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THE END OF KARABAKH AND THE CHANGE OF GEOPOLITICAL AND SECURITY CIRCUMSTANCES IN THE TRANSCAUCASUS

Abstract:	<i>This paper observes “defrosting” of Azeri – Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh region in September 2023 which resulted in Azerbaijan’s complete victory and reinstalment of its control over this breakway region. Result of this rivalry significantly changed the complete geopolitical and security circumstances in the Transcaucasus and led to a new balance of power between local, regional and big powers in this region. After the detailed presentation of the course of conflict in early autumn of 2023 and its outcomes, the paper provides a brief overview of the history of geopolitics of the Caucasus and Transcaucasia and the long-term rivalry of Armenians and Azeris that led to Karabakh conflict.</i> <i>Central part of the paper observes post-Cold War competition in Transcaucasia between main geopolitical players in the region - Russia, Turkey, Iran and the West and their relations with local small states. Final part of the Paper is reserved for the current geostrategic changes in Transcaucasia after the 2023 conflict, that is, the newly established balance of power in the region and, in concluding remarks, gives the predictions of its durability and sustainability.</i>
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Introduction

In the shadow of the great confrontation between Russia and the West in Ukraine, another post-Soviet region experienced a new “defrosting” of the conflict which resulted in significant changes in the overall geopolitical and strategic-security conditions in this area. This is, of course, the finale of the decade-long Armenian Azeri conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh and its consequences for the overall situation in Transcaucasia. The framework for the analysis of this change is the theory of neoclassical realism applied to classical geopolitics. It considers “the influences of geography on international relations that are located within the Mackinder-Spikeman tradition, but with a creative refinement that takes into account the changed social, economic, political and cultural factors”¹. The approach of neoclassical realism will be more noticeable in understanding the foreign policies of observed international actors that equally consider domestic variables and the constructivist concept of “perception”, especially those concerning the relative power in the perceived geopolitical environment/space². On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched what it calls an “anti-terrorist military operation” against Nagorno-Karabakh. It is a breakaway enclave with about 120,000 Armenians, on whose territory the Republic of Artsakh, supported by

¹ Nick Megoran, *Neoclassical geopolitics*, “Political Geography”, Vol. 29, Newcastle University, Newcastle, 2010, pp. 187

² Gideon Rose, *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, “World Politics”, Vol. 51, No. 1, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998, pp. 14

neighboring Armenia, operated for more than three decades even though this territory is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.

The secession of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan began in 1988, on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union and led to the Armenian Azerbaijani war. The conflict ended in 1994 with an agreement mediated by the “Minsk Group” (co-chaired by Russia, the USA and France) established by the OSCE¹. Based on the “Protocol of Bishkek”² the agreement froze the conflict, leaving all the territorial gains achieved through military operations in the hands of the Armenians. The agreement also established a “contact line” in Nagorno-Karabakh that separated the warring parties along which OSCE/Minsk Group observers monitored the implementation of the ceasefire and sought a way to find a peaceful solution to the dispute while at the same time imposing an arms embargo for both sides and facilitating the decrease of violence in the entire region. At the end of the “First Karabakh War”, Armenian forces controlled the entire territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven more regions extending from Karabakh to the internationally recognized Armenian-Azerbaijan border. The established peace was fragile: after a series of smaller conflicts and skirmishes, in September 2020, a new large-scale conflict (the so-called “Second Karabakh War”) broke out over the entire disputed territory. After six weeks of heavy fighting, which claimed nearly six thousand lives and drove about thirty thousand Armenians from Karabakh into exile, a peace agreement was reached on November 10th with the help of Russia, which halted military operations³. Since the Armenian side experienced a series of defeats and the loss of a large part of its territory, a new “freezing” of the conflict followed the situation on the ground. With the deployment of 2,000 Russian peacekeepers along the newly established demarcation line, the ceasefire meant not only the return of seven districts and a significant part of Nagorno-Karabakh itself to Azerbaijani control, but also enabling the survival of the remaining part of Karabakh by preserving its only land connection to Armenia – Lachin Corridor.

Although the conflict ended, the agreement of November 2020 failed to establish more stable conditions for lasting peace. Occasional skirmishes between Armenians and Azeris continued daily, in front of the eyes of Russian peacekeepers. Official Baku continued to insist on the complete disarmament of what it called “illegal Armenian troops” in Nagorno-Karabakh, accusing them of occasional shelling and detonation on a part of the territory that, according to the agreement, belonged to the Azerbaijani side. Armenia (but also Russia) retaliated with counteraccusations, alleging that Azerbaijan is violating the ceasefire, shelling and occupying new territories, including those inside Armenia. Both sides have accused the other of numerous war crimes committed over a long period, especially those related to ethnic cleansing.

From the very beginning of the implementation of the agreement, it was visible that the problems surrounding the observance of the transportation route along the Lachin corridor - the only physical connection between Armenia and the enclave in Nagorno-Karabakh that was secured by Russian patrols - were increasing. Azerbaijanis, according to the agreement, undertook to guarantee free passage in both directions, for civilians as well as for vehicles and transport of the goods⁴. In the late 2022, Azerbaijani activists completely blocked the corridor preventing the transport of food, medical equipment and all humanitarian convoys to Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the movement of civilians between it and Armenia. The reason for the blockade was found in the alleged illegal mining of natural treasures in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian side accused the government in Baku of being behind these civil protests and expressed dissatisfaction that Russian peacekeepers failed to break this blockade⁵. On the other hand, Azerbaijan retaliated with counteraccusations that did not only concern illegal mining, but also the use of the corridor for the transport of military equipment, especially mine-explosives, which, allegedly, the Armenians use to mine the areas that were returned to their control of Baku according to the

¹ Cornell Svante, *The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict*, Report No. 46, Department of East European Studies, Uppsala University, 1999

² <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Bishkek%20Protocol.pdf> (16.05.2025)

³ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384> (16.05.2025)

⁴ Hrant Michaelian, Jeronim Perović, *Geopolitical Echoes of the Karabakh Conflict*, “CCS Analyses in Security Policy”, No. 334, December 2023, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zürich, 2023, pp. 1-4

⁵ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Russian Peacekeepers find themselves sidelined in Nagorno Karabakh*, 15 December 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88651> (16.09.2025)

November 2020 agreement¹. In April 2023, a few days after the Armenian Prime Minister publicly recognized Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, the authorities from Baku established their checkpoints along the Lachin Corridor, thus strengthening the blockade that had lasted for months, while Russian peacekeepers remained passive.

