

**ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЕ ПОЗИЦИОНИРОВАНИЕ ЮЖНОГО КАВКАЗА
В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПРОТИВОСТОЯНИЯ ЗАПАД–РОССИЯ:
МОТИВЫ, СУБЪЕКТЫ И ФАКТОРЫ**

Дунамальян Н. А.

Аннотация

В статье рассматривается специфика роли Южного Кавказа в системе международных отношений в свете прежнего (до 2020 г.) соотношения интересов России и Запада, а также их нынешнего противостояния. Автор представляет краткий анализ истории отношений между центрами силы на Южном Кавказе после распада СССР, а также выделяет узловые проблемы, которые могут возникнуть в процессе пересмотра места южнокавказского региона в контексте современной геополитики.

**ՀԱՐԱՎԱՅԻՆ ԿՈՎԿԱՍԻ ԱՇԽԱՐՀԱՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆ ԴԻՐՔԱՎՈՐՈՒՄԸ
ԱՐԵՎՄՈՒՏՔ–ՌՈՒՍԱՍՏԱՆ ԱՌՃԱԿԱՏՄԱՆ ՀԱՄԱՏԵՔՍՈՒՄ.**

ՇԱՐԺԱՌԻԹՆԵՐ, ՍՈՒԲՅԵԿՏՆԵՐ ԵՎ ԳՈՐԾՈՆՆԵՐ

Ն. Ա. Դունամալյան

Սեղմագիր

Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում է Հարավային Կովկասի տեղը միջազգային հարաբերությունների համակարգում նախկին (մինչև 2020թ.) ՌԴ–Արևմուտք շահերի հարաբերակցության և դրանց ներկայիս առճակատման լույսի ներքո: Հեղինակը ներկայացնում է ԽՍՀՄ փլուզումից հետո Հարավային Կովկասի ուժային կենտրոնների հարաբերությունների պայմանության համառոտ վերլուծությունը, ինչպես նաև ընդգծում է առանցքային խնդիրները, որոնք կարող են առաջանալ ժամանակակից աշխարհաքաղաքականության համարեքսպում հարավկովկասյան տարածաշրջանի դիրքի վերանայման գործընթացում:

**GEOPOLITICAL POSITIONING OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WEST–RUSSIA CONFRONTATION:
MOTIVES, SUBJECTS AND FACTORS**

Dunamalyan N. A.

Summary

The article examines the specifics of the role of the South Caucasus in the system of international relations within the light of the previous (until 2020) balance of interests between Russia and the West, as well as their current confrontation. The author presents a brief analysis of the history of relations between the centers of power in the South Caucasus after the collapse of the USSR, and also highlights the key problems that may arise in the process of revising the place of the South Caucasus region in the context of modern geopolitics.

GEOPOLITICAL POSITIONING OF THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WEST - RUSSIA OPPOSITION: MOTIVES, SUBJECTS AND FACTORS²

Introduction

The classic “Europe-Russia-Asia” rout, which had high throughput capacities and developed logistics infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe³ for more than 50 years, in 2022 became an area of instability, disrupting previous economic and trade ties between the EU and the Russian Federation. The South Caucasus, previously perceived as an unstable region, has become more important for the EU (*and the West, as a whole*), seeking to provide its energy needs bypassing Russia, and for Russia, which is trying to find new ways to minimize the effect of restrictive political and economic measures of Western countries in the field of ensuring the safety.

In addition, the relocation of the global economic center to the East and the growth of China's influence in the context of promoting the project “One Belt - One Road” contribute to the development of infrastructure in the interests of all actors in the South Caucasus, the Middle East, Central and South Asia. Such a combination of interests is of a tactical nature, aimed at asserting the positions of each of the subjects of the regional politics in terms of future confrontation or ensuring the strategic balance of forces in Eurasia.

Attempts of tactical interaction between the West and Russia in the South Caucasus

The end of the Cold War and the cessation of the existence of one of the superpowers led to a revision of the US foreign policy priorities as the main leader of the "Collective West", which also affected the countries of the South Caucasus, although initially the US leadership tried not to directly influence regional processes and utilized the resource of Yeltsin's Russia and NATO's Turkey. In addition, the US initially accepted the prerogative of the RF as a mediator of the conflicts in the South Caucasus and, at the same time, supported the independent republics of the region, which in the future made it possible to become an arbitrator in relations between Russia and the states of the South Caucasus. In other words, the United States tried

¹ Candidate of Political Sciences, Associate Professor of the Department of Political Science of the Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University.

² The original article (in Russian) was submitted to the Editorial office on July 25, 2023.

