day war. After two days of active hostilities, Armenia and Azerbaijan reached a ceasefire on September 14.

Armenia applied to Russia, the US, France, the UN Security Council, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The UN Security Council held two meetings on the issue with both closed and open debates,¹ while the CSTO sent a special mission to Armenia to assess the situation and prepare a special report for the heads of CSTO member states.² As a result of this new attack, Armenia confirmed more than 200 deaths among its soldiers, while 16 soldiers remained missing. There were casualties among the civilian population too. Azerbaijan confirmed more than 80 deaths among its armed forces.

What was the reason behind the Azerbaijani decision to start a new war against Armenia? Just two weeks before this latest offensive, Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders met in Brussels to discuss how to move forward toward

¹ Amid Fighting between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Assistant Secretary-General Urges Both Parties Commit to Lasting Peace Treaty, in Security Council Briefing, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15031.doc.htm>.

² The CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas, who is the head of the CSTO mission in the Republic of Armenia, met with the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia, https://en.odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/eneralnyy-sekretar-odkb-stanislav-zas-nakhodyashchisya-v-armenii-vo-glave-missii-odkb-vstretisya-s/#loaded.

the signature of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan.³ On August 30, the Armenia-Azerbaijan border delimitation and demarcation commission met in Moscow. Apparently, Azerbaijan was not satisfied with the results of the meeting and decided to punish Armenia and force it to take some steps.

Azerbaijan has two main demands from Armenia – to accept the Azerbaijani position that no Nagorno Karabakh exists anymore, and to provide a corridor via the Syunik region to reach Nakhichevan from Azerbaijan proper. Azerbaijan views the realization of the first demand through the signing of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty with no mention of Nagorno Karabakh. Thus, Azerbaijan does not demand Armenia to drop any discussion about the independence of Nagorno Karabakh. Baku wants Armenia to explicitly state that there is no territorial administrative unit named Nagorno Karabakh.

The Kremlin understands the potential dangers of an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty not mentioning Nagorno Karabakh. It will provide Azerbaijan an opportunity not to extend the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno Karabakh after November 2025. As a possible solution, Russia proposed the inclusion of a special article on Nagorno Karabakh in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty, which will declare that this issue is not solved. It will note that it shall be solved during future negotiations without providing a concrete timeframe and modalities. Azerbaijan rejects this approach and demands a peace treaty without mentioning Nagorno Karabakh at all.

The second demand of Azerbaijan is the establishment of a corridor via the Syunik region to Nakhichevan with no Armenian control. Theoretically, Azerbaijan may agree to Russian control over the routes, making routes via Syunik similar to the Lachin corridor which connects Armenia with Nagorno Karabakh. Armenia rejects this demand and insists that Armenia should implement border and customs control according to national laws.

³ Press statement by President Charles Michel following the trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia, 31 August 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/press-statement-president-charles-michel-following-trilateral-meeting-president_en.

Russia is interested in opening these routes as an additional connection with Turkey via Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, Russia does not want to see these routes as an alternative China-Europe connection circumventing Russia. Thus, Russia calls for the restoration of communications and wants to have control over them, meanwhile rejecting any idea of extra-territorial corridor.⁴ An Azerbaijan-Turkey corridor without Russian control is detrimental to Russian interests.

Armenia launched a wave of diplomatic activities after the latest Azerbaijani aggression. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan visited New York and Paris;⁵ the Armenian foreign minister met with his Azerbaijani counterpart in New York through the mediation of the US Secretary of State; the Secretary of Armenia's Security Council Armen Grigoryan spent an entire week in Washington, where he met with President Aliyev's top foreign policy aide Hikmet Hajiev⁶ and held discussions with several American state institutions, including a surprise visit to the CIA headquarters. During these hectic movements, Pashinyan put forward the idea of deploying international observers along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border and indirectly criticized Russia for breaching signed contracts for weapons sales for which Armenia had paid. Grigoryan welcomed the US involvement in the South Caucasus, arguing for its positive effect and additional security guarantees.

On September 29, 2022, a Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman claimed that several extra-regional players sought to bring instability to the South Caucasus region.⁷ Answering a question about Pashinyan's idea to deploy international observers along the Armenia-Azerbaijan borders, she stated that Russia stood for the full and unconditional implementation of the agreements reached by the three countries to ensure a settlement of the conflict, adding that there was a general rule not to replace what was working with

⁴ Russia Signals Opposition To 'Extra-territorial Corridor' Through Armenia, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32059566.html>.

⁵ France demands that the Azerbaijani forces return to their initial positions. Nikol Pashinyan and Emmanuel Macron meet in Paris, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2022/09/26/Nikol-Pashinyan-met-with-Emmanuel-Macron/>.

⁶ Armenia's Security Council Secretary presents details from meeting with Azerbaijani presidential aide, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1093539/>.

⁷ Moscow sees attempts by number of extra-regional players to bring instability to South Caucasus region, <https://news.am/eng/news/722713.html>.

something illusory. On September 30, 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that discussions were underway to use CSTO observers to create favourable conditions for the realization of the trilateral Armenia-Russia-Azerbaijan agreements, particularly for the delimitation and demarcation of borders.⁸

Russia is concerned about the possibility of deploying international observers along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. As the Russia-West standoff continues, Russia perceives the presence of Western observers as a direct step to increase their influence in the South Caucasus and weaken Russia's position. Meanwhile, Russia understands that if the Kremlin does nothing to stop future Azerbaijani attacks, Armenia will be forced to find other solutions. Russia cannot afford direct military intervention against Azerbaijan, which may quickly transform into a Russia-Turkey military clash, opening a second front for Russia. In this context, deploying CSTO observers may create obstacles to further Azerbaijani attacks and simultaneously prevent the emergence of additional Western presence in the South Caucasus.

As several actors are involved in active diplomatic efforts after the recent Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia, and Armenia-Azerbaijan relations are slowly becoming another battlefield in the Russia-West standoff, the negotiations between Yerevan and Baku on the elaboration of a future peace treaty loom on the horizon. During his interview with Public TV on September 30, 2022, PM Pashinyan stated that Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers would start the detailed discussion of the peace agreement.⁹

On October 6, 2022, within the framework of the first meeting of the European Political Community in Prague, Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan and President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev held a meeting at the initiative of the president of France and the president of the European Council. After an hours-long discussion, they adopted a joint statement, according to which Armenia and Azerbaijan confirmed their commitment to the UN

⁸ As Lavrov Hints at CSTO Observers in Artsakh, Russia Signals Opposition to Baku's 'Corridor' Scheme, <https://asbarez.com/as-lavrov-hints-at-csto-observers-in-artsakh-russia-signals-opposition-to-bakus-corridor-scheme/>.

⁹ Prime Minister Pashinyan gives interview to Public TV, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2022/09/30/Nikol-Pashinyan-Interview-Public-Television/>.

Charter and the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991, through which both sides recognized each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. They confirmed that this would serve as the basis for the work of the commissions on delimitation. Armenia agreed to facilitate the deployment of the European Union (EU) civilian mission along the border with Azerbaijan.¹⁰

The implications of this statement should be divided into two parts – implications for the self-proclaimed Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) Republic and implications for Armenia. The reference to the Alma-Ata declaration of 1991 sent a clear message to all external players involved in the South Caucasus geopolitics that the Armenian government is ready to recognize Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan.

The recognition by Armenia of Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan would provide Baku with opportunities to reject any notion of independent Nagorno Karabakh. When Pashinyan hinted in April 2022 that Armenia was ready to discuss about the autonomy of Nagorno Karabakh within Azerbaijan, he hoped that President Aliyev would abandon his claim that no Nagorno Karabakh existed after the second Karabakh war. However, Azerbaijan continued its claims that there was no Nagorno Karabakh, and it was not going to discuss that issue with anyone.

Recently, the Armenian government has spoken about the necessity of Azerbaijan-Nagorno Karabakh or Baku-Stepanakert talks within some special international mechanisms. However, if the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty does not mention Nagorno Karabakh, it is implausible that Azerbaijan will agree to talk with Nagorno Karabakh as a political entity.

Many in Nagorno Karabakh believe that an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty will have no concrete implications for Nagorno Karabakh. The Nagorno Karabakh Republic authorities will state that regardless of what the Armenian government thinks about the status or existence of Nagorno Karabakh,

¹⁰ Statement following the quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel, 6 October 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/07/statement-following-quadrilateral-meeting-between-president-aliyev-prime-minister-pashinyan-president-macron-and-president-michel-6-october-2022/>.

they will never be a part of Azerbaijan and will never take Azerbaijani passports. According to this narrative, as long as Russian peacekeepers are deployed in Karabakh, Azerbaijan will not have the capacity to invade Karabakh by force or use troops to force Karabakh Armenians to accept Azerbaijani passports or to leave. This logic has some right to exist. However, it might not function by the end of 2025. After Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty with no mention of Nagorno Karabakh was signed, it would be difficult for Russians to justify their presence in Karabakh after November 2025.

The deployment of an EU civilian mission in the border regions of Armenia [with Azerbaijan, Ed.] will decrease the likelihood of another large-scale attack by Azerbaijan.¹¹ However, the EU mission will not be able to prevent minor incidents. The EU deployed a civilian monitoring mission in Georgia in October 2008. However, during its 14 years of activities, the mission could not prevent incidents along Georgia-Abkhazia or Georgia-South Ossetia line of control. The mission's duration is fixed for two months until the end of 2022. Probably, Azerbaijan will use this short timeframe as another tool to press Armenia to sign a peace treaty and agree on principles of border delimitation and demarcation until the end of 2022; otherwise, it will threaten Armenia with a new large-scale attack after the departure of the mission.

Meanwhile, there was absolutely nothing in the statement about restoring communications. During his speeches in Parliament on September 14 and during the 2022 UN General Assembly, the Armenian prime minister emphasized the importance of securing the internationally recognized territories of Armenia within its 29,800 square km. He hinted that he was ready to make painful decisions to secure Armenia. Many understood these statements as a willingness to make significant concessions on Nagorno Karabakh to secure Armenia and make Azerbaijan drop its demands for the "Zangezur corridor."

However, after the Prague summit, Pashinyan stated that Aliyev again rejected his offer to open communications based on the concept of each state's complete control over routes in its territory. At his turn, Aliyev, after the summit, again accused Armenia of not providing a route to Nakhichevan

¹¹ Q&A EU Monitoring Capacity to Armenia, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/qa-eu-monitoring-capacity-armenia_en.

and for breaching its obligations under the November 10, 2020, trilateral statement. Thus, while Armenia *de facto* accepted the Azerbaijani demand to recognize Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and may do it again if it would sign a peace treaty with Azerbaijan with no mentions of Nagorno Karabakh, Azerbaijan continued to demand the establishment of the “Zangezur corridor.”