A new culmination of hostilities around Nagorno-Karabakh took place on September 19, 2023. The government in Baku found the reason for the start of the “anti-terrorist operation” in two incidents in which several civilians and soldiers died when their vehicles ran into mines, allegedly planted by Armenian troops. The declared goals of the Azerbaijani side in this operation concerned “suppressing major provocations in the economic region of Karabakh, disarming and ensuring the withdrawal of the armed forces of Armenia from our territories, neutralizing their military infrastructure, ensuring the safety of the civilian population returned to the territories freed from occupation and, then, the civilians involved in the construction and restoration works and our military personnel, and, finally, the restoration of the constitutional order of the Republic of Azerbaijan”². In this sense, humanitarian corridors were established for the evacuation of civilians from the area of military operations. The Armenians, on the other hand, claimed that the whole operation was staged and started to round off Azerbaijan's policy of ethnic cleansing, targeting civilian settlements under the pretext of eliminating military targets, while at the same time denying that Armenian military personnel and equipment were deployed in Nagorno Karabakh.

Although international factors, primarily Russia, the USA and the EU, immediately requested an end to hostilities and an extension of the peace talks between the government in Baku and the authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azerbaijani army continued its operation. Twenty-four hours later, the authorities in Karabakh accepted the ceasefire proposed by the command of the Russian peacekeepers deployed in the field while the authorities in Baku declared a military victory. During this short conflict about 200 people died, while about 400 people were injured. The agreement of September 20, 2023, itself included several provisions: 1) laying down the arms of the Armenian military forces and other illegal armed groups and their withdrawal from combat positions and complete disarmament; 2) surrender of all ammunition and military equipment; 3) implementation and coordination of these measures by the Russian peacekeeping contingent deployed in the region³. The government in Yerevan again denied the presence of its military forces in the Karabakh area and announced that it was not involved in the latest negotiations on the ceasefire agreement.

The implementation of the ceasefire agreement, along with the disarmament of the Armenian forces in Karabakh, opened, however, the issue of amnesty for their fighters. They doubted the security guarantees that must be issued before handing over the weapons, since official Baku expressed views that amnesty will not cover all Armenian fighters, that is, it will not apply to those who are suspected of war crimes in the conflicts of the early 1990s as well as in 2020. Azerbaijani forces have established a series of checkpoints for people moving through the Lachin Corridor in the direction of Armenia. There are numerous testimonies of people who were arrested and taken away, including some of the former Armenian leaders from Karabakh⁴. As for the Russian peacekeepers, they are expected to remain present on the ground until the expiration of the 2020 agreement, i.e. until the end of 2025, to monitor the withdrawal of Armenian troops.

After the implementation of the ceasefire agreement, all of Nagorno-Karabakh came under the full control of the military forces of Azerbaijan while negotiations began for its full reintegration into the constitutional order of Azerbaijan. After such development, it is logical to expect the conclusion of a general peace agreement that would be acceptable to all parties. This is exactly what was discussed in the telephone conversation of Azerbaijani President Aliyev with Vladimir Putin on September 21, 2023, when the agreed measures were intensification of

1 Gabriel Gavin, Supplies begin to run low as Nagorno-Karabakh blockade continues, Eurasianet, December 19, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/supplies-begin-to-run-low-as-nagorno-karabakh-blockade-continues> (16.05.2025)

2 Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Press release, 22 August 2022, <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/uchdik-girkgiz-saribaba-high-grounds-are-cleared-of-armenian-mines-video-41519.html> (17.05.2025)

3 Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Press release, 20 September 2023, <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/colonel-anar-cyvazov-an-agreement-has-been-reached-to-suspend-local-anti-terror-measures-video-49446.html> (17.05.2025)

4 Arab News, Azerbaijan seeks ‘war crime’ suspects in sea of Karabakh refugees, 26 September 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2380781/world> (17.05.2025)

trilateral talks on the restoration of transport links, the demarcation of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the drafting of a peace agreement between the two countries¹.

On September 28, the Armenian leader in Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh, Samvel Shahramanyan, issued a statement on the dissolution of the institutions of this republic until January 1, 2024. During the first week after the end of the fighting half of the Armenian population left the territory of Karabakh. By the end of the year, almost the entire Armenian population was evacuated to the mother country - Armenia. Because of these tendencies Western partners have insisted that Azerbaijan guarantee the rights and security of the Armenian population of Karabakh as well as the immediate provision of humanitarian aid, to which the government in Baku responded positively. However, the degree of mistrust and hostility was so great that soon the entire Armenian population experienced an exodus. Because of this epilogue, the Armenian capital Yerevan was rocked by riots in which the resignation of Prime Minister Pashinyan was demanded because of the fate that befell the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh.

Geopolitics of the Caucasus and Transcaucasia and the Historical Rivalry of Armenians and Azeris

The dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, like the entire Caucasus region, is steeped in historical and geopolitical rivalries. This region stretches between the Black and Caspian seas and consists of the territories of the states of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia as well as the border areas of Russia, Iran and Turkey. The Great Caucasus - a mountain range that separates Europe from Asia - divides the North Caucasus, which is part of the Russian Federation, from the South Caucasus, which consists of the three mentioned independent states that, from the Russian perspective, occupy the area of the Transcaucasia (*Zakavkáz'je* in Russian). The area of the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, in geopolitical terms, represents the border area between the Middle Eastern state formations in the Rimland and the areas of the center of the Eurasian continent - the Heartland, since ancient times. Herodotus still saw the area of the Caucasus and the southern rim of the Caspian Sea as a barrier between despotic Persia and vast Scythia, from where attacks, counterattacks and sudden migrations of the population start. "The Transcaucasia is an area where the interests of Great powers have clashed for centuries, and complex geopolitical games and exhausting wars have been fought between them. In the old century, these were the Roman Empire and the Old Persian Empire (Achaemenid state), in the Middle Ages - Byzantium and the New Persian Empire (Sasanid state), the Seljuk Empire and the Arab Caliphate, in the new century - Turkey and Persia (the Safavid state), and, from the 18-th century, the Russian Empire. Today, the interests of the superpowers collide there - primarily the Russian Federation and the USA, and, among the first-class subjects from the region - Turkey and Iran"².