³ Davtyan V.S. Geopolitical Dimension of Energy, Transport and Logistics Security of Armenia: Monograph. – Yerevan, YSLU Publishing House, 2019. PP. 64-65.

to build a hierarchical relationship in the post-Soviet space, defending its main priorities for the early 1990s: control of nuclear proliferation, maintaining US global leadership, democratization of the Newly Independent Countries, countering the emergence of regional conflicts, and preventing the rise of regional hegemony.

In the case of the US and the EU, the deepening of relations with the South Caucasus took place in the context of distancing of the republics from the influence of the Kremlin and the collapse of the post-Soviet space, while after the stabilization of the domestic political situation and the increase of hydrocarbon prices, Russia regained its positions and tried to achieve a balance of forces throughout the former USSR. Both of these movements clashed in 2014 against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea to Russia. However, at first glance, this regional plot has already been incorporated into the overall picture of future confrontation throughout Eurasia.

South Caucasus in the context of confrontation between Russia and the West after 2014

In 2014-2015 the collision of two competing geopolitical projects led to the formation of “interconnected” conflicts within the Ukrainian and Syrian crises. On one hand, 2014 marked a period of long-term deterioration of relations between Russia and Ukraine, which began against the backdrop of the war in Donbass and the imposition of sanctions by the West against the Russian Federation, on the other hand, in 2015, the kickoff of the Russian military operation in Syria marked a qualitatively new stage in international relations in terms of changing the distribution of forces in the Middle East and the post-Soviet space. Referring to the theory of regional security complexes by American researchers *B. Buzan* and *O. Wæver* (Regional Security Complex Theory)⁴, it may be stated that after 2015, new actors were involved in the regional conflict and several geopolitical subjects were tied into one chain of interaction (Syria, Karabakh, Donbass, etc.), which led to the formation of a new “region”, which is much wider than Eastern Europe, the Middle East or the South Caucasus. The formation of such a “region” is related to a certain level of close and intense interdependence of actors in security matters.

South Caucasus in “Great Silk Road” and “North-South” infrastructure projects

The discourse of opening transport communications arose immediately after the collapse of the USSR, but political issues overshadowed economic ones. For example, the closure of the Armenian-Turkish border by Turkey was only politically

⁴ Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge Studies in International Relations). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511491252 .

motivated, although in other cases there was a factor of military operations in the territories through which the transport routes pass. Initially, each extra-regional actor had a strategic vision of the geo-economic future in the South Caucasus.

Russia tried to restore the Soviet infrastructure by tying up all transport routes on its own, preventing any large-scale projects from bypassing the Russian territory. The “North-South” project in this context was perceived as a barrier for the Western expansion into the South Caucasus and Central Asia, as it crossed all former and future communications of these regions. The West was thinking in terms of a global infrastructure network that did not allow any state or group of countries to control or block the movement of goods, which indirectly, if not directly, was focused against Russia. The EU also tried to ensure diversification in the field of hydrocarbon imports in order to prevent the exclusive dominance of the Russian energy factor in Europe. The regional powers Turkey and Iran sought to play the role of geopolitical “brokers” or “hubs” within the interconnection of different regions of Eurasia, which does not contradict the interests of the West and Russia, but sets the regions up to compete with various projects (*including in the issue of fundraising for road construction and deepening political relations*). China, on the other hand, sought infrastructure expansion in order to link the various markets of Eurasia directly with China and to channel the pipelines of Russia, Kazakhstan and other oil and gas exporters to Chinese consumers. In other words, the key actors are ready for the development of transport communications, however, taking into account some nuances that should not disturb the strategic balance.

At the same time, after 2017, a new stage of the “transport diplomacy” between the EU, Turkey and Azerbaijan began, which included the completion of the construction of the *Southern Gas Corridor*⁵, which was supposed to connect Azerbaijan through Turkey with the countries of Southern Europe. In 2018, the *Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline* (TANAP) and on November 15, 2020, the *Trans-Adriatic Pipeline* were put into operation. This project became a shortened version of the unrealized *Nabucco* and became an important political event in the context of the strengthening the Azerbaijani-Turkish economic and military-political union. If the project *Nabucco* and, in particular, the issue of laying a natural gas pipeline along the bottom of the Caspian Sea met with resistance from Russia due to environmental problems in the Caspian⁶, then the “southern gas corridor” has been no longer perceived so negatively due to the possible use of the gas pipeline by Russia⁷. However, after 2022, the deterioration of the international geopolitical

⁵ Ayvazyan D.S. Southern Gas Corridor as a Tool for Diversifying Gas Imports to the European Union // Scientific and Analytical Bulletin of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences (in Rus.). 2018. No. 2. PP. 128-134.

⁶ Russia will not agree to the construction of a trans-Caspian gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan (in Rus.). 16.12.2022. <https://news.am/rus/news/735541.html> (download date: 23.07.2023).