The recent events in and around Armenia-Azerbaijan relations raised alarm bells in the Kremlin. On October 24, 2022, the Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman issued a lengthy statement arguing that the West put unprecedented pressure on Armenia to change its foreign policy vector while the NGOs funded by the West actively spread anti-Russian sentiments in Armenia.¹² According to Moscow, the West’s suggestions for normalization of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations were unbalanced, while the primary goal of the West was to push Russia out of the region. Russia argued that the Western efforts would break the fragile balance in the region established by the November 10, 2020, trilateral statement.

In parallel with harsh criticism against the West, Russia decided to reengage in the Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations process actively. Answering a question from the representative of Armenia at the Valdai Forum on October 27, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin hinted that the Russian version of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict resolution did not mean a recognition of Azerbaijan’s sovereignty over the part of Karabakh where Russian peacekeepers were temporarily stationed. Putin also made an important clarification: “Let Armenia itself decide with whom to resolve the conflict – with the West or Russia.” According to him, the American or Washington version of potential peace treaty assumes that Karabakh will remain part of Azerbaijan.¹³ On the initiative of President Putin, a new trilateral Armenia-Russia-Azerbaijan summit took place in Sochi on October 31, 2022.¹⁴

¹² Russia Decries ‘Western Pressure On Armenia’, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32099853.html>.

¹³ U.S. Favors Azeri Control of Karabakh, Says Putin, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32104360.html>.

¹⁴ Trilateral talks with President of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister of Armenia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69729>.

Russia is satisfied with the current volatile *status quo* where Nagorno Karabakh is *de jure* part of Azerbaijan but *de facto* is controlled by Russia, and Baku has no influence and leverage. The best-case scenario for Russia is to extend this situation until 2025, which will ensure the extension of the deployment of Russian peacekeepers for at least another five years. This approach is in line with Armenian interests. The continuation of the current *status quo* is not ideal for Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, but after the defeat in the 2020 Karabakh war, there are no ideal solutions for Armenia. Armenia faces a choice between two scenarios: to lose Karabakh immediately or to keep the current *status quo*.

Thus, the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process slowly starts to become part of the Russia-West confrontation, which may negatively impact Armenia and Azerbaijan. Another feature of the ongoing regional geopolitical chess game is the growing Iranian involvement. Tehran is unhappy to see increased Azerbaijan-Israel defence cooperation, and Israel's indirect presence along the Azerbaijan-Iran border. The ongoing Azerbaijani and Turkish claims on the "Zangezur corridor" to connect Azerbaijan with Turkey via the Syunik region of Armenia are another concern for Iran.

In late October 2022 the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps launched large-scale military drills along Iran-Nakhichevan and Iran-Azerbaijan borders. The Iranian foreign minister visited Armenia and opened an Iranian consulate in the Syunik region.¹⁵ Russia is objectively focused on the war in Ukraine and cannot provide significant attention to the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, given the growing Russia-Iran strategic cooperation, the Kremlin may ask Iran to increase its involvement in the South Caucasus to balance the US and Turkey.

Against this very complicated geopolitical background, Armenia should avoid any steps which may be interpreted or perceived as a U-turn in Armenia's foreign and security policies. A clear message should be sent to all external actors – Russia, Iran, the EU, and the US. Armenian efforts to bring international observers into Armenia have nothing to do with the Russia-West standoff or the US-Iran confrontation. The only thing of interest to

¹⁵ Consulate General of Iran opens in Armenia's Kapan, <https://en.armradio.am/2022/10/21/consulate-general-of-iran-opens-in-armenias-kapan/>.

Armenia is to prevent a new Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia and to not allow ethnic cleansing in Nagorno Karabakh, which would be inevitable without the international military presence and agreed and guaranteed status for Nagorno Karabakh.

Armenia and Azerbaijan should take all necessary steps to avoid being trapped in the middle of the Russia-West confrontation. The ongoing war in Ukraine proved that this scenario might have catastrophic implications for both states. It does not mean that negotiations should be stopped. However, the hectic moves to sign a US or EU-prepared agreement, which Russia may view as an attempt to kick it out from South Caucasus, may destabilize the situation and bring new war instead of peace. In this context, a possible option for not losing momentum could be the signature of a document that would envisage the principles of the future peace agreement while providing more time to carefully draft a peace treaty based on the balance of interests of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and other actors.

The Emerging Geopolitics of the South Caucasus in the Aftermath of the August–September 2022 Escalations¹

Ahmad Alili

The developments in the South Caucasus are highly dynamic. The realities are changing very fast, and some analyses which may be relevant at the beginning of a month might be altered at the end of that month. The beginning of such a highly dynamic process was the 2020 war in Karabakh.

The geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus can be divided into three general timeframes following the 10 November Tripartite statement:

1. Immediately after the 2020 Karabakh war, post-war geopolitical and military reality
2. Developments between November 2020 and August 2022
3. The aftermath of the August–September 2022 escalations between Armenia and Azerbaijan

Post-2020 Karabakh War Geopolitical and Military Reality

The 2020 Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan has changed regional geopolitics completely. The interested parties, the countries in or bordering the South Caucasus, can be divided into two big categories: (1) Winners and (2) Losers.

The military and geopolitical winners of the 2020 Karabakh war can be classified as the following countries:

- Azerbaijan could restore its control over vast areas in the Western and Southern parts of the country. It could regain its border with Iran and Armenia. It also managed to push the Armenian Armed Forces from sensitive geographic points, which could be used to cut

¹ Speaking Points delivered at the 24th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus: “After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security”.

off Azerbaijan's oil and gas pipelines. Also, Azerbaijan has gained significant reputational bonuses as the winner of the war; hence many countries willing to cooperate economically and politically. The war created new opportunities in terms of Azerbaijan being capable of carrying out sensitive geopolitical tasks in a region located between Iran and Russia.

- Turkey has gained significant leverage in the South Caucasus thanks to corporation and alignment with Azerbaijan. Now, the Turkish military presence in Azerbaijan is more than evident. Turkey and Azerbaijani Army conduct various operations, even outside of the region. Ankara and Baku teamed up for the NATO military operations in Afghanistan during the withdrawal of the NATO troops from the Bagram airport.
- Turkish and Israeli cutting-edge military technology got good advertisement during the war campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh. Israel helped Azerbaijan in the war hence gaining the sympathy of most of the people next to the northern frontiers of Iran – a country promising to destroy Israel.

Hence, the most significant geopolitical winners of the war were Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Israel. Russia won by sending its troops to Karabakh, but its public image was damaged, especially among Armenians:

- As a result of the 2020 Karabakh war, Russia could deploy its troops to Karabakh. Azerbaijan was the last Eastern Partnership country with no Russian troops' presence on the ground before the 2020 Karabakh war. For Russia, it also was a significant reputational gain; it could send its troops to new territories. Nevertheless, the potential loss of CSTO member Armenia – Russia's strategic ally – could negatively affect its public image in the South Caucasus and in the former Soviet Union countries.

Armenia and Iran can be listed as the main losers in the context of the geopolitical and military losses during the 44 days war:

- Armenia lost its control over Karabakh with the loss of a considerable number of soldiers (more than Azerbaijan, but the general population of Armenia is more than three times less compared to Azerbaijan). Armenia also lost its reputation as the victor of the 1990s Karabakh war.
- Iran – a country under international sanctions – lost a grey zone borderland next to its frontiers. Turkey also increased its regional presence, diminishing Iranian influence, especially in Azerbaijan. Israel’s growing positive image in the Azerbaijan Republic turned out to be the source of inspiration for many Iranian Azerbaijanis. This was considered a threat by the Tehran government. Israel and Turkey’s growing presence in Azerbaijan and South Caucasus created a significant obstacle to the growing Iranian ambitions in the South Caucasus.

Developments between November 2020 and August 2022

- France and USA lost their status as the co-chairs of OSCE Minsk Group, a mediation format no longer recognized and accepted by the Azerbaijani government. Instead, since December 2021, the EU has become the leading negotiation platform. In this context, there was a competition with the Russian-led platform. The EU-led platform could achieve what all the other platforms combined could not achieve since the 1990s: Armenia and Azerbaijan declared recognition of each other’s territorial integrity during the Prague meeting of the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, France, and the EU Commission.
- Georgia – another sovereign nation in the South Caucasus – first opposed the newly emerging geopolitical reality in the region; it was firmly against the proposed “3+3” format, which was supposed to involve Russia. The war in Ukraine and Tbilisi’s cautious approach to the ongoing regional developments pushed Tbilisi, Baku, and Ankara closer to each other: Georgia’s security has become essential for Turkey and Azerbaijan also.
- Iranian-Azerbaijani relations remained tense, slightly improving from time to time. Nevertheless, Tehran demonstrated its readiness

to cooperate with Armenia to weaken the Turkish and Israeli growing presence in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus.

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also affected the South Caucasus geopolitics. The end of the era of the post-Soviet period was gone with the 2020 Karabakh war. The war in Ukraine destroyed any doubts about that.

The Aftermath of the August–September 2022 Escalations between Armenia and Azerbaijan

The two escalations between Armenia and Azerbaijan have altered the geopolitical trends in the region, introducing new components to the geopolitical reality on the ground:

- It became even more apparent that Russia is not the sole security provider in the region (at least, there is another security provider – Turkey). Moscow could not provide security to Armenia as the decision-makers in Yerevan would have wished. In addition, it also created doubts in Armenia about Russian support for Armenian national interests, especially in Karabakh, as well as about its uncontested role as security provider for the whole of Armenia.
- Iran-Armenia military cooperation increased significantly. Iranian military drones and other weapons appeared in Armenia. Armenia is also considered a possible route for the Iranian drones transferred to Russia for use in Ukraine.
- The security contract between Armenia and Russia is broken, at least in the views of significant parts of the Armenian public opinion. Two prominent pro-Armenian and Armenian-origin Russian politicians were banned from entering Armenia.
- The need for Russian-Azerbaijani cooperation against Iran increased. Russia and Azerbaijan share the same interest in not letting the Iranian presence grow in Southern Armenia.

- A positive side-effect of the Russian troops' presence in Karabakh for Azerbaijan: It became a shield against Armenian ethnic cleansing claims. The presence of Russian troops in Karabakh became slightly tolerable, and their weakened presence is welcome.

The increase of the Western influence in the region:

- European political community – a new format of cooperation between Azerbaijan and EU countries. Azerbaijani diplomacy is highly experienced in the topics of defence and security and can share its experience with EU countries.
- Armenian exceptionalism? The territorial integrity of Ukraine has been supported by the West, but it was not supported in the case of Azerbaijan. There are claims in Azerbaijan about “Western alienation of Azerbaijan, due to EU policy against Azerbaijan.”
- European political community – What is the role of Armenia? CSTO member country.
- Great EU achievement – The mutual territorial recognition of Azerbaijan and Armenia on the EU-led platform.
- The European presence is growing in the South Caucasus. European Civilian Mission: there are pros and cons. Pros outweigh the cons.
- Nevertheless, the symbolism of the EU civilian mission is significant. EU representatives would stand on the Armenian side of the border and would face the Azerbaijani side. To Baku, this might look like the EU was choosing sides in the South Caucasus.
- Iran-Armenia = growing relations.
- Iran believes that Azerbaijan is bringing the Western presence in the South Caucasus, something Tehran cannot allow. Not all of Azerbaijan's strategic projects are aligned with the EU and USA policies. Tehran's perception is that Armenia as a CSTO member, hence anti-Western, would be a natural ally of Iran.