In this region, considering the strength of the state power of the forces in the depth of the land and its Middle Eastern rim, the direction of the boundary function of the Caucasus-Priscaspian is the only thing that changed. "When the power in Rimland was stronger, the Caucasus represented a fortress aimed at defense against the southern Russian steppes. This was the most common historical case: during the time of Achaemenid Persia, during the peak of Byzantine power, during the rise of the Ottomans... When the balance of power was reversed, the Caucasus was the station from which the campaign from the depths of the continent towards Rimland started. This was the case at the time of the Indo-European Hittite invasion of Asia Minor and the Middle East at the beginning of the Iron Age; then, at the time of the Kipchak creation of Genghis Khanids who used the Caucasus as a springboard to fly across Anatolia to Syria to deal with the Egyptian Mamelukes. The third most obvious examples are the Caucasus during Russian expansion in period of the wars with Turkey in 1829, the Crimean War (1853-56), and the First World War. At the time of equal strength of the states from the Heartland and the Rimland, the Caucasus-Priscaspian border area was the scene of geopolitical rivalry for mastering more favorable positions for the protection of the "hinterland" (e.g. during the Khazar wars with Sassanid Persia, and later with the Arab Caliphate)"³.

¹ *President of Russia, Telephone conversation with President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, 21 September 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72312> (17.05.2025)*

² Драган Петровић, Драгомир Анђелковић, Горан Николић, *Геополитика Закавказја*, ИМПП; Београд, 2010, p. 47, Dragan Petrovic, Dragomir Andjelkovic, Goran Nikolic, *Geopolitic of Transcaucasia*, IMPP, Belgrad, 2010, p. 47

³ Александар Гајић, *Нова велика игра*, "Нова српска политичка мисао", Београд, 2009, p. 28, Aleksandar Gajić, *The New Big Game*, "New Serb Political Thinking", Belgrad, 2009, p. 28

Geopolitical reasons were decisive, which is why the state creations in the Caucasus could rarely maintain independence, even a vassal position, except in times of the balance between the powers (such as during the peace between Rome and the Parthian state). But even that was rare. Not long after one of the powers felt that the balance of power was beginning to prevail in favor of someone else, it would start a preventive offensive in order to strategically occupy this border area and use its geographical advantages to protect its "main" areas (cases of Khazarian offensive towards Persia, Turkish Caucasian retaliation according to Persia, later also Russia...) from possible dangers. Until the migration of the Ogus Turkic tribes (whose descendants are today's Turks and Azeris) to the "Caucasian partition" and the Transcaucasia, the thousand-year-old ethnic communities living there belonged to the Caucasian Indo-European peoples who built many state structures in this rough area. The longest-living among them are the Armenians, whose continuity in the Caucasus and the eastern part of Asia Minor (the "Armenian Plateau") can be traced back over 3,500 years¹ since the state formations of Mitany, the tribal alliance with the Nairi people (around Lake Van) and the powerful state of Urartu in whose later period the ruling dynasty was undoubtedly Armenian². From the sixth century before Christ, the Armenian state entered the historical stage which was mentioned in the documents of the Persian emperor Darius (549-485) as a vassal state of Media, and then as part of the Persian Empire and Alexander's Macedonian Empire. As an independent state, "great Armenia" under the Artasheid dynasty survived between the Roman Empire and the Parthian Empire. From time to time, falling under the influence of one of these two great powers, Armenia turned into a vassal, "buffer" state. In the Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages, Armenia was the scene of conflict between Byzantium and Sassanid Persia, and, later, for the penetration of the Arab Caliphate, the Seljuk Turks, and the Mongols into Byzantine Anatolia. With the weakening and retreat of Byzantium, the "Armenian Plateau" will become an area of competition between the Turkish states in Asia Minor, until they are all defeated by the westernmost one - the Ottoman state. However, there will be no lasting peace in these areas. The conflicts between the Ottomans and Safavid Persia will only repeat the imperial contests of the past. The price of the war was paid by the Armenians, whose lands were devastated and whose population was seriously thinned. The border was constantly changing, although in general it can be said that, when the guns fell silent, from the middle of the 16th century, Turkey controlled the western part and Persia the eastern. The Armenian lands were economically backward, and their national structure was fundamentally changed. In the former Armenian ethnic area, members of that nation became a minority. Ever since the time of the Oghuz invasion in the 11th century, Turkish tribes have settled in these areas, from which today's Turks, Azeris and Kurds will be born. They were settled here not only by Turkish, but also by Persian authorities. After the approach of the Russian Empire to Transcaucasia, Armenians rose up in revolt several times. The more famous Armenian uprising was that of David Beck during the time of the Russian emperor Peter the Great who led wars with the Turks and Persians.

After the Beck's Uprising - during which many Armenian-inhabited territories were briefly liberated by the insurgents - the only free territory that survived was Nagorno-Karabakh, thanks to its inaccessibility. "Where there were five small principalities even before the great Armenian movement, the heirs of the former Hatchin state were united into a state known as Hams. The wave of feudal anarchy, which swept over the Persian Empire at the beginning of the 18th century, eased their position, i.e. temporarily weakened the restraints that constantly threatened to destroy them (...) In the Transcaucasia, the Azerbaijani aristocracy, which played an important military-political role in Persia, began to create its own states"³. Under the leadership of Ali Khan, an Azeri magnate, Karabakh was conquered in 1747. After annexing Georgia and establishing vassalage over the North

¹ There is a hypothesis that the proto-Armenian tribes represent a branch of the Phrygians who moved to the eastern part of Asia Minor from Balakan, from Macedonia at the time when the Hellenic tribes began to descend towards present-day Greece.

² The Azeris, to match the Armenian indigenous status in the Karabakh area, promoted their version of the historical settlement of this area to position themselves as indigenous people, where they see themselves as the heirs of the Caucasian Albanians, who, since the spread of Islam, mixed first with the Arabs, and later with the Turks. Svante Cornell, *The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict, Report no. 46*, Department of East European Studies, Uppsala University, 1999, p. 4; Golden Peter, *The Turkic Peoples and Caucasia*, in Ronald Grigor Suny (ed.) *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996 (revised edition), pp. 45-46

³ Драган Петровић, Драгомир Анђелковић, Горан Николић, *Геополитика Закавказја*, ИМПП; Београд, 2010, pp. 137, Dragan Petrovic, Dragomir Andjelkovic, Goran Nikolic, *Geopolitic of Transcaucazia*, IMPP, Belgrad, 2010, p. 137

Caucasian principalities at the beginning of the 19th century, Russia entered war with Persia (1804-1813) in which feudal chaos reigned again. During the war, Eastern Armenia was liberated. Thus, the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh entered the Russian orbit in 1805. Due to Napoleon's attack, however, in 1813, Russia was forced to make peace with Persia and withdraw from these areas, but not for long. Already in the next conflict with Persia, in 1828, the Yerevan and Nakichevan Khanates (ruled by the Azeris in the name of Persia) were annexed to the Russian Empire. The Ottomans also had to admit that after the defeat they suffered in the war with Russia in 1828-1829. Then, in 1846, Karabakh was included in the Baku province, where it remained until the end of the Russian Empire.