⁷ Gas from the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan can be delivered to Europe through the TAP gas pipeline (in Rus.). 02.11.2016. <https://regnum.ru/news/2200677> (download date: 23.07.2023).

environment may overturn the system of agreements established before the war in Ukraine.

The situation changed not in 2022, but in 2020, when Armenia's defeat in the 44-day war (Second Artsakh War) led to a revision of regional relations and a change in the format of relations between the geopolitical players.

Preservation of relative consensus between Russia and the USA on the Karabakh settlement

The American position on the Karabakh conflict followed the general policy of the USA on the settlement of ethno-political conflicts through the demarcation of ethnic communities into separate territorial units (*Yugoslavia is an example*). The Russian side was more attentive to the real situation, since the region of the South Caucasus in the past was part of the territory of the USSR and many ethno-political disagreements did not arise in 1991 and even in 1988, but existed before and after the establishment of the Soviet power. Russia's position was to search for mutually acceptable solutions for the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides, which could be incorrectly interpreted by the parties to the conflict. An important aspect was the desire to take into account the position of not only Armenia or Azerbaijan, but also the authorities of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic)⁸. The difference in these approaches was felt initially, when the Western negotiators perceived the situation as a territorial dispute between two states with the inclusion of an element of human rights protection, and the Russian side highlighted the key elements of the conflict, insisting on observing the interests of all parties.

During the Second Artsakh War, all previous principles of the settlement were violated by Azerbaijan, and the logic of the negotiation process was completely distorted. The consensus around the settlement between Russia and the United States, despite growing tensions in bilateral relations, remained on the final result of the “settlement”, because, according to some Russian⁹ and Western¹⁰ politicians, the war “contributed” to the resolution of many key contradictions and brought the parties closer to the conclusion of a peace treaty.

After the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the competition between the Russian Federation, the United States and the EU began around a common agenda for the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. The trilateral statement of November 10, 2020, the deployment of the Russian peacekeeping contingent into Nagorno-Karabakh and the signing of the *Declaration on Allied Cooperation* with

⁸ Kazimirov V.N. Peace to Karabakh. Russia's mediation in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. - 2nd ed., add. (in Rus.) - Moscow: International relations, 2015. PP. 33-34.

⁹ Lavrov is convinced that a political settlement in Karabakh is possible (in Rus.) <https://tass.ru/politika/9712099> (download date: 23.07.2023).

¹⁰ British Ambassador to Baku: London is in favor of an international contingent in Karabakh (in Rus.). <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-56942212> (download date: 23.07.2023).

Azerbaijan gave Russia the opportunity to consider itself the main mediator in the conflict settlement, however, Russia's switch to the war in Ukraine led to the formation of new settlement platforms in Brussels and Washington.

Ultimately, after the Second Artsakh War, a unique situation developed in the region, when the conflict led to a more complicated situation than before, despite the confidence of the mediators in a speedy resolution of the conflict through Armenian concessions.

Obviously, all of the above factors affect relations between Russia and the United States, but the transfer of global confrontation to the South Caucasus region is not a priority for either side (*Georgia's tensions with Ukraine and the EU are short-term*¹¹) because of the focus on the war in Ukraine. The South Caucasus region is becoming an alternative way to ensure “indirect” political and economic relations between the West and the Russian Federation, therefore, the escalation of the conflict in this area will not benefit the major players, and pressure on Armenia in order to conclude a peace treaty with Azerbaijan as a consolidation of the new status quo will increase.

The South Caucasus Peace Agenda: Imposed or objectively necessary discourse?

The geopolitical changes of recent years demonstrate the need to achieve peace and stability in the South Caucasus, as evidenced by various initiatives and projects aimed at “opening up” the region for transit and promoting a peaceful agenda from several power centers. However, regional peacekeeping has various shades associated with the desire to achieve a more convenient position for the future geopolitical “game”. In this context, “peace” is perceived in the context of structuring relations in the South Caucasus and the wider region in order to increase the predictability of subsequent processes.

After 2020, the international community has gone through several stages of turbulence, but today the major powers are trying to determine new priorities within the crisis of the past formats of relations. The South Caucasus is becoming a key region in this context where the routes pass across Europe to Central Asia and from Russia to Iran and India. Infrastructure projects, being a very complex set of technical measures, need a stable situation in the region to attract both investments and the prospects for investments, therefore, peace in the South Caucasus is becoming one of the priorities within the context of the future global economic reorientation to the markets of PRC (People's Republic of China) and South-East Asia.

¹¹ Will Georgia get the status of a candidate country for EU membership? (in Rus.) <https://www.golos.ameriki.com/a/eu-georgia-decision/7137025.html> (download date: 23.07.2023).