On the possible future scenarios:

- Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral developments.

In conclusion, the 2020 Karabakh resulted in significant shifts in the regional geopolitics of the South Caucasus: making Azerbaijan and Turkey the primary winners, whereas Russia advanced militarily in the region but lost reputationally in Armenia and the broader region. The 2020 Karabakh war, and the 2022 Ukraine war, ended the post-Soviet age in the South Caucasus and broader CIS region.

Is this the endgame of the South Caucasus geopolitics? No. The geopolitical processes will remain highly dynamic.

Beyond Yerevan and Baku: How Iran and India Perceive the Developments in the South Caucasus

Yeghia Tashjian

The Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Background behind the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict

The aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war has regionalized and internationalized the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Despite the Russian-brokered ceasefire Trilateral Statement signed by Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, other regional countries such as Turkey, Iran, and international actors such as the EU, US, and even India have been active players as each side is seeking to promote its interests.

Taking advantage of Russia's setbacks in Ukraine, the EU's need for alternative gas supplies bypassing Russia, and shifts in the Russian-Turkish "co-opetition" are giving Azerbaijan a "free hand" to exert additional military pressure on Armenia by attacking bordering villages. Meanwhile, the asymmetric relationship between Ankara and Moscow, which was once in favour of Moscow, is now tipping toward Ankara as a result of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Since Turkey perceives itself as an equal partner in arranging regional affairs in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus, Moscow's political dependence on Ankara would boost Turkey's regional position, giving the latter a free hand to test Russia's "red lines." Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin is eager to maintain Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's power in Ankara, fearing that the opposition may succeed in ousting him in the 2023 elections and hence torpedo the current regional arrangements between Turkey and Russia.

This issue has complicated the geopolitical balance in the South Caucasus. Turkey's power relative to Russia is one of the main factors that has handicapped the latter from assisting its only ally in the South Caucasus.¹ Armenia,

¹ Yeghia Tashjian, "The Russian-Turkish 'Co-opetition' in Times of Regional Crisis", Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, August 2021,

a member of the Russian-led CSTO alliance, is unable to counter Azerbaijani provocations after its defeat in the second Nagorno-Karabakh War and is under constant fire and pressure from Baku and Ankara. Starting in December 2020, Azerbaijan has constructed a false statist narrative to enforce a corridor connecting Azerbaijani proper to the Nakhichevan exclave. Despite the fact that the November 10, 2020 Trilateral Statement called for the opening of the trade routes, it did not mention the term corridor as it is the case with Lachin which connects Armenia proper to Nagorno-Karabakh. This interpretation has been manipulated both by Ankara and Baku and both sides are forcing Armenia to give up its sovereignty over a corridor whose aim is ultimately to connect Turkey to Central Asia.² Regionally and internationally, Russia, Iran, and the Western states officially expressed their opposition to the term corridor and called for the opening of communication channels between both countries which should facilitate trade and mutual trust. Instead, Baku rejected and engaged in irredentist claims on Southern and Eastern Armenia and planned to permanently stay in the occupied bordering villages until a deal which would favour its ambitions was reached.³

On the other hand, Armenia and Turkey are engaging in a shy dialogue. From a Russian perspective, pushing for “normalization” between Armenia and Turkey will bring stability to the region. As long as Moscow is in control of the process and the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh is frozen, it will continue to have leverage on Armenia’s policymaking. Interestingly, while the “Great Game” between Russia and the West is continuing in the region, both sides are backing the opening of the border with Armenia that Turkey closed in 1993.⁴ From the European and American perspectives, pushing for “normalization” between Ankara and Yerevan and gaining the agreement of

https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/programs/arab_and_international_affairs/Publications/2021-2022/20220323_Yeghia_russia_turkey_en.pdf, accessed 21/10/2022.

² Alex Galitsky, “Azerbaijan’s Aggression Has Forced Armenia Into Russia’s Arms”, *Foreign Policy*, October 4, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/04/azerbaijan-aggression-armenia-russia-nagorno-karabakh/>, accessed 21/10/2022.

³ Laurence Broers, “Is Azerbaijan planning a long-term presence in Armenia?”, *Chatham House*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/azerbaijan-planning-long-term-presence-armenia>, accessed 21/10/2022.

⁴ Yeghia Tashjian, “The South Caucasus and the ‘Great Game’ of Energy Security”, *Armenian Weekly*, July 27, 2022, <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/07/27/the-south-caucasus-and-the-great-game-of-energy-security/>, accessed 21/10/2022.

Yerevan on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, they would protect their energy security interests and weaken Russia's leverage on Armenia and the region. Viewed from Russia, the border opening facilitated by the Kremlin would guarantee Moscow's role as the powerbroker in the region and would increase its diplomatic leverage over Ankara and Yerevan. The question remains though: would the intersection of the interests of the conflicting Russia and the West eventually pave the way for diplomatic success and the signing of a new version of the "Zurich Protocols" between Ankara and Yerevan?⁵ We should remember that one of the reasons for the failure of the US-EU-backed Armenian-Turkish protocols was Russia's silent opposition behind the scenes profiting from Baku's negative reaction against the signed agreement in Zurich. Hence, the success of the Armenia-Turkey negotiations is dependent on the "political mood" in the Kremlin, the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, and the future outcome of the "Great Game" between Russia and the West.

Meanwhile, on the side lines of the new "Great Game" between Russia, Turkey, and the West, both Iran and India are actively involved in the regional system in the South Caucasus. Interestingly both are using "carrot and stick" tactics by employing soft and hard power to secure their geopolitical and geo-economic interests. This paper will further analyse their geopolitical and geo-economic interests and argue how Tehran and New Delhi can help promote stability in the region by providing economic incentives.

An Iranian Perspective of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran has patiently and cautiously followed the developments in the South Caucasus. The main strategic objective of Tehran was to prevent US-Israeli penetration into the region, and it viewed the Russian political and military presence in the region, particularly in Armenia, as a buffer zone against Western and even Turkish expansionist activities. However, after 2018, the Iranians viewed the developments in

⁵ Carlo Frappi, "Beyond the genocide. The political and regional dimensions of the Turkish-Armenian question", *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, April 24, 2015, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/beyond-genocide-political-and-regional-dimensions-turkish-armenian-question-13174>, accessed 21/10/2022.

Armenia from the prism of the “Western-backed colour revolutions”, as it was highlighted in Iranian newspapers.⁶

During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Iran called for Armenia’s withdrawal from the adjacent territories of Nagorno-Karabakh and a peaceful resolution of the conflict. According to Dr Mohammad Marandi, during the war “Iran accepted and supported Azerbaijani sovereignty and today Iran supports Armenia’s sovereignty and won’t allow Turkish or other regional forces to weaken the sovereignty of Armenia”.⁷

After the trilateral statement of November 10, 2020, and the Shushi Declaration of June 15, 2021, it was clear that Turkey’s ambitions went beyond the Caucasus and Iran was further being marginalized.⁸

Constraints and “Red Lines” of Iran’s Security Interests in the South Caucasus

Nevertheless, after December 2020, as Azerbaijan constructed a “Zangezur corridor” discourse and started making territorial demands from Armenia, threats intensified against Iran’s national security. Tehran’s new conservative administration under President Ebrahim Raisi has re-drawn its “red lines” in the South Caucasus and replaced its passive diplomacy with a pro-active assertive foreign policy.⁹

⁶ “چرا انقلاب رنگی ارمنستان سیاست واشنگتن است؟”, (“Why is the Armenian color revolution Washington’s policy?”), *Iran Diplomacy*, April 27, 2018, , <http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1976301/%DA%A7-%D8%A7-%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B1%D9%86%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%AA%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA->, accessed 6/9/2022.

⁷ Interview with Iranian political analyst Dr. Seyed Mohammad Marandi, October 2021.

⁸ Yeghia Tashjian, “‘Shushi Declaration’ and its Implications on the South Caucasus and Beyond”, *Armenian Weekly*, June 29, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/06/29/shushi-declaration-and-its-implications-on-the-south-caucasus-and-beyond/>, accessed 6/9/2022.

⁹ Yeghia Tashjian, “Iran and the Second Artsakh War: Has Tehran lost its leverage over the South Caucasus?”, *Armenian Weekly*, January 27, 2022, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/01/27/iran-and-the-second-artsakh-war-has-tehran-lost-its-leverage-over-the-south-caucasus/>, accessed 6/9/2022.

According to the Iranian political analyst Dr. Seyed Mostafa Khoshcheshm, the current Iranian government is reviewing former President Hassan Rouhani's policies in the South Caucasus. The analyst argued that Iran has valued its trade with Ankara more than its relations with Yerevan. However, with the coming of conservatives to power, the Iranian government realized that its geopolitical and geo-economic interests are at stake.¹⁰

Hence what are Iran's "red lines" in the region and how would it address the Turkish-Azerbaijani threat against its national security?

First, Iran is concerned about the Israeli military and intelligence presence near its border with Azerbaijan. According to Dr. Khoscheshm, Mossad has sent hitmen and agents from the Azerbaijani border to Iran to assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists.¹¹ Iran also believes that Israel is backing secessionist tendencies in Northern Iran.

Second, Iran had concerns that the continuation of the crisis between Yerevan and Baku would reinforce Turkey's proactive policy of supporting Azerbaijan and this would give Ankara a bigger stake in the future of the South Caucasus. Iran is concerned that any possible escalation or war would fuel a sense of Azerbaijani nationalism inside Northern Iran.¹²

Finally, with the establishment of the so-called "Zangezur corridor", Iran would lose its important transit role in the region. According to the Trilateral Statement, Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhichevan will be connected to Azerbaijan proper through a route passing by Southern Armenia, possibly through Meghry district via a railway. Baku has interpreted this phrase as giving it access to a "corridor". Iran is alarmed by a potential change of its frontiers with Armenia and that its image as regional transit hub would diminish and would weaken its leverage over Nakhichevan. Meanwhile, Turkey, which borders Nakhichevan, would gain land access to mainland

¹⁰ Interview with Iranian political analyst Dr. Seyed Mostafa Khoshcheshm, October 2021.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *«Транский лев» потеряет голову. Южный Азербайджан стремится к независимости! РЕДАКЦИОННАЯ*, ("The 'Iranian lion' will lose its head. South Azerbaijan strives for independence!"), *Haqqin.az*, August 27, 2022, https://haqqin.az/democracy/258047?fbclid=IwAR2hE2itqzEJJOZ7DszriBHvog6WtHaRUiAe6SeJ0c6Qb_9KYPtVXBdsDKJQ, accessed 1/9/2022.