During World War I - due to the Armenian support for Russian penetration into the depths of Asia Minor - Turks, Kurds and Azeris committed genocide against the Armenian population. Thus, the population of Karabakh was physically cut off from the core of the Armenian ethnic territory. Throughout the turbulent revolutionary days, these areas were first occupied by Turkey and then, became part of the Transcaucasian Federative Democratic Republic (which by May 1918 had split into Georgian, Armenian and Azeri parts). "At the same time, the Armenians - who were literally threatened with physical destruction by the Turks and Azeris - managed to stop the Turkish offensive. Istanbul, pressured by the British forces in the Middle East, in such circumstances accepted to recognize the independent Armenian state defended by the Armenian forces"¹. Transcaucasia was temporarily occupied by the Entente forces from where the White forces were helped in the fight with Bolsheviks. The Armenians, then, tried for the second time to liberate their western territories during the conflict between Kemal's Turkey and Greece, while the British and the French withdrew from these areas and left them alone in the conflict with the Turks. The Greeks and the Armenians suffered a heavy defeat. To avoid destruction, the Armenians turned for help to the Bolsheviks, who, in the meantime, had triumphed in the civil war in Russia. Occupying the entire area of the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, the Red Army, because of the Armenian agreement with the Soviet Union of December 2, 1920, occupied Armenia without resistance and brought the Armenian Bolsheviks to power.

After the October Revolution, the Soviet leadership "awarded" the pre-revolutionary genocide by placing Karabakh, then 94% Armenian, to the Azerbaijan Soviet Republic. Impoverished and devastated, the area inhabited by Armenians recovered slowly but surely. With the completion of plans for the cultivation of agricultural land after the first six years within the USSR, food production rose by 75% compared to the pre-war level. Irrigation projects were started, and road infrastructure was renewed. Overall, the Azeri regions made rapid economic progress thanks to Caspian oil, while the Armenians could peacefully, in accordance with their centuries-old tradition, engage in trade and financial affairs. The 1930s brought sudden industrialization and collectivization. Its results were indisputable: by 1931, unemployment had (at least statistically) disappeared, and the total national product in 1935 was 650% higher than eight years earlier, raising the share of industrial production in total output from 21.7% to 62.1 %². From a rural area, in the next four decades the regions inhabited by Armenians will turn into regions of the USSR with dominant service activity and industry.

Inter-ethnic relations escalated again on the eve of the collapse of the USSR, in 1988. Karabakh province (then with three quarters of Armenians, due to the high birth rate of Azeris) declared first separation, and then (in 1991) independence from Baku. "There followed, as in some previous times, a wave of pogroms against Armenians throughout Azerbaijan. The first happened in February 1988 in the city of Sumgait and in the capital of Azerbaijan, two years later ("Black January")"³. The government in Baku tried to take over the People's Front of Azerbaijan, which was counterbalanced by the KP of Azerbaijan under the leadership of Ayaz Mutalibov. Mutalibov mostly relied on Moscow all the time. By the decree of January 12, 1989, the Special Commission for Karabakh was formed, and the Russian commander Volsky, who was more on the side of the Armenians, was sent to the field.

On November 28, under pressure, Moscow abolished the special Commission for Karabakh, while 6,000 Soviet soldiers remained in the enclave to prevent inter-ethnic conflicts. In the meantime, the Azeris formed a "volunteer militia" that was preparing to dissuade the Armenian guerrillas from an offensive that would break through the corridor and territorially connect Karabakh with Armenia. Clashes started spontaneously along the border of the Nakichevan region and the Republic of Armenia. During the fall, the Azerbaijani authorities initiated a

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 150

² Graham Smith, *The Nationalities Question in Post – Soviet States*, Longman, NY, 1996, p. 252

³ Драган Петровић, Драгомир Анђелковић, Горан Николић, *Геополитика Закавказја*, ИМПП, Београд, 2010, p. 91, Dragan Petrovic, Dragomir Andjelkovic, Goran Nikolic, *Geopolitic of Transcaucasia*, IMPP, Belgrad, 2010, p. 91

blockade of all roads and cut the flow of energy to Nagorno-Karabakh, which only accelerated the decision to break through the corridor.

The Soviet authorities' attempt to pacify the feuding Azeris and Armenians experienced a complete debacle as early as September 1991, when Armenian guerrillas seized Azeri enclaves around Shusha while the federal army remained on the sidelines. "In March 1992, after a series of defeats suffered by Azerbaijani forces in Nagorno-Karabakh and the border regions with Armenia, under pressure from the NFA, Mütəllibov resigned"¹. He was replaced by Abulfəz Elçibey, the leader of the nationalist movement, who intensified the war. "However, the defeats continued: after the fall of the city of Shusha, an Azeri stronghold in Karabakh, the Armenians managed to break through the corridor near Lachin (later also near Kelbajar) and territorially connect the Karabakh area with the mother republic. By October 1993, the Armenians occupied 20% of the total territory of Azerbaijan (all areas where they lived in the majority before the Turkish Azeri genocide) and declared their republic."² All subsequent counterattacks by the Azerbaijani army were repulsed until the spring of 1993, and their army experienced an almost complete collapse. A truce between Azerbaijan and Armenia was concluded in 1994, which froze the conflict.

Post-Cold War Geostrategic Competition in Transcaucasia

The entire conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in Transcaucasia as well as in the entire Caucasus has a strong geopolitical background. Armenia represents Russia's ally in Transcaucasia (it has been a member of the CSTO since its establishment in 2002), especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union when Armenia remained isolated and surrounded by hostile Muslim neighbors. The exception is Iran, which has adopted an attitude of benevolent neutrality towards the Armenia in general (including the issue of Karabakh). This attitude stems from several reasons - from the creation of an Iranian alliance with Russia in order to jointly resist strategic threats³, the fear of Azeri separatism (a larger number of Azeri live in northern Iran than in Azerbaijan itself) and the influence of Turkey around the Transcaucasia.