Armenia becomes the main target of pressure in this context, as “*peace at the expense of Armenia*” seems the most realistic scenario in the current situation. The main arguments for accelerating the achievement of peace are related to the necessity of lowering the bar of the Armenian side demands in the framework of the negotiation process¹², the inclusion of Armenia in future infrastructure projects (MTC “North-South”) and the speedy achievement of a peace treaty with Azerbaijan in terms of ensuring rights and security of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh ¹³. Based on such conditions, the achievement of “peace” at the expense of one of the regional states, can lead to a final disruption of the balance of power in the South Caucasus and threaten with new attempts in the future to resolve disputed issues by force.

Threats

The current situation is extremely risky for Armenia in terms of several key factors:

- The internal and external political situation around Armenia after the defeat in the Second Artsakh War is based on a broad consensus among the great powers on the common future of the South Caucasus region without going into details, which threatens to put pressure on Armenia in the context of ongoing concessions under the guise of a “pragmatic” policy;
- The deterioration of the situation on the Ukrainian front and the expansion of the theatre of military operations in Eastern Europe threatens to transfer the “West–Russia” confrontation to the South Caucasus;
- Today, Armenia has a deliberately weak position also in the context of an alliance with Russia, which limits the room for maneuver for this republic, and without the active actions of the Russian Federation to strengthen the strategic alliance with Armenia, the situation could deteriorate for both sides.

Possibilities

The revision of the geopolitical role of the South Caucasus can contribute to Armenia’s economic development and additional investments, as could be seen after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine. It is also possible to strengthen Russian-Armenian cooperation in the military-technical sphere to balance the positions of Turkey and Azerbaijan in the region. It is also worth noting the potential of preventing war if a stable regional structure is established involving several major players interested in peace.

¹² The international community calls on Armenia to lower the bar on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh – Pashinyan 13.04.2022. <https://newsarmenia.am/news/armenia/-mezhdunarodnoe-soobshchestvo-prizyvaet-armeniyu-snizit-planku-v-voprose-statusa-nagornogo-karabakha/> (download date: 23.07.2023).

¹³ “The crisis deepens”: Russia seeks guarantees of the rights and security of the Armenians of Karabakh (in Rus.) <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2023/07/21/krizis-uglublyatsya-rossiya-dobivaetsya-garantiy-prav-i-bezopasnosti-armyan-karabaha> (download date: 23.07.2023).

SOURCES AND LITERATURE

1. Ayyazyan D.S. Southern Gas Corridor as a Tool for Diversifying Gas Imports to the European Union (in Rus.)// Scientific and Analytical Bulletin of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences. 2018. No. 2. S. 128-134.
2. Armenia risks dropping out of the North-South transport corridor project. (in Rus.) 23.10.2022. https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2022/10/24/94697_2-armeniya-riskuet-vipast-iz-proekta-koridora-sever-yug (download date: 23.07.2023).
3. Gas from the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan can be delivered to Europe through the TAP gas pipeline. (in Rus.) 02.11.2016. <https://regnum.ru/news/2200677> (download date: 23.07.2023)
4. Davtyan V.S. Geopolitical Dimension of Energy, Transport and Logistics Security of Armenia: Monograph. – Yerevan, YSLU Publishing House, 2019. PP. 64-65.
5. Kazimirov V.N. Peace to Karabakh. Russia's mediation in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. - 2nd ed., add. (in Rus.). – Moscow: International relations, 2015, PP. 33-34.
6. “The crisis deepens”: Russia seeks guarantees of the rights and security of the Armenians of Karabakh (in Rus.). <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2023/07/21/krizis-uglublyaetsya-rossiya-dobivaetsya-garantiy-prav-i-bezopasnosti-armyan-karabaha> (download date: 23.07.2023).
7. Lavrov is convinced that a political settlement in Karabakh is possible (in Rus.) <https://tass.ru/politika/9712099> (date of access: 23.07.2023)
8. The international community calls on Armenia to lower the bar on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh – Pashinyan (in Rus.) 13.04.2022. <https://newsarmenia.am/news/armenia/-mezhdunarodnoe-soobshchestvo-prizyvaet-armeniyu-snizit-planku-v-voprose-statusa-nagornogo-karabakha/> (download date: 23.07.2023).
9. Will Georgia get the status of a candidate country for EU membership? (in Rus.), <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/eu-georgia-decision/7137025.html> (download date: 23.07.2023).
10. British Ambassador to Baku: London is in favor of an international contingent in Karabakh (in Rus.). <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-56942212> (download date: 23.07.2023).
11. Russia will not agree to the construction of a trans-Caspian gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan (in Rus.). 16.12.2022. <https://news.am/rus/news/735541.html> (download date: 23.07.2023).
12. Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security (Cambridge Studies in International Relations). Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO 9780511491252.