Azerbaijan without having to pass through Iran or Georgia, while being directly connected to the Central Asian markets.¹³

For this reason, Iran has occasionally warned Azerbaijan that its border with Armenia is a “*red line*”. In an interview with Dr. Ehsan Movahedian, professor of international relations at the ATU University in Tehran, the scholar mentioned that the construction of the “Zangezur corridor” would create geopolitical and geo-economic challenges for Iran. He expressed concerns that the creation of this corridor would mobilize Pan-Turkic aspirations not only in Northern Iran, but it would also increase Turkey’s support and NATO’s penetration to the Northern Caucasus, Central Asia, and even as far as the Xinjiang province of China. Hence, with this aim, NATO would clearly encircle the region, and with the help of Turkish and even Israeli operatives, it would create ethnic and sectarian tensions.¹⁴

For Iran, the loss of Armenia as a deterrent buffer state against the Pan-Turkic project would create tensions in Iran’s northern provinces. Iran views the regional developments as a whole conspiracy. That is the inter-Shia tensions in Iraq and the increase of Turkish pressure on Yerevan are all interconnected to each other and orchestrated by the West to isolate Iran and push it out of the Middle East. Iran’s silence in the South Caucasus would be translated as a sign of weakness and may have a domino effect on the Middle East.

Iran’s Pro-Active and Balanced Diplomacy

As border clashes erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan in May 2021, and then Baku attacked the Armenian bordering towns on September 13, 2022, while the Azerbaijani President stated his territorial demands from Armenia, the Iranians started employing both hard and soft power policies due to counter the increase of Azerbaijani influence on Armenia’s Syunik province. From the Iranian perspective, any change regarding its internationally

¹³ Yeghia Tashjian, “Iran and the Second Artsakh War: Has Tehran lost its leverage over the South Caucasus?”, *The Armenian Weekly*, January 27, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/01/27/iran-and-the-second-artsakh-war-has-tehran-lost-its-leverage-over-the-south-caucasus/>, accessed 26/10/2021.

¹⁴ Interview with Dr. Ehsan Movahedian, September 7, 2022.

recognized borders with Armenia or a *de facto* loss of Armenian sovereignty over Syunik would threaten Iran's national security and place Iran at the mercy of Turkey and Azerbaijan when it comes to trade routes linking Tehran to Russia and Europe. Iran values Armenia for its North-South corridor project (construction of a new highway connecting Armenia-Georgia, and Armenia-Iran borders) as Armenia could turn into a valuable geo-economic transit hub if it finalized this corridor connecting Iran to the Black Sea and beyond.¹⁵

On March 2022, Iran agreed to provide a transport route to Azerbaijan connecting it to Nakhichevan via Iran bypassing Armenia to deter Azerbaijan's territorial claims on Armenia.¹⁶ According to Mehfam Suleimanbeigi, an Iranian political expert, Baku is taking advantage of the war in Ukraine and it has again announced its intentions to create a corridor in Syunik to cut the Armenian-Iranian border.¹⁷ According to the Iranian expert, the "Zangezur corridor" posed a great danger for Iran as it would stand in the way of the strategic North-South trade that is the Black Sea-Persian Gulf corridor and would prevent Iran's access to the Eurasian and the European markets through Armenia. It is worth mentioning that Armenia is the only EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union) member state that has a land border with Iran and thus the Meghry Free Economic Zone bordering Iran can play as an import-export hub for the EAEU countries and Iran.¹⁸ It is within this context that we should analyse Iran's August 2022 appointment of Abedin

¹⁵ Yeghia Tashjian, "Is Iran making a comeback to the South Caucasus?", *The Armenian Weekly*, October 20, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/10/20/is-iran-making-a-comeback-to-the-south-caucasus/>, accessed 29/11/2022.

¹⁶ Heydar Isayev, "Azerbaijan, Iran sign transport deal bypassing Armenia", *Eurasianet*, March 18, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-iran-sign-transport-deal-bypassing-armenia>, accessed 7/9/2022.

¹⁷ بلندیروازی در باکو ("Ambition in Baku"), *Sharh Daily*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.sharghdaily.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87-100/854582-%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%BE%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%A7%DA%A9%D9%88>, accessed 6/9/2022.

¹⁸ "Free Economic Zones in Armenia: boundless opportunities in a 'bounded country'", *Medium*, May 29, 2021, <https://medium.com/caucasus-asia-center/free-economic-zones-in-armenia-boundless-opportunities-in-a-bounded-country-c4648074eb38>, accessed 7/9/2022.

Varamin as Consul General in Syunik's Kapan town, a step that has further antagonized the Turkish and Azerbaijani authorities.¹⁹

Therefore, Iran has adopted both hard power (military exercises near the Iranian-Azerbaijani border) and soft power (trade and energy deals with both Armenia and Azerbaijan) to preserve stability in the region. For this reason, Tehran signed a MoU with Baku to launch the construction of a highway bridge over the Arax River to connect mainland Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan.²⁰ Hence, the establishment of a Consulate General in Syunik can be defined in the framework of Iran's neighbourhood policy. The Iranian side stated that:

Economic interactions are the prelude to creating peace and security in different regions and would increase the level of economic interactions between neighbours, and improve the regional stability, security and peace.²¹

Iran's proactive policy towards South Caucasus also raised India's interest in the region.

How India Views the Developments in the South Caucasus?

India views the post-2020 regional *status quo* and increased Turkish influence in the region with concern as its arch-enemy Pakistan backed Baku in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. It was within this context that India joined Iran and sent a harsh diplomatic message to Azerbaijan. As Azerbaijani forces engaged in incursions in Syunik in May 2021, and in September 2022, New Delhi called on Azerbaijan to pull back its forces from Armenia "immediately" and refrain from further provocations. Arindam Bagchi, the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, stated that India has been following with concern the situation along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. The senior diplomat added that "peace and stability in the South

¹⁹ "Iran appoints Consul general in Kapan", *ArmenPress*, August 11, 2022, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1090131.html>, accessed 7/9/2022.

²⁰ "Iran, Azerbaijan Republic launch construction of bridge over Aras", *Iran Press*, September 21, 2022, <https://iranpress.com/content/66737/iran-azerbaijan-republic-launch-construction-bridge-over-aras>, accessed 25/9/2022.

²¹ Mohsen Pakaein, "The message of the establishment of the Consulate General in Kapan, Armenia", *Islamic Republic New Agency*, August 27, 2022, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84864775/The-message-of-the-establishment-of-the-Consulate-General-in>, accessed 2/9/2022.

Caucasus region are important from the regional security perspective.” India’s representative at the UNSC meeting on September 15, 2022, raised similar concerns and called the “aggressor to immediately cease hostilities”.²² From Indian perspective, any military conflict in Southern Armenia may threaten the security of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) where both India and Iran are encouraging Armenia, despite its poor infrastructure compared to Azerbaijan, to play a bridging role connecting the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea.²³

Based on my interviews with Indian economists and military experts, I can conclude that India has certain geo-economic and geopolitical interests in the region and hence it has employed “carrot and stick” tactics to push forward its interests.

India views the Greater Central Asia Region, which is now known as the “Extended Neighbourhood”, from an economic angle. According to an Indian expert, the establishment, jointly with Russia and Iran, of the INSTC has been the cornerstone of this equation which would not only connect India with Eurasia and Central Asia, but with Europe as well through a sea-railroad route. This is the reason why India and Iran wanted Armenia to join it, although Baku has already been engaged with the INSTC, as part of this route.²⁴ Given its geopolitical interests, Armenia must become an integral part of this route to strengthen and take this cooperation to the next level. By joining the INSTC, Armenia would get easier access to Indian markets, and Indo-Armenian trade via Iran would create a huge boost in bilateral trade.

Armenia’s participation in the North-South Corridor or the Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor would provide Yerevan with an opportunity to strengthen its economy, security, and geopolitical position. However, given Azerbaijan’s advantage due to its better infrastructure, Armenia must engage with India and seek trade partners and investors for the construction of the

²² “#UNSC Meeting on #Armenia”, *India at the United Nations, YouTube*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhkjaoWMuMc>, accessed 25/9/2022.

²³ Yeghia Tashjian, “Syunik and the Geo-Economic Future of the South Caucasus”, *Armenian Weekly*, May 21, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/05/21/syunik-and-the-geo-economic-future-of-the-south-caucasus/>, accessed 6/9/2022.

²⁴ Interview with Mr. Rananjay Anand, co-founder and president of the Indo-Armenian Friendship Society, October 3, 2022.

North-South highway inside Armenia. Pooya Hosseini, an Iranian political analyst based in Yerevan, argued that Armenia could attract investments from India only through three decisive factors: strengthening political relations with New Delhi, increasing its economic activities, and engaging in lobbying efforts.²⁵

After the 2020 war, Armenia became politically and economically isolated in the region. Due to its poor infrastructure system she failed to take part in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while Azerbaijan is attracting Chinese investments due to its better developed and more modern railroad system. This played to the benefit of India, as Yerevan aimed to diversify its economic and political ties with rising Asian countries. India is viewing China's BRI as a rival project to its INSTC.

Meanwhile, as part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, China is pushing its Middle Corridor, (also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (ITTR)) which links her to Central Asia via Kazakhstan, and then heads towards Europe via Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey.²⁶ This corridor is also significant to Europe as it bypassed Russia. Geographically, it is also the shortest transport route connecting Western China to Europe. With the war in Ukraine, the global demand for transport amid supply chain disruptions has made this corridor more attractive as an alternative means of bypassing Russia to get some goods to market.²⁷ The importance of this corridor became significant as Azerbaijan and Turkey started pressuring Armenia to give up its Southern border with Iran and establish a corridor where Azerbaijan would be directly linked to Turkey. This threat alarmed Iran and India who realized that their geo-economic interests were threatened along the North-South trade routes. For this reason, Tehran and New Delhi started

²⁵ Interview with Pooya Hosseini, Founder and director of the "Armenia – Iran strategic cooperation development center" foundation, March 21, 2022.

²⁶ Charles Szumski, "Kazakhstan key 'Middle Corridor' linking China to EU", *Euractive*, June 17, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakhstan-key-middle-corridor-linking-china-to-eu/>, accessed 25/9/2022.

²⁷ James Jay Carafano, "Central Asia's Middle Corridor gains traction at Russia's expense", *GIS Reports Online*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/middle-corridor/>, accessed 25/9/2022.

actively pushing Yerevan to take part in the INSTC and the Iranian-backed Black Sea-Persian Gulf Transport Corridor initiatives.²⁸

Nevertheless, India has also geopolitical concerns. Pranab Dhal Samanra, from the Indian *Economic Times*, one of the leading Indian newspapers, published an analysis arguing that, if this “Turkish-Azerbaijani-Pakistani” axis is cemented in the South Caucasus it might move Southwards and the “three brothers” would act jointly in other theatres including in the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir given the “existing political understanding on the subject”.²⁹ India is also worried that Pakistan might also bring China into this axis, threatening India’s national security. Hence, it is in “India’s interest that Armenia puts up a stand and not allows being trampled upon because of the power vacuum (in the South Caucasus) caused by Russia’s preoccupation with Ukraine” argued Samanra.³⁰ It is within this context that the recent Indian-Armenian arms deal should be assessed.³¹ Thus, India is using both “carrot and sticks” tactics in the South Caucasus to push the conflicting parties to engage in dialogue and peacefully resolve their conflict. New Delhi is both providing economic incentives by inviting Baku and Yerevan to participate in regional transport projects, but at the same time arming Yerevan to resist further Azerbaijani provocations. By doing so, New Delhi is seeking to preserve its geo-economic interests and limit its geopolitical losses against the Ankara-Baku-Islamabad axis.