In the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia's relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan were constantly on the verge of a low-intensity war. Although Georgia maintains good-neighborly relations with Armenia, it is not ready to do anything that would lead to deterioration of relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, Armenia mostly viewed the Western powers as someone who did not consider their vital interests but subordinated them to the interests of their adversaries - Azerbaijan and Turkey⁴. The geostrategic position of Azerbaijan after the lost "First Karabakh War" dictated the necessity of connecting with potential strategic allies. That is why the government in Baku has repeatedly offered some of its bases to the NATO pact. Hopes for full membership in this military alliance, however, were not likely, since the USA, after the end of the Cold War, was not ready to risk a more drastic deterioration of relations with Russia because of Azerbaijan. Seeing the real power relations in Transcaucasia at that time, the Azerbaijani side (under the leadership of first Gaidar Aliyev and then, his son İlhan Aliyev) began the process of improving relations with Russia and Iran, while developing parallel allied relations with Turkey and, in the background, with the USA. All this was done based on the assessment that Azerbaijan needs peace to restore order in the country and ensure its unhindered development after which, under favorable circumstances, the conflict will "thaw" and the long-term goal will be realized: the return of Karabakh under the jurisdiction of Baku. Erdoğan's "neo-ottoman" Turkey also projected its "grand strategy" towards the Transcaucasia region. In real-political practice it consists of gradually pulling in newly formed states into their own sphere of interest with tendencies of strategic integration. Turkey places the entire area of the Transcaucasia in its "near abroad", which, in its foreign policy doctrine, is designated as an area of strategic priority, primarily for reasons of its own supply of energy resources and ensuring the flow of energy resources to world markets. Within

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 93

² Александар Гајић, *Нова велика игра*, "Нова српска политичка мисао", Београд, 2009, p. 98, Aleksandar Gajić, *The New Big Game*, "New Serb Political Thinking", Belgrad, 2009, p. 98

³ Александар Гајић, *Геостратешки оквири руско-иранских односа*, "Национални интерес", Vol. 22, No. 1, 2022, Институт за политичке студије, Београд, pp. 153-171, Aleksandar Gajić, *Geostrategic Frameworks of Russian-Iranian Relations*, "National Interest", Vol. 22, No. 1, 2022, Institutul de Studii Politice, Belgrad, pp. 153-171

⁴ Александар Гајић, *Нова велика игра*, "Нова српска политичка мисао", Београд, 2009, p. 98, Aleksandar Gajić, *The New Big Game*, "New Serb Political Thinking", Belgrad, 2009, p. 98

that, Turkish foreign policy has defined its special strategic interests in this area. "In the Caucasus, Turkey's strategic interest is to maintain peace on its border with Georgia and Armenia. The relief of the Caucasian border allows the concentration of available forces on the neuralgic areas inhabited by the Kurds and helps to better secure the Iraqi and Iranian borders, beyond which the Kurds also live. Conflicts with the Kurds permanently deplete the budget and the Turkish state, which is not ready to get more seriously involved in the events of the Caucasus until the threat of Kurdish guerrillas is reduced. Apart from the diplomatic efforts and the military equipment with which it helps Azerbaijan and Georgia, Turkey has not been able to stand up to the Russian Iranian coalition, which is successfully preventing its more significant economic and political penetration into the Caucasus"¹. Turkey actively participated in the training of Azerbaijani officers and helped to modernize Azeri's army and equipment according to NATO standards. Turkey is equally persistent in its diplomatic support for Baku in the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh (although Azerbaijan does not support Turkey in the issue of Cyprus) and in connection with the agreement on the transportation of oil via the route Baku - Tbilisi - Cheyhan, as well as the gas that Baku also has for export. "Due to the outcome of the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey closed its borders with Armenia and terminated diplomatic relations with this neighbor. The new Turkish foreign policy and its more "realistic" approach opened space for the gradual normalization of relations with Armenia, while maintaining the closest, special relations with Azerbaijan. It turned out to be an extremely complex, almost impossible task for the policy of reducing the problems in relations with all neighbors to zero"². Behind the positions of local and regional geopolitical players in Transcaucasia and the Caucasus stand Russia and the USA with their global geostrategic projections. In a geopolitical sense, Russia tends not to allow the "Caucasian barrier" to turn into a hostile geopolitical "fortress" through which instability will spill over into the areas of southern Russia, but, instead, tries to (using positions and mechanisms inherited from the Soviet period) play the role of a key balancer and arbitrator who will bind all local actors to themselves economically and politically and prevent them from finding themselves in positions opposite to Russian ones. America, modifying its Cold War "policy of containment"³ in the direction of expanding and encircling Russia, is doing the exact opposite. It does this because it wants to prevent pan-continental integrative processes starting in the Eurasian "heartland" that can give birth to a supranational integrative structure that can rival the USA on a global scale. Regarding the protection of its security, the USA believes that there are no countries in this area from which a direct threat can be sent to the territory of the USA and the lives of its citizens.

For the period of the First Karabakh War and the next few decades after it, it could be said that Russia, using the legacy of the Soviet Union, managed to realize most of its security and geostrategic interests in the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, using the existing conflicts and its influence on "freeze" and "thaw" them as needed. Iran looked at it with favor, Turkey with helplessness and resentment, while the USA and Western allies only timidly sought to influence to change the *status quo* that kept this entire area partially isolated from the surroundings. Events since the end of the second decade of the 21st century have brought about several significant geostrategic changes. In the geostrategic and security sense, the Second War for Karabakh led to a significant shift in the regional balance of power: with an obvious disparity between the conflicting parties in favor of Azerbaijan, a sudden increase in the influence of Turkey as Azerbaijan's main ally was demonstrated. Almost hegemonic supremacy of Russia in solving of all the key problems in the Transcaucasia was quite clear along with the further marginalization of Iran as a regional power in this area as well as the new weakening of the role of the West, especially the OSCE and its body (the Minsk Group). OSCE remained completely sidelined in the resolution of the conflict, while the gradual emergence of Russian Turkish partnership (which does not exclude their mutual competition) regarding the future architecture of relations in this region became obvious⁴. The Minsk Group, established by the OSCE as the main multilateral framework for negotiations in the region led by representatives of

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 157

² Дарко Танасковић, *Неоосманизам-повратак Турске на Балкан*, Службени гласник, Београд, 2010, pp. 71, Darko Tanasković, *Neo-Ottomanism – Turkey's Return to the Balkans*, Official Gazette, Belgrad, 2010, pp. 71

³ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005

⁴ Siri Neset, Mustafa Aydin, Ayça Ergun, Richard Giragosian, Kornely Kakachia, Arne Strand, *Changing Geopolitics in South Caucasus After the Second Karabakh War: Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry*, CMI Report No. 4, September 2023, pp. 4-67

the EU not only experienced a spectacular failure to contribute to the stabilization of the situation and the resolution of the conflict in any way, but also experienced complete rejection and strong criticism from both Azerbaijan and Turkey (due to the alleged pro-Armenian attitude). The statements of the EU High Commissioner for Foreign and Security Policy, Joseph Borrell, did not go further than emphasizing the imperative cessation of hostilities and the resolution of the conflict exclusively under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group, which only confirmed the weakness of the EU's position in the entire Transcaucasia. Even the efforts of certain European countries, among which that of France (as co-president of the Minsk Group) and its president Macron was the most obvious, did not materialize on the ground, where the Russian role proved to be crucial.

The end of the Second Karabakh War led to victory euphoria in Azerbaijan and a dangerous strengthening of the belief that “might makes right”, while the war itself was seen as a confirmation of armed force as the only way to resolve the Karabakh dispute. In the Azeri public opinion, the result of the conflict created an impression of the inherent weaknesses of democracy as it was seen as a victory of a stronger, more powerful and more authoritarian state over a weak, young democracy. Armenia experienced the military defeat in Karabakh as a national tragedy for which it sees its own government mostly responsible, while the rest of responsibility is assigned to the Russian alliance as well as the positions of the Western powers. In its public opinion the notion about the essential weaknesses of young democracies in the face of stronger and more powerful authoritarian regimes began to prevail. All of this will have a further negative impact on the continuation of democratization and the initiated reforms in Armenia. Russia's peacekeeping presence related to the protection of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave has increased Moscow's influence on the government in Yerevan as a completely dependent party in this partnership. This kind of relationship, which can lead to the complete subjugation of Yerevan to the interests of its patron, to the greatest extent displaces any serious influence of Western powers on Armenia. The newly emerging geostrategic situation has created new forms of concern for regional security, both due to Russia's unilateral deployment of peacekeepers to the disputed territories, as well as due to the visible return of Turkish power to Transcaucasia with the aim of occupying the position of Azerbaijan's military patron. Azerbaijan will be challenged to maintain the unstable balance between Turkey and Russia. At the same time, the inherent rivalry between Ankara and Moscow can only re-emerge, with the South Caucasus serving as an arena for a new competition between regional powers, which could provoke a response from Iran.

Therefore, Russia skilfully used the Azerbaijani victory to, after more than three decades, deploy its military troops on the territory of this country and thus become the sole guarantor of the protection of the Armenian population in the Karabakh enclave, completely ignoring and exerting excessive influence of the OSCE and its Minsk Group in this area. Its main goal was to present itself as the dominant military and security power in the region which will keep the Western powers, the USA and the EU, away from this area. With a military presence in all three Transcaucasian countries (it has its largest military base in Armenia in Gyumri), Russia, as the leading country of the CSTO, has an undeniable role in protecting Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran and is its *de facto* patron. Turkey used the outcome of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh to make a strong political comeback and increase its military presence in Azerbaijan for the first time since the First World War. However, it shows no willingness to directly threaten Russia's hegemonic position. In addition, Turkey shows itself ready to strongly influence further processes of regional opening and new initiatives on regional cooperation. As a participant at the center for monitoring the implementation of the peace mission (led by Russia), Turkey subsequently joined the monitoring of the implementation of the agreement reached in November 2020. It is showing readiness for further cooperation with Russia to the extent of matching their regional interests. On the other hand, Turkey (as an important member of the NATO and still a candidate for EU membership) openly opposed the foreign policies of the Western powers, primarily the USA, the leading country of NATO, and France, the leading country of the EU, which they advocated regarding the action of the Minsk Group. Aligning itself unreservedly with Azerbaijan, Turkey directly encouraged a military solution to the frozen conflict without any consultation or agreement with its NATO partners. On the contrary, Turkey wholeheartedly advocated that all further peace negotiations related to Nagorno-Karabakh take place outside of the Minsk Group, as well as to obtain a safe place for herself in future peace negotiations.

Iran is the only country that has equally good relations with all Transcaucasian states. However, its influence in the region cannot be compared to either Russia's or Turkey's, nor does Iran show any ambition in this regard. Because of all this, Iran in no way participated in the war or in stopping it. Nevertheless, a partial change in

Iran's attitudes towards the immediately conflicting parties in the Karabakh conflict was noticeable: although earlier Iranian covert pro-Armenian positions during the 2020 conflict gradually turned in the direction of supporting the victorious Baku (probably due to the assessment of this outcome of the conflict), a whole series of subsequent frictions, misunderstandings and conflicts with Azerbaijan returned Iran to its original positions. Marginalized, Iran shows increasing fear of the strengthening of the Turkish-Azeri coalition, which threatens to isolate Iran from Armenia by land (by merging the Azeri enclave of Nakichevan with the main part of the territory of Azerbaijan). The negative attitude towards Azerbaijan is additionally fostered by the significant military and financial resources that Baku recently receives from Israel, Iran's main enemy in the Middle East which is increasingly politically and intelligence-wise present in Transcaucasia. The strengthening of Azeri Israeli ties led to strong condemnations of Tehran, which provoked even stronger reactions from Baku.

Current Geostrategic Changes in Transcaucasia After the 2023 Conflict

The one-day conflict in September 2023 and the victory of the Azeri Turkish coalition which brought the end of Karabakh in front of the eyes of Russian peacekeepers, led to a series of new interpretations of the changes in the balance of power in Transcaucasia. Western experts interpreted this development of events, especially the helplessness of Russian peacekeepers (although they mediated within twenty-four hours to reach a truce) mostly as an expression of the sudden weakening of Russia's influence in this entire area after 2022, i.e. since Russia started military operations in Ukraine. «On the one hand, EU sanctions against Russia have made the “central corridor” of China's Belt and Road Initiative through the South Caucasus more attractive to China and Europe; on the other hand, the arm of the “protecting power” Russia has been weakened by the war and Western sanctions. Therefore, the South Caucasus is no longer an undisputed Russian “courtyard” or “sphere” of interest” but the place of the new “Great game” of the major powers in the world”¹. According to this approach, the beginning of the “new big game” for changing the power relations between the “Great powers”, as well as the reorientation of the countries in the Transcaucasia, has begun. Along with the reduction of Russian and Iranian influence, the most noticeable is the strengthening of Turkey and Azerbaijan as its protégé. Western powers (US and EU) can now use a partial power vacuum to support the economic and political transformation of Armenia and Georgia, despite their influence still being significantly limited. “China is trying to bring Georgia and Azerbaijan together to create a trade corridor from Caspian to the Black Sea as an alternative route in the southern part of Eurasia. Nowadays, as Russia withdraws from the region, the power vacuum must be filled again”².