Reflection

For Armenia, joining such projects would not only remove the trade isolation imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, irrespective of the unblocking of

²⁸ Vali Kaleji, “Iran Drives Development of Persian Gulf-Black Sea International Transport and Transit Corridor”, *Jamestown Foundation*, July 14, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/iran-drives-development-of-persian-gulf-black-sea-international-transport-and-transit-corridor/>, accessed 12/10/2022.

²⁹ Pranab Dhal Samanta, “Analysis: India can’t ignore dangerous adventures of ‘3 Brothers’ in Armenia and elsewhere”, *Economic Times*, October 6, 2022, https://m.economic-times.com/news/defence/view-india-cant-ignore-dangerous-adventures-of-3-brothers-in-armenia-and-elsewhere/amp_articles/94518499.cms, accessed 12/10/2022.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Yeghiah Tashjian, “Armenia-India Relations: From Politics to Arms Trade”, *Armenian Weekly*, October 5, 2022, <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/10/05/armenia-india-relations-from-politics-to-arms-trade/>, accessed 11/10/2022.

the trade routes between Yerevan and Baku according to the November 10 Trilateral Statement, but it might also offer the opportunity to become a crucial player in international trade routes and attract the interest of rising regional powers. Iran's and India's proactive policy in the South Caucasus is a win-win solution both for Yerevan and Baku. Azerbaijan too would benefit from those initiatives, while growing trade interdependency between Baku and Yerevan might push them to cooperate and launch joint transport projects with neighbouring and regional countries. Trade interdependency might also minimize the possibility of future conflicts and territorial claims from the government and semi-officials.

A paper published by CATO Institute in April 2020 raised the question of whether trade integration contributes to peace.³² The "liberal peace" theory emphasizes the idea that mutual economic interdependence would integrate trade relations of rival countries. Hence, a higher degree of bilateral economic interdependence would limit the incentives to use military force, as political leaders tend to minimize conflicts out of concern that wars would deter financial investments and create additional costs to the economy.

In this context, foreign investments are an essential requirement for peace and future prosperity. With the help of the EU, and with Iran's and India's involvement, both Armenia and Azerbaijan could take advantage of economic cooperation and bear its fruits. This would also further facilitate the establishment of joint initiatives and economic regional forums aiming to connect Europe to Asia via Baku and Yerevan.

³² Jong-Wha Lee and Ju Hyun Pyun, "Does Trade Integration Contribute to Peace?", *CATO Institute*, Research Briefs in Economic Policy No. 211, April 22, 2020, <https://www.cato.org/research-briefs-economic-policy/does-trade-integration-contribute-peace>, accessed 15/10/2022.

PART III: The Outer Limits of the War in Ukraine: Moldovan and Russian Security

Security Threats against the Republic of Moldova¹

Elena Marșac

Since the independence, Moldova's strategic environment has always been more or less complicated. The country's foreign and security policy, being based on a neutral status, has actually been carried along multiple vectors in the direction of the EU and Western partners.

Moldova is facing heavy security challenges. Externally, the country's security is deeply influenced by the geopolitical changes in the region: Moldova is in the near vicinity of the war and being a possible target for the Russian Federation, feels the direct effects on the economy and social life of its citizens. There is a lack of basic knowledge in society on how to behave in conflict situations; civil security infrastructure is in a poor state; general knowledge of mobilisation and other military issues is lacking. The latter amplifies panic and can be particularly damaging in the event of possible military provocation or aggression. Domestically, Moldova is in a continuous process of developing its national identity (70% consider themselves Moldovans), threatened by secessionist tendencies, internal protests organized by fugitive oligarchs, hampered by a lack of a clear vision on security policies and strategic communication (Stratcom).

Due to its geostrategic location, being torn between Western aspirations and the legacy of Russian influence, Moldova is particularly vulnerable to outside propaganda. Moldova has also faced the clash of strategic communications of bigger international actors, such as the EU and the Russian Federation. Consequently, Moldova's external narratives are highly important for the country's credibility. As about the geopolitical context, it should be mentioned that the European Union vector in Moldova's foreign and internal policy seems to be strong and sustainable (55%) despite the negative effects of the crisis in Ukraine and Russian information war. The EU Stratcom is more and more present in Moldovan informational environment.

¹ Speaking Points delivered at the 24th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus: "After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security".

Our country is facing a series of economic problems: the electricity imported from Transnistria, embargoes, energy security dependent on Russian Federation,² high inflation, a low budget for defence and countering threats to national security, the low ability to respond efficiently to crises and emergency situations. As a result, Moldovan society feels insecure. At the social level, there is lack of societal cohesion and of a clear national narrative to unite people.

Today we are witnessing a shift in the security paradigm as we knew it until recently. The unprovoked Russian aggression of Ukraine changed the world and implicitly the way we should treat our security for the years to come. In this context, the Republic of Moldova is one of the countries that should revise the entire security and defence concept, adapt it to the new realities by overcoming the existing stereotypes fuelled by the Russian propagandist machine and endless disinformation campaigns.

In discussing this issue, I would like to emphasize three main points.

1. The assumption that Russia attacked Ukraine to reach Transnistria and by this to prevent NATO enlargement is a complete fallacy, and a plausible argument only for the countries who are still largely dependent on Russian energy resources.
2. The Republic of Moldova can and should revise its internal security policies towards countering a potential Russian aggression through a gradual abolishment of its neutrality status.
3. The only way Russia could recover its reputation and have its security concerns taken into consideration is by ceasing to threaten its neighbors and to rip off pieces of land from other countries.

Russia attacked Ukraine because the current Russian leadership wants to maintain its grip on power indefinitely. The only way to do this with large

² Gas as hybrid instrument to ensure the politics of power in the region, using the vulnerabilities and weakness of country to keep Moldova as a dependent importer with no system of national energy production, and maintain the unwillingness of the leading elites to create strategic plans of energy provision for the state.

popular support and in the absence of steady economic growth and development, is to appeal to the narratives about the might of the historic Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Every time the popularity of Putin was going down, Russia went to war. First was Georgia in 2009, second, Ukraine 2014, now Ukraine 2022. The appetite of Russian public for the return of the territories that were part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union is fuelled daily by Russian propaganda channels. Thus, the easiest way to justify aggressive actions is to find an external enemy (in this case NATO) and blame every failure of the Russian leadership on NATO enlargement. Unfortunately, some countries in the West consider this narrative as a good enough justification and try to construct a false reality around it. In my consideration this is a fallacy that is very easy and comfortable for some of the Western countries to fall in, and I believe that the adoption of this narrative will soon return the whole situation to the business-as-usual status. These are mainly the countries who developed a hyper-dependence on Russian energy resources, or countries with a weak democracy that tend to slide towards autocracy. The point I would like to emphasize here is that regardless of what security guarantees Russia would receive, as long as it is governed under the leadership of Putin, it would maintain its expansionist views since this is the only way Putin can hold on to power.

By launching a conventional war against Ukraine, the Kremlin has moved on to the second stage of imposing its hegemony in the post-Soviet space – imposing the ceding of territories and/or the *de facto* subordination of Ukraine by military means. In these new realities, we can see the following: the aggressive policy of the Russian Federation represents a direct threat to the security of the Republic of Moldova, directly threatening the sovereignty and independence of our country, in addition to the threat against its territorial integrity which has persisted since 1992. According to sociological polls carried out in October 2022, 45.1% of the respondents consider the Russian Federation, 13.3% the USA, and 17.5% NATO as a threat against national security.³

³ Sociological polls on “Public perceptions on security and defence system”, October 2022, CBS-AXA, https://www.scribd.com/document/608011854/Percep%C8%9Bii-Publice-Asupra-Sistemului-de-Securitate-%C8%98i-Ap%C4%83rare-a-Republicii-Moldova?fbclid=IwAR21VYP40pC-5VMsum6cFzNjk6PiQ6_gG8ocPm_nfFabDsYRuAIuZJc7y7I.

There are too many variables to make predictions, but we can say that the Republic of Moldova is one of the targets of the Kremlin's aggressive revisionist policy. Military actions against Ukraine increased Moscow's interest in Moldova. Perceiving the Republic of Moldova as an unstable, politically, and militarily weak state, the Russian leadership may see Moldova as an easy target to conquer in order to weaken Ukraine's strategic position.

The Republic of Moldova can and should revise its internal security policies towards countering a potential Russian aggression through a gradual abolishment of its neutrality status.

Enhancing Defense Capabilities and Reforming the Security Sector

To address my second point, I will begin by saying that the neutrality status that Moldova has enshrined in her Constitution is working to the detriment of our security and national interests. I would completely agree that one of the reasons that encouraged Russia to proceed with aggression against its neighbours has been the lack of existing viable security guaranties for the small countries that did not possess the resources to build defensive capacities to counter Russia. In this case, the solutions are to become part of existing alliances, create new alliances, or deepen the existing partnerships to unprecedented levels that would resemble an alliance. The essence is that, regardless of the name, type, and legal background of an organization, as long as it provides security guaranties, it is good for Moldova. In this regard, the Brussels Treaty from 1948 could become one of the suitable frameworks handily available.

Currently, in the context of the military invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, the philosophy behind the state neutrality has returned to the agenda of public debates in the Republic of Moldova and it has become ubiquitous in the statements of Moldovan officials. Respectively, the term neutrality seemed to be increasingly discussed within society, while maintaining certain confusions, such as "security without army" or "security through isolation".

According to sociological polls the solution for the national security of the Republic of Moldova is neutrality for 44%, an EU membership for 12.6%,

unification with Romania for 12%, unification with Russia for 11%, and a NATO membership for 4.9%.⁴

An essential condition of neutrality is to ensure the inviolability of the state territory. However, on the territory of the Republic of Moldova there are still military troops of the Russian Federation. Moreover, the Russian Federation must respect the commitments assumed by signing the agreements with the Republic of Moldova on withdrawing its military and ammunition from the Moldovan internationally recognized territory. Another condition refers to the recognition of the neutrality status. However, the current neutral status of the Republic of Moldova has a unilateral character because it has not been recognized by other states or international organizations. As the national legislation points out, no legal acts/treaties have been concluded at international level or any UN Resolution adopted, that would expressly recognise this status. So far, the Republic of Moldova has not taken any actions focused strictly on the recognition of its status of neutrality. Thus, the non-recognition of the state's neutrality status lacks security guarantees from other international actors. The third essential condition assumes the existence of a defence capability since to be neutral does not mean that the state does not have the right of self-defence. The Judgment of the Constitutional Court nr. 14 of 2017 on the interpretation of Article 11 of the Constitution, clarified the rights of a neutral state, such as: the right to legitimate self-defence (individual and collective) against an external armed attack affecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state.