Although some of these tendencies are unquestionable, the situation is far more complex. Russia, strained by the war in Ukraine and hit by Western sanctions, is undoubtedly gaining a different reputation in the eyes of the countries of the Transcaucasian region, but it is still too early to talk about its influence significantly receding. A more realistic assessment would be that Russia tactically agreed to resolve the situation around Karabakh in this way less because of her own impotence and more because it did not want to be dragged into another, now mostly unnecessary conflict in its backyard, on the side that is not only weaker but increasingly unreliable for their interests. On the other hand, it would thus spoil relations with the other side, which is not only getting stronger, but whose cooperation is more necessary in the broader geopolitical view in the conditions of imposed sanctions and sudden changes in power relations in the whole world. The biggest ballast for Russia in the Transcaucasia since 2020 has been the constant attempt by the West (primarily France) to strengthen its influence in the region through the OSCE Minsk Group, usurping from Russia the commitment to protect the Armenians in Karabakh. With Azerbaijan's full control of Karabakh, this danger disappears: according to the November 2020 agreement, Russian troops are on the ground for two more years (until late 2025); Russia (and not the West) remains an important factor in the conclusion of the final peace agreement, while relations with the victorious Azerbaijan and its patron, Turkey, remain not only intact, but on the rise. On the other hand, there is no serious fear that Yerevan (which, after the “plush revolution” of 2018 and the arrival of Pashinyan as Prime minister), will start playing “The Western card” again more strongly and maneuvering between Russian protection and increasingly pro-Western aspirations. Under pressure from Azerbaijan and Turkey (whose claims revolve around the territory of Armenia, i.e., the corridor between the Azeri enclave of Nakichevan and the main part of the territory of Azerbaijan), Armenia needs the

¹ Ralph Wrobel, *The changing geopolitics in the South Caucasus during the war in Ukraine: Chances and risks for the region*, “Ordnungspolitische Diskurse”, No. 2, 2023, Ordnungspolitisches Portal (OPO), Erfurt, 2023, p. 3

² *Idem*

protection of its interstate borders. This can be done only by Russia (which is already doing this by deploying military bases in Armenia) and its regional military alliance - the CSTO. Odium in Armenia against Russia for not preventing the capitulation of Karabakh and militarily intervening (which it was not obliged to do, because, as a member of the CSTO, Russia is obliged to defend only internationally recognized borders of Armenia and not the disputed enclave) is smaller than the odium against the domestic, Pashinyan's government, which, precisely because of its double game between Russia and the West, is blamed for the collapse of Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh. And this perfectly suits the Russians to - by channeling great dissatisfaction - influence the departure of this government and the arrival of a new, more cooperative and geopolitically one-sided government. Although Russia's image has been significantly weakened in the eyes of common Armenians, Russia is aware that Armenia, at least in the coming period, has no alternative to protect its vital interests other than staying together with Russia: because of all this, Russian officials unabashedly portray the events of the period 2020-2023 as a form of punishment for an increased pro-Western turn government in Yerevan, warning them that something similar could happen to them with a new threat to territorial integrity if they do not exclusively turn to their proven ally and protector.

Even the victorious Baku must not allow itself to indulge in its regional ambitions, since it is surrounded by two regional powers that look with displeasure at such a scenario - Russia and Iran. Therefore, Azerbaijan has become a complex policy of cooperation, competition and deterrence, since both of these powers possess potent political, military and hybrid instruments that can give official Baku a headache. Although dissatisfied with the Russian military presence on its territory and its protective position towards the Armenians, Baku not only continues to intensify economic cooperation with Moscow (Russia is the main supplier of weapons to Azerbaijan and a growing supplier of food products) but also continues to develop a strategic partnership in transit, logistics and energy sector. This is equally important for Moscow and Tehran to avoid sanctions and the consequent weakening that the West has inflicted on them. For Baku, it is a tempting offer to position itself as a regional hub and thus improve its position vis-à-vis powerful, threatening neighbors. "It is particularly indicative that, just two days before the start of direct Russian military engagement in Ukraine in February 2022, the presidents of Russia and Azerbaijan signed a broad military-political agreement which President Aliyev thunderously described as something that "raises mutual relations to the level of an alliance." Despite such exaggerations, there is no doubt that Azerbaijan and Russia are carefully developing their mutual relations based on common interests such as: common hostility to Western support and cooperation with Armenia including Russia's desire to punish Armenia for its pro-Western turn; and increasing cooperation on regional trade and transit routes both north-south and east-west, including in the Quartet with Turkey and Iran"¹.

Turkey has similar interests, which, in the new situation of Western sanctions against Russia and the continental expansion of Chinese transport trade routes, respond to the opening of borders within the region, the normalization of damaged relations and the construction of new infrastructure projects that would only strengthen Turkey's future positions and plans. With one foot in the Transcaucasia, along with its strategic ally Azerbaijan, Turkey certainly dreams of expanding its zone of influence further across the Caspian Sea to the Turkic-speaking Central Asian world. But Turkey is not ready to risk confrontation with Russia and Iran by creating territorial continuity under its control and thus endangering the wider, vital infrastructure projects. Iran, for its part, also supports this type of regional rapprochement and cross-border transportation (especially energy connection) but fears that the Turkish-Azeri option will territorially exclude it from these processes, especially considering the Azeri rapprochement with Israel. That is why Tehran is leading the way in advocating a 3+3 regional platform (three regional powers - Russia, Turkey and Iran and three Transcaucasian countries - Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) to solve all disputed problems in the Transcaucasia. Turkey, Russia, and even Azerbaijan agrees with this in principle.

The main projects in which all regional and local players are interested are those related to the transport infrastructure. It would increase the international connection of the region with the surroundings and contribute to the increase in the volume of international trade. Certainly, both the sanctions imposed on Russia and the outcome of the war in Ukraine can have significant consequences on the scope of these transport corridors, whose degree of success will be different in different outcomes. Nevertheless, their geoeconomic and geopolitical significance is

¹ Hugo Von Essen, *Azerbaijan's Uncertain Geopolitical Rise in a South Caucasus Maelstorm*, SCEEUS Report No.17 2023, Stockholm, 1.12.2023, p. 17

unquestionable. These are the following transport corridors, railways and pipelines with energy to the world market: “1. North-South Corridor: The North-South International Transport Corridor, a projected rail route stretching from Finland through Russia to the Persian Gulf and India. 2. Middle Corridor: A route that transports goods between China, Central Asia, Turkey and the European Union via the South Caucasus. 3. East-West Corridor: A transit route conceived at the end of the Cold War, transporting energy resources as well as other goods between Europe and Central Asia, passing through the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus and Turkey, and finally connecting with China in the east and Pakistan and India in the south. 1. China's Belt and Road Initiative: Including the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor passing through the South Caucasus, although Beijing has not yet invested in significant infrastructure or transport projects 2. Zangezur Corridor (Syunik in Armenian): Connecting Nakhchivan to Azerbaijan via Armenian territory involves controversy over who will control the route. While Azerbaijan insists on having control over the route and points to the Lachin Corridor connecting Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh via Azerbaijani territory, Armenia strongly opposes any control by Azerbaijan on its territory, allowing it to lead to further demands in the long term. 3. Araxa Rail Link: The primary rail link between Azerbaijan and Armenia, built between 1899 and 1940, but damaged and later destroyed during and after the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Azerbaijan announced in February 2021 that it had begun reconstruction of the line on its territory. The realization of this project would put the region at the center of the future railway connection Black Sea - Persian Gulf. 4. Gyumri-Kars railway: A direct connection between Armenia and Turkey would facilitate the trade between the two countries and between Nakhchivan and Turkey and would benefit Azerbaijan, Iran and Russia. 5. If the Araks rail link is realized, Iran may have to shelve its expensive project for the Astara-Resht line and instead use the existing rail network through Julfa across the Nakhichevan border to further connect with Azerbaijani and Armenian lines. 6. Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) Railway: A massive project that started in 2017, connecting Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan as well as Europe with Central Asia and China. 7. Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline: in operation since 2006. This pipeline transports oil from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey and then across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. 1. Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) Natural gas pipelines run parallel to the BTC and carry natural gas primarily to Georgia and Turkey. It has the potential to supply Europe with Caspian gas through the planned Southern Gas Corridor, as well as to transport gas from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. 2. Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP): a section of the Southern Gas Corridor that became operational in 2020. It transports gas from the Caspian Sea via Turkey to Europe. 3. The Baku-Supsa oil pipeline runs from the Sangachal terminal near Baku to the Supsa terminal in Georgia. It transports oil from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli field and is operated by British Petroleum (BP). The history of this pipeline has been troubled; the Russian invasion of Georgia allowed Russia to take control of a short length of pipeline, and there were several spills and thefts. Although there is potential for expansion, there are no plans to date. 4. The Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (proposed) is a gas pipeline that transports gas from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan via the Caspian Sea via an undersea pipeline. It is also known as the South Caucasus Pipeline Future Extension (SCPFKS) because of its connection with the South Caucasus Pipeline”¹.

Conclusions

In addition to the relative weakening of Russia in the Transcaucasia region and the partial loss of the hegemon's position, the dynamics of power distribution and interest projections in this area generally go in a different direction from further antagonism of both regional powers and local actors. If Russian regional military hegemony in the post-Cold War period was sufficient to keep this space more or less closed and under its control through conflict management primarily for security reasons, new tendencies in international relations require a change in the treatment of this space: in times of global overcomposition of power in the direction of a multipolar order and the need for a new interregional connection, the area of Transcaucasia is becoming more and more interesting for a whole series of large and regional powers which tend to turn this area from a closed conflict zone into an open regional transport hub. This is the vital interest of Turkey, Iran, Russia and all Transcaucian countries. That is why it is not appropriate to expect that any of them will threaten it by forcing their narrow but far-reaching geostrategic plans difficult to achieve without a great risk of conflict. It is more likely that they will put mutual

¹ Siri Neset, Mustafa Aydın, *Changed Dynamic after the Second Karabakh War*, in Neset, Mustafa Aydın, Ayça Ergun, Richard Giragosian, Kornely Kakachia, Arne Strand, *Changing Geopolitics in South Caucasus After the Second Karabakh War: Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry*, CMI Report No. 4, September 2023, pp. 15-17

disagreements on the back burner, and despite suspicions and occasional confrontations, in the 3+3 multilateral format, they will manage to find a common language because the benefit from the implementation of joint projects is incomparably greater than the individual gains after extremely uncertain attempts to realize particular interests that cannot be realized without the broadest confrontation.

In this regard, the most nerve-wrecking point is the so-called The Zanzegur Corridor that runs through the Armenian province of Syunik towards Iran and separates the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakichevan, with the Turkish enclave in the hinterland, from the bulk of the Azerbaijani statehood. By establishing this corridor, Armenia would be territorially isolated from Iran. Turkey, through Azeri's control of this corridor, would create territorial continuity for the direct strategic expansion of its influence towards the Caspian Sea, and beyond it, on the Turkophone post-Soviet republics of Central Asia. In other words, this scenario would be disastrous for Iran and Armenia and would further weaken Russian influence in the region.

However, it is unlikely that there will be a new crisis over Zanzegur corridor: this story served more as an analogy for the official Baku to apply pressure regarding the crisis in the Lachin Corridor; with the reintegration of Nagorno-Karabakh, the threats surrounding the Zanzegur Corridor become largely redundant. Azerbaijan's priority was the return of Karabakh under its sovereignty and not a territorial pretension to the territory of the neighboring country, Armenia, which would almost certainly have led to a strong confrontation with the already distrustful Iran and Russia with whom, only gradually and with numerous disagreements, an area of common interest was found. To destroy everything now - and not only that - but a whole series of plans for a regional communication network that benefits everyone, especially Turkey, is out of question. In addition, Russia, whose troops are stationed in bases in Armenia and are guarding its border with Turkey and Iran, has a contractual obligation as a member of the CSTO military alliance to defend Armenia from external attack. Failing to protect Armenia would incomparably harm Russia's reputation more than its neutral position in the military solution of the Karabakh problem, especially since the official Yerevan itself publicly changed its positions and recognized this area as an indisputable part of the sovereign and internationally recognized state of Azerbaijan.

Nevertheless, the triumphalist position of Baku, the continuation of threatening rhetoric and the joint Turkish-Azerbaijani border military exercises do not exclude the possibility of embarking on some irrational adventure of violent, military opening of this corridor, which would surely lead to confrontation with Russia and Iran. By acting like this, Yerevan is only pushed harder into Russia's embrace. The Russian-Iranian alliance is strengthening and the government in Yerevan is faced with losing the support of citizens, being overthrown and replaced by a government with a stronger pro-Russian orientation. On the other hand, Azerbaijan has enough reasons to refrain from opening the issue related to the Zanzegur Corridor: its importance is far less significant than the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh whose permanent status has yet to be resolved by a comprehensive peace agreement. By opening up a new issue, Baku would only miss out on consolidating its gains on the ground and worsen its relations with rising neighbors, spoiling the region's broader integrative connectivity (from which Baku would benefit most) and risk a wider escalation of conflict with major powers.

Turkey is in a similar position: Ankara wants to capitalize on its aid to Baku and open up opportunities for wider normalization and strategic engagement that can benefit everyone, including Armenia which would, thus, partially compensate for the national tragedy of the exodus of its population from the enclave in Karabakh. Russia and Iran are equally interested in the same thing, regarding the Zanzegur corridor and the border along the Armenian province of Syunik (currently protected by Russian troops), all with the same commitment that the West should stay away from interference in regional relations. With all of this in mind, it is to be expected that a modus acceptable to all parties will be found around neuralgic issues (most likely, in a 3+3 format). In due time, instead of striving for hegemony, some kind of condominium over the area of Transcaucasia, which is in common interest, will be established.

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