Consequently, I consider that the Republic of Moldova should start moving away from its neutrality status and actively move towards strengthening its security and defence sector. This should be included as an objective in the next National Security Strategy. A solid strategic communication effort should accompany the entire process to prepare the population of Moldova for such a move. In the meantime, nothing is preventing the leadership of Moldova to deepen its current partnerships with NATO, EU, US, and other

⁴ Sociological polls on “Public perceptions on security and defence system”, October 2022, CBS-AXA, https://www.scribd.com/document/608011854/Percep%C8%9Bii-Publice-Asupra-Sistemului-de-Securitate-%C8%98i-Ap%C4%83rare-a-Republicii-Moldova?fbclid=IwAR21VYP40pC-5VMsum6cFzNjk6PiQ6_gG8ocPm_nfFabDsYRuAIuZJc7y7I.

strategic partners to boost its defence capabilities and increase its resilience, similarly to Finland and Sweden. However, this should constitute just a transition period. The ultimate goal should remain that of becoming part of an alliance.

The third point I wanted to emphasize is that the Russian Federation will be able to recover its reputation only when it would cease with threatening its neighbours with armed aggression, and the whole world with nuclear strikes. Russia will regain its reputation when Russian people start normal election cycles and will vote out a group of people that are in power since 1999. Current Russian security concerns are false and irrelevant. Russian security was not threatened by Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova in any shape or form. The aggression always came from Russia.

Additionally, Russia should learn to live in peace with its neighbours by giving up its ambitions to reconstitute the Soviet Union, or any other form of historic Russian empire. The era when the world was divided in spheres of influence disappeared with the fall of the Soviet Union. No country from the free world wants the Iron Curtain to fall back, and everyone seems to resist this idea.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that Russia should not be allowed to recover its reputation by giving up independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of independent countries that were once part of the Soviet Union including Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. This will signify the defeat of the collective West, and the change of the current rules-based international world order.

The Changing Regional Balance of Power in the South Caucasus after the 24th February 2022

Boris Kuznetsov

The South Caucasus has entered the age of great power competition. The region is a good case study of the growing rivalry especially because three regional powers – Iran, Russia, and Turkey – increasingly strive to build a new order and behavioural patterns for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. In other words, the study of the three regional powers' behaviour in the region sheds light on some critical elements of the emerging new world order after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict on 24th February 2022.

The regional powers put a special emphasis on building new regional organizations aiming to cement their position. There is still a lack of agreement among the regional powers on which security cooperation and conflict-resolution mechanism would be acceptable to all actors. Yet the evolving process indicates the growing ability of Iran, Turkey, and Russia not only to influence the region, but also to eliminate external powers and ultimately construct a new order from the Black Sea to the Caspian basin. Russia's hopes on developing better relations with Turkey and Iran becomes clear against the regional geographic outlook. A common understanding with Ankara and Tehran allows Moscow to fortify its position not only in the South Caucasus but on the two areas flanking the region. In the Black Sea, where Russia wants to manage together with Turkey, while in the Caspian basin it works with Iran. Other littoral states matter less, although when considered necessary they could be consulted. However, the critical element is the exclusion of non-regional powers from exerting influence. From Moscow's perspective the new order in the South Caucasus should evolve around Russia.

The creation of a regional platform covering the South Caucasus and serving as alternatives to the Western multilateralism is an ultimate goal for Iran, Turkey, and Russia. The "3+3" format for regional cooperation is an initiative voiced by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which intended to

strengthen trade and economic ties between Turkey, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. Only Georgia has not been interested in participation due to Russia's role in the format. However, the other five countries might continue with this initiative despite a large number of competing interests and frictions among them. Nonetheless, after 24th February 2022, the prospect of deepening cooperation with Moscow became even more restrained for all participants, so that the future of the "3+3" cooperation became even more unclear. It should be noted that the proposed format was considered as the project that could undermine the Western role by excluding its presence and influence in the region. Thus, this project poses significant political challenges. As Georgia is the only country refusing to participate, Tbilisi's final decision will be crucial for the future of the format. In summary, the "3+3" platform of regional cooperation is seen mainly as an anti-Western coalition in Georgia, the main purpose of which is to redistribute the balance of power and expel the West from the region. However, Georgia aspires to integrate into Western institutions, seeks to strengthen ties with the European Union and NATO and looks at becoming more involved in the European integration process. However, from an economic point of view, the "3+3" format does not offer clear additional economic benefits to Georgia. Georgia already has stable trade and economic relations with all neighbouring countries, including Russia. However, despite the barriers mentioned above, Moscow officially does not lose hope that Georgia might abandon its opposition and become involved in the proposed project.

Initially, Russia's attitude toward the "3+3" initiative was hardly visible. Willingness to participate was hardly openly stated, though the idea might fit into Russia's understanding on the need to re-organize the region without Western influence.

It is difficult to build a clear picture of what Russian influence would look like in the next few years, but some observations nevertheless could be made. Russia's reliance on the military in formulating its foreign policy is likely to grow. Meanwhile, this would allow Moscow to have more impact and expect more support from the South Caucasus countries on its strategic visions over relations with the West or even the involvement of regional powers – Iran and Turkey. Its military presence, which is demonstrated as a source of regional stability, is being growingly regarded as a tool for projecting Russia's geopolitical influence.

The foreign policy of the three South Caucasus states is becoming increasingly diversified. A greater number of external players are interested in investing into the region. This means that viewing the South Caucasus solely in terms of the Russia-West competition does no longer correspond to the reality on the ground. There is a greater dynamism in terms of new infrastructure projects, foreign trade connections and the ability of the neighboring regional powers as well as of China to penetrate the once exclusively Russia-dominated South Caucasus.

This means that the future geopolitical order in the region is likely to be mostly shaped by Iran's, Turkey's, and Russia's intensifying attempts to create loose mechanisms serving as alternatives to Western influence. However, this does not entail the West's total withdrawal from the region. Rather a major rethinking of Western approach to building the new regional order will likely follow. This will open space for Iran, Russia, and Turkey to fill. That trio will tend to support each other. In the new order Russia's role will be critical. Moscow has been cautious not to overestimate its power, conscious of its limits, and willing to approach the regional and global geopolitical trends more pragmatically. It means seeing the South Caucasus not as an exclusive Russian sphere of influence, but rather as a space where Moscow would have both to cooperate and compete with other powers. The difference is that Moscow would prefer to talk rather to the regional powers – Iran and in particular Turkey – than to the Western actors whose vision of the South Caucasus is very different from the Russian.

Iran, Turkey, and Russia will be cooperating more out of their need to confront (in case of Iran and Russia) or constrain (in case of Turkey) the collective West's ability to penetrate the region. On the one hand, this thinking might push Iran and Turkey to accept Russia's supremacy, on the other hand, Russia might embrace a sort of a hierarchical system where it would hold the key role, but it would also accommodate some Iranian and Turkish interests. Moscow would also accept that challenging its position might be part of the game, but the scope of the competition should not cut into Russia's set of core interests, such as its military supremacy.

There are also some positive trends. The South Caucasus is no longer seen as a part of the West-Russia confrontation. Regional powers and China have been and will continue to be involved into the economy and politics of the

region, thereby accelerating the South Caucasus' closer ties with Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and especially with the Middle East.

The West is rethinking its position in the region, but to retain some influence, might need to rely on Turkey. This might suit the West because Turkey possesses a wide array of tools to penetrate the depths of the Eurasian continent where Brussels and Washington are otherwise unable to exert influence. Turkey and the West have in general similar, if not identical, geopolitical ambitions: promotion of East-West corridors as opposed to traditional Russia-dominated South-North pipelines, roads, railways, and other infrastructure. In the longer run, Turkey's policy in the Black Sea and in the South Caucasus (especially the latter) could generate a basis for a certain *rapprochement* between Turkey and the West. Turkey is the only NATO country which has engaged Russia militarily and knows the operational mode of the Russian military from Libya and Syria to the South Caucasus. Losing such a valuable ally would be tantamount to a major geopolitical mistake.

Moreover, Turkey is increasingly reaching out to Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan to build closer political, economic, and military ties. The arch of influence would also enable Turkey to puncture Russia where it hurts most and to build an effective negotiating tool with Moscow when it comes to bilateral tensions in other regions.

Iran's South Caucasus policy is closely linked to its relations with Russia. Russia-Iran strategic cooperation is driven by three imperatives: both need each other as a stabilizing force in the neighboring territories, primarily in the South Caucasus and in the Caspian Sea; secondly, bilateral military and nuclear cooperation; thirdly, both countries cooperate in Syria and although many consider the partnership in Syria as a backbone for their strong long-term bilateral ties, the South Caucasus is where Moscow and Tehran have been most successfully in cooperating with each other since the 1990s. Another common interest is to avoid any foreign, non-regional political and military influence in the South Caucasus. In this regard, any military cooperation which would involve a Western country, or a country related with the Western military power, is seen by Tehran as potentially dangerous to its interests. From this angle, the trilateral Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan military cooperation is perceived negatively by the leaders of Iran. This alignment of interests was well seen during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war when both

states effectively sought a minimization of Western diplomatic influence in the conflict-resolution process. For Iran, the Middle East and the South Caucasus regions have also become inter-connected. Regional security and energy resources underpin this growing linkage. As the second Nagorno-Karabakh war demonstrated, Russia and Turkey, which since the 2010s have been active in increasing their military and economic positions in the Middle East, consider now the South Caucasus as part of a greater geopolitical game that stretches from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea.

China lacks a long-term strategic vision for the South Caucasus. However, if there is a certain area where China thinks geopolitically it is on the geographic location of the South Caucasus as the shortest route from China to Europe, which would potentially make it an important region for China and the operation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite some progress, China's ties with the South Caucasus states developed slowly. Bilateral trade has usually seen steady growth, but there is little indication that it will become as significant as the three South Caucasus states would hope. The region does not feature high on BRI's agenda. China, up until the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict in February 2022 had always prioritized the transit route through Russia. However, this could change as the transit through Russia could see long-term obstacles due to Western sanctions. We need to place China's policy in South Caucasus within the larger Eurasian picture. A separate analysis of China's vision on the South Caucasus disregarding Beijing's policies in the Black Sea and Central Asia would not provide an adequate picture. There is an understanding in Beijing that the expansion of the BRI in the South Caucasus cannot take place out of the larger context of Central Asia. Without a proper connectivity through Central Asia and across the Caspian Sea, the intensity of Chinese activities in the South Caucasus is unlikely to increase significantly in the near future.

Russia, Turkey and Iran have a common interest in building transit routes through the South Caucasus. This opens up certain opportunities for *rapprochement* between Armenia and Turkey, and the possibility of open borders between both countries. In this context, Georgia is already playing a mediating role in their negotiations. Nonetheless, a precondition for an improvement in relations between Ankara and Yerevan remains the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. While there is great potential for increased trade and connectivity, and although in the aftermath of the 44

days war expectations were high, they cannot really materialize without the conclusion of a peace agreement.

The existing ethno-political conflicts practically block a full-fledged regional integration. There is not a single project in which Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia would be present all together. Tbilisi is trying to maneuver between Yerevan and Baku, although dependence on Azerbaijani business has increased significantly in recent years. The three countries have three different foreign policy priorities. Georgia is focused on joining NATO and the EU, Armenia – on participation in the Eurasian integration projects of the CSTO and the EAEU, and Azerbaijan – on distancing itself from any integration and developing bilateral ties. Baku is trying to build multi-vector ties with all the countries of the region and the regional powers. In February 2022, an allied agreement was concluded with Russia, relations with Turkey are reaching a new level with the signature of the Shusha Declaration on June 15, 2021. Armenia claims that it has always been in favor of the Russian version of resolving the conflict with Azerbaijan. At the same time, Yerevan is actively appealing to France and is also interested in the work of the EU and OSCE observers on the Azerbaijani section of its border, although their effectiveness raises significant questions.

The South Caucasus is a contested neighborhood and the subject of intense debates. This reflects the changing dynamics of the region, its complex realities, the interests of outsiders and the region's relations with the rest of the world. Its strategic position, linking the North to the South and the East with the West, as well as its oil, gas, transport, and trade routes are all important reasons for its increasing relevance.

However, despite a growing interest for this region, its real priorities and needs are still being largely ignored. This could be partly explained by the inability of regional actors to develop a joint coherent vision for their future. A reassessment of the region, with all its problems and priorities, is therefore urgently needed.

Epilogue

Frederic Labarre

This workshop prompted participants to “imagine South Caucasus Security” after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We believe that our contributors have acquitted themselves of that task reasonably well, in the current context of uncertainty. Any analytical lapses can squarely be blamed on the stress brought about by the rapid change in international affairs. Our minds struggle to comprehend the implications of what we are seeing, and, in many cases, of what we are living. Imagining security for the South Caucasus should have been an exercise in creativity. A constructive exercise in real terms as well as in theoretical terms.

To imagine a particular status of relations, one has to have a clear outlook on what the future might be. Perhaps the co-chairs were too demanding, or required thinking in the abstract. Abstract, conceptual thinking has its value, but it is frequently constrained by the overbearing weight of reality. We asked the contributors to look into the conditions that would make their favoured solutions prevail. We often overlook how those conditions are the product of outside events. These events cannot always be controlled. Perhaps this should have been the initial question to our workshop; what can the South-Caucasus control? What can Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia control? Evidently, the recurring answer would have been that this control is ultimately dependent upon what Russia wants. Or what Turkey wants. Occasionally on what Iran wants. And then, the discussion would centre on what regional hegemons “must” do so that peace and stability may prevail in the South Caucasus. If international relations were as constructive as theorists of cooperation would have you believe, smaller powers would make demands that larger powers might meet out of normative courtesy. As it happens, and this is nowhere truer than in the South Caucasus, small powers may propose, but large powers dispose. All that matters is knowing who is truly a large power, and who is a wannabe. At present, we would venture to suggest that Russia is the latter, and this has vast consequences for the future of South Caucasus security.

This is pertinent because countries which misjudge their own power are wont to take risks they would not otherwise countenance in other circumstances. Uncertainty thereupon becomes everyone's nemesis, and time becomes the great unknown. Time is the most traitorous element; no one can control it, and no one ever knows whether it is working against or for you. Time is the great equalizer.

This is being written on the ninth anniversary of the Maidan, and on the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The war is on-going, and it seems to be a function of great power competition, not local aggression or depredation. This is not a local war. This is an attempt to change the geopolitical *status quo*, and the South Caucasus is caught in the middle. This is the surest conclusion we can make to this workshop. We do not know whether the policy recommendations that we have toiled over will even be relevant, or considered, because things move so fast.

Such is the magnitude of change that we are reverting back to the Cold War paradigm of international relations, save that we may be aiming our sights at China's ambitions. An indicator as to what kinds of international relations we can expect even among allies is clear to see in the sort of international relations theorists are gaining the stage. Whereas Joseph Nye might be the theorist-practitioner of the post-Cold War years who attempted to give rise to "soft" power, now we are treated to the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer's hardest form of realism. In many a "I told you so" moments recorded on YouTube and Twitter, Mearsheimer attempts to channel past realists, such as Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. He has become to international relations theory what Jordan Peterson is to social psychology. And the narrative is not hopeful; from the West's fault to Russians indomitability. The one realist who had attempted to unify State power and identity – Samuel Huntington – is barely acknowledged. We are returning to a world where military might decides everything.

This is both good and bad for the Western alliances. If, as Mearsheimer suggests, America is the root of all conflicts, then how do we account for Russia's actions, and China's blustering? The point here is that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has precipitated the unthinkable; it has made the United States essential again. It has rescued it from the beginning of its spiral into irrelevance, as the country grappled with deep social divisions. As little as

four years ago, the RSSC SG had explored the implications of Emmanuel Macron's quip about NATO being "brain-dead." Things move so quickly we already have to reconsider our conclusions. The United States has returned to Europe, terrorism is on the back-burner, and NATO is undoubtedly more relevant than ever. Does this mean that we can expect Georgian adherence to the Alliance soon? Strategically speaking, this is unthinkable without Ukraine. And currently Ukraine is too much of a risk to bring into the Alliance. But NATO enlargement is definitely back on the agenda, witnessing the applications of Sweden and Finland., and the possibility of swaying Turkey's particular objections. Sooner or later, even Turkey will have to reckon with geopolitical change. And if Turkey must accept that change and still benefit from it, it may be forced to bandwagon with the United States. If a country as powerful as Turkey currently is must account for that renewal of power, what chances have the three South Caucasus countries?

In a survey of the state of the world, Bertrand Badie and Dominique Vidal conclude that "nothing will ever be the same as before".¹ We stand at the cusp of tectonic changes. The sort of change that greeted the end of the First World War much more than the end of the Second. War itself will not be the same. We will have to adapt multilateral tools (if we can get them), and more to the point, and even in the absence of proper multilateralist solutions, national solutions may not bring success and security. Finally, to circle back to the issue of time, there is a distinct feeling it is running out. In that context therefore, we would urge the South Caucasus countries to set aside their differences and look to the future and to themselves together to meet future challenges. In the next SGI, we will look deeper into the consequences of a political and power vacuum for the South Caucasus. We would hope to discuss these issues as a way to raise awareness of the risks inherent in the future.

We maintain the belief that the South Caucasus countries do not control much. They do, however, control the status of their relations. With this in mind, and although we have had to adopt a reactive posture in the design of our RSSC SG workshops, we remain committed to raising awareness of that control, and of their respective responsibilities towards their populations.

¹ Badie, Bertrand & Vidal, Dominique (2022). *Le Monde ne sera plus comme avant*. Paris: Liens qui Libèrent, 335p.

PART IV: Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group

Executive Summary of Recommendations

The Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) met 03–06 November 2022 in Reichenau/Rax, Austria, discussed and subsequently agreed on a number of policy recommendations, such as:

1. To urge for greater input/involvement from the European Union in the Armenian-Azerbaijan peace process. This involvement should focus on trust building and the necessity of regional cooperation. In particular, business-to-business contacts through “EU for Dialogue” projects should be established.
2. To lengthen the duration of EU’s civilian monitoring mission on the line of contact, and possibly to roll it into the Frontex scheme.
3. Regional civil society and NGOs via the EU’s support should implement specialized programs designed to stimulate mutual trust: monitoring social media for heinous content; developing a free trade zone, and a broader range of economic incentives to support the peace process; building collective psycho-social resilience.
4. To set up an Armenian-Azerbaijani annual literary contest for regional scholars and writers. The objective would be to collect success stories or fictional accounts of good-neighbourly relations as well as peaceful coexistence from Armenia and Azerbaijan.
5. Official statements should limit vitriolic/provocative rhetoric or positions.

Introduction

The 24th workshop, which took place from 3rd to 6th November 2022, provided the occasion to examine the implications for the countries of the South Caucasus triggered by Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The conflagration of which Ukraine has become victim has been brewing for several years, and the current tragedy is a function of geopolitical tensions opposing Russia and the West. Sadly, Ukraine has been the terrain over which this dispute is being settled, but we cannot overlook the possible implications of this conflict on the remaining tensions in the South Caucasus. Against the background of an uneasy cease-fire on the new line of contact between Armenian and Azeri forces in Karabakh, maintained by Russian peacekeeping troops, a number of questions arise, while the parties to this decades-long conflict seek to ink a final peace deal. First, can the weakness of Russian forces embolden Azerbaijan in seeking greater concessions from Armenia, threatening the current cease-fire? Second, more generally, what will Armenia's options be when it realizes that it cannot count on Russia for support? Third, might not Georgia be tempted to re-establish its sovereignty over the breakaway regions in the same manner? What are the implications for Georgia's NATO aspirations while it welcomes thousands of Russian draft- and sanctions-dodgers? Fourth, what to make of Iran's growing economic and security role in the South Caucasus from the point of view of the European prospects of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, and of their engulfment with the Middle Eastern turmoil?

The intention of this workshop was again to stimulate thinking over the fast-evolving security and strategic environment in order to advocate for regional integration and the abandonment of hegemonic "guarantees" as best option for regional security.

What follows is a brief description of the debates that took place, capped by policy recommendations. The co-chairs thank all the participants – whose recommendations these are – and the organizers for making this workshop possible.

Panel 1: Georgian Security, Breakaway Territories, and NATO

This panel was opened by a message by Dr. Alan Whitehorn urging everyone in the region to keep their minds and hearts opened for long-term and peaceful solutions to the conflicts of the South Caucasus. Later, the RSSC SG participants welcomed keynote speaker Ambassador of Canada to France and special envoy to the European Union, H.E. Stéphane Dion, who outlined Canada's programs to support fragile democracies in the region in general, and in particular Armenia. He also mentioned the eventual opening of a permanent Canadian legation in Yerevan.

Much of the presentations that followed underlined the absolute necessity for Georgia to adhere to NATO, and for NATO to open negotiations for accession. Evidently, certain conditions outlined in the Membership Action Plan on which Georgia's eventual NATO membership hinges, have not been met yet. However, the continuing aggression by Russia over Ukraine has triggered a hardening of the Alliance and provided the opportunity to further expand, most famously to Finland and Sweden.

Georgian participants could rightly wonder why the admission of two new members can proceed over an urgent strategic need, while Georgia's admission, which proceeds from the same need, continues to be delayed. The solution proposed has been to extend partial (territorial) membership to Georgia, to account for the obligation of mutual defence for the areas which Tbilisi controls. In other words, it is the same logic that operated in the 1950s, when a truncated (West-)Germany was welcomed into NATO. This idea – recently proposed by think tanks in Washington – is therefore not new. As the Russian menace continues to threaten regional stability, the consolidation of Western democracies' influence in the South Caucasus merits a second look.

A focus was given on the shifting balance of power in the South Caucasus following Russian entanglement in Ukraine. The weakening of Russian regional attention increasingly draws Iran into the region while threatening the fragile Russia-Turkey balance of power established with the ceasefire agreement of the latest Karabakh war. This might have a destabilizing effect on the region, as Turkey-Iran relations would be more competitive not only in Syria, but also in Iraq, and more recently over the issue of the "Zangezur

Corridor”. It was discussed whether the West was prepared to share its “sphere of interest” in the South Caucasus with Russia, Turkey and Iran, rather than compete for “spheres of influence” with them.

Panel 2: Nagorno-Karabakh as Once and Future Powder Keg?

This panel discussed the current state of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and how it has been affected by the ongoing war in Ukraine. Concern was expressed with this conflict becoming entangled with the Russia-West confrontation, and with the ensuing consequences of Russian long-term engagement in Ukraine. Azerbaijan’s insistence that Armenia allowed the opening of the “Zangezur corridor” through Armenian sovereign territory has raised concerns in Teheran over Turkey’s alleged plans for regional hegemony. Less Russian and more US and EU presence in the South Caucasus were also hardly liked by Iran who felt its Northern neighbourhood had been increasingly encroached by perceived hostile powers. In the currently tense regional context, Armenia should continue peace negotiations as the main way to avoiding a new war with Azerbaijan. However, concluding a peace agreement by January 2023, as hoped for by some Western capitals, was little likely given the continued uncertainty over the status of Armenians from Karabakh.

The biggest success so far of EU’s diplomatic mediation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict consists of their mutual recognition of territorial integrity under the auspices of the European Political Community summit in Prague. In that context, greater EU presence in the South Caucasus seems welcome in spite of an internal debate over the “Western alienation of Azerbaijan”. Furthermore, the increasing regional role of Iran in response to a perceived weakening role of Russia was noted, which in turn might lead to stronger Russia-Azerbaijan relations as natural allies against Iran’s deeper involvement in the region.

Another topic was how Iran and India perceived current developments in the South Caucasus, and how they were playing in support of Armenia’s security policy. Including Armenia into the North-South transport corridor for geopolitical reasons in spite Azerbaijan having a much better infrastructure on offer could serve as an example. Looking at the results of a survey of Iranian experts’ views on Iran’s role in its neighbourhoods, including in the

South Caucasus region, there was dominant dissatisfaction with current Iranian policy and vigorous recommendations for its substantive review. On the other hand, India was both providing economic incentives, by inviting Baku and Yerevan to participate in regional transport projects, and arming Yerevan to resist further against Azerbaijani pressures. By doing so, New Delhi would be seeking to preserve its geo-economic interests and limit its geopolitical losses against the Ankara-Baku-Islamabad axis.

Participants argued in favour of the EU and US being more actively involved in the peaceful settlement of conflicts in the South Caucasus region, and of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in particular. Increasing the geopolitical and financial involvement of the West in the region would lead to a significant reduction in the role and influence of Russia. As an example, the creation of a special OSCE Observation Mission was proposed, which could lead to the replacement of Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh. Moreover, in the longer term, the Eastern Partnership could prepare Armenia and Azerbaijan for signing Association Agreements with the EU. A stable and integrated South Caucasus could make a serious contribution to establishing a more functional European security system and would also bring greater stability in the adjacent areas.

Panel 3: The Outer Limits: Ukrainian, Moldovan and Russian Security

This panel was meant to complement the views from the South Caucasian states with broader perspectives on the current security challenges facing Ukraine, Moldova, and the Russian Federation. Clearly, Ukraine and Moldova are directly threatened and largely affected by the Russian war against Ukraine. The focus has been given here on strategic communication of (in)security in Ukraine, and on state institutions' and public perceptions of security threats in Moldova. Additionally, two scenarios facing the global distribution of power were outlined: a bipolar (US-China) world, where Russia would become a junior partner of China; a multi-polar international system where US, and China would still be the most prominent global players, but great powers like Russia, India, Brazil would also play major multi-regional, if not fully global roles. In case the latter scenario was the likelier one, Russia should build its new global role upon multilateral organizations, such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union, to

replace its broken relations with the West, and re-balance its partnership with China on an equal footing.

Interactive discussions focused on Georgia as a major beneficiary of East-West connectivity. The official strategic goal of the Georgian government is to expand this connectivity and establish Georgia as a hub between East and West. Economically and commercially speaking, Georgia, thanks to its numerous free trade agreements, is “non-aligned”. This non-alignment is supported by the fact that Georgia is close to the needs of other countries in the region. All compete for trade corridors and all need to modernize infrastructure. The logical conclusion would be to make the region as a whole more competitive. This competitiveness could be generated by the evidence that a commercial hub like Tbilisi could help connect suppliers in the Caspian and beyond to the West, by-passing Russian infrastructure (especially in oil and gas).

On the other hand, a general precondition would be for regional actors to honour existing conventions faithfully, arrive at non-use-of-force agreements between all countries, open borders and guarantee respect for human rights. The promotion of contrary ideological notions must be stopped. Rather, it is the region itself which should develop its own strategic objectives with due consideration of hegemonic interests. In order to do this, actors should concentrate on commonalities, and address them frankly. When there are competitive advantages, these should be leveraged to the advantage of the whole region.

New Handbook Project

The Editorial Workshop on launching a new handbook project on “Building Resilience against Human Security Threats and Risks” hashed out the foundations of the new project. Participants agreed that: the project should take a bottom-up approach aiming at developing a better future rather than imposing an external regional vision; it will be developed as an educational project, but its potential regional impact in support of building a new security architecture based on the EU’s historical experience is equally important; the content should be de-politicized and reflecting specialist experts’ research. Like the first RSSC SG handbook project (www.bundesheer.at/publikation-1139) its scope and contributors’ list should not be limited to a specific

region, but it should be geographically as inclusive as possible. The focus on strategizing building resilience against human security risks and threats was highly recommended. After the workshop, a summary of conclusions and an outline of the table of contents have been circulated to confirmed and potential contributors.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations emerged from our interactive discussions pertaining to the current tense geopolitical and strategic context:

1. All participants agreed that a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan was vital for the region's future development and status. They urged decision makers to come to an agreement quickly.

The Armenian-Azerbaijan peace process should welcome greater input/involvement from the European Union. This involvement should focus on trust building and the necessity of regional cooperation. In particular, business-to-business contacts were urged through "EU for Dialogue" projects.

2. Military incursions across the common border were deemed as the most serious and proximate threat to the current Armenian-Azerbaijani ceasefire. Therefore, it was proposed to lengthen the duration of EU's civilian monitoring mission on the line of contact, and possibly to roll it into the Frontex scheme. EU monitors would increase transparency and deter against a resumption of hostilities, complementing the work of Russian peacekeepers.
3. Specialized programs designed to stimulate mutual trust should be implemented mainly by the regional civil society and NGOs, via the EU's support. Among the initiatives that were discussed, a few attracted our attention:
 - a. Projects to monitor social media for heinous content (bots, fake accounts, graphic content);
 - b. Develop a free trade zone, and implement a broader range of economic incentives to support the peace process;

- c. Stimulate the involvement of NGOs and civil society in building collective psycho-social resilience.
4. Set up an Armenian-Azerbaijani annual literary contest for regional scholars and writers. The objective would be to collect success stories or fictional accounts of good-neighborly relations as well as peaceful coexistence from Armenia and Azerbaijan. These are then to be honored at an annual prize ceremony where the first, the second and the third prize are to be awarded each for Armenian and Azerbaijani writers.
5. Official statements should limit vitriolic/provocative rhetoric or positions.

Georgia is currently being put under pressure by the influx of Russian draft- and sanctions-dodgers. Since late September 2022, thousands of Russian nationals have been pouring in, and establishing companies to open trade with the outside world. This means that Georgia is being put in a position where she might be unwittingly or indirectly helping Russia's war effort. Nevertheless, the presence of many anti-war Russians is also an opportunity to deploy soft power. It therefore became urgent to distinguish between those Russians who oppose the war from those who profit from it. This becomes especially important in the context of Georgia's continuing ambitions to join NATO and the EU (notwithstanding the delicate geostrategic position it occupies next to Russia). Thus it is recommended that:

6. The possibility and risks associated with a partial enlargement of NATO to include the areas of its territory which Georgia more directly controls, and how to deal with the most recent wave of Russian immigrants in Georgia be investigated more fully during the next RSSC SG workshop.

List of Abbreviations

ABL	Administrative Boundary Line
APG	Alliance of Patriots of Georgia
ATU	Allameh Tabataba'i University
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BTC	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline
BTE	Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIMIC	Civil-Military Co-operation
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
FSB	Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
IPRM	Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism
IRI	International Republican Institute
KGB	Committee for State Security
MAP	Membership Action Plan
MoU	Memorandum of understanding
MP	Members of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSCE MG	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Minsk Group
OTS	Organisation of Turkic States
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PM	Prime minister
PR	Public relations
PSYOPS	Psychological operations
RM	Republic of Moldova
S.O.	South Ossetia
TANAP	Trans-Anatolian natural gas pipeline

TAP	Trans-Adriatic natural gas pipeline
TITR	Trans-Caspian International Transport Route
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
U.S. / US	United States of America

List of Authors and Editors

Ahmad ALILI, Caucasus Policy Analysis Centre, Baku

Stéphane DION, Prime Minister's Special Envoy to the European Union and Europe and Canadian Ambassador to France

Angelina GROMOVA, South Ossetia expert, Moscow

Daria ISACHENKO, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

Kakhaber KEMOKLIDZE, Former Georgian State Security Council, Tbilisi

Elguja KHOKRISHVILI, Georgian Institute of Politics, Tbilisi, and Free University of Berlin

Boris KUZNETSOV, Centre of International and Regional Policy, Saint-Petersburg

Frederic LABARRE, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston

Elena MARZAC, Platform for Security and Defence Initiative, Chisinau

George Vlad NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

Benyamin POGHOSYAN, Centre for Political and Economic Strategic Studies, Yerevan

Michael SARJVELADZE, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

Yeghia TASHJIAN, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut

Alan WHITEHORN, Department of Political Science & Economics, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston

The war in Ukraine is a function of the geopolitical standoff opposing Russia and the West. As such, it has worsened the geopolitical context within the South Caucasus region. At strategic level, Russia is struggling to hold on its “game maker” role while the US and the regional powers are challenging its dwindling regional dominance.

Building a new regional order in Eastern Europe is inevitable. What role should Russia play in it? Whether it was included or not, peace in the South Caucasus will continue to be shaped by its long-term strategic interests and threat perceptions. This is the inescapable geopolitical logic of the South Caucasian states who should either deal with Russia wisely or have their continued survival at risk.

ISBN: 978-3-903359-63-5

