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South Caucasus



ARMENIA - GEORGIA NEIGHBORHOOD: EXPERTS DIALOGUE

ARMENIA AND GEORGIA 2023: SECURITY, PEACE AND SOCIETIES - OLD CHALLENGES WITH OLD ANSWERS?

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This publication is a collection of articles based on the events of the *Armenia – Georgia Neighborhood: Experts' Dialogue* which took place in Yerevan (April 2023) and Tbilisi (October 2023). The articles analyse the current security challenges in the South Caucasus within the global geopolitical context. The events were co-organized by the Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts (Georgia), the Armenian Committee of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (Armenia), and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom South Caucasus.

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1. Preface

This volume is a collection of articles presented during two events of the *Armenia-Georgia Neighborhood: Experts' Dialogue* which took place both in Tbilisi and Yerevan.

In 2023 the topics of discussions during two events in Yerevan (in April) and Tbilisi (in October) focused on the new security challenges for the South Caucasus in the wake of the Ukraine war, new geopolitical realities, domestic policy discourses, and opportunities for peace.

The dialogue has been taking place for almost ten years with the involvement of experts specializing in security, human rights, media, democratization, economy, and other areas. From 2022 on we decided to share these discussions with a wider public by introducing this publication in three languages.

The year 2023 continues to show major global and regional challenges: the war in Ukraine, a new Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the developments in the South Caucasus region. The articles look at these various geopolitical developments through the prism of the South Caucasus, specifically through the lenses of Armenia and Georgia.

The current rapid changes in global geopolitics also affect developments in the South Caucasus region. Therefore, in the upcoming years we will continue to look at the situation in our region, which hopefully can become one day peaceful and fully democratized.

Armen Grigoryan

Program Manager

*Friedrich Naumann Foundation for
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2. The Possible transformations of security systems in the Eurasia region and the South Caucasus as consequences of the Ukraine war

Hayk Toroyan

April 2023

The current geopolitical changes in the world, mainly the war in Ukraine and the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war, contributed to the transformation of economic, security, and overall politics in the whole world. This article will look deeper into possible transformations of security systems and security partnerships in the South Caucasus region as well as in a wider Eurasian context. Finnish membership in NATO almost doubled the direct border of the Alliance with Russia. However, it seems like NATO's plan to encircle Russia could go further and continue in the South Caucasus. Additionally, if Russia is defeated in Ukraine, NATO's main target would be China, which for now is maneuvering between its seeming alliance with Russia and its economic ties with the West, especially Europe. The paper will investigate the possibilities of a further expansion of NATO in the South Caucasus, as well as in the Asia-Pacific region, to counter Chinese hegemony. In this context, the relevance of QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) – a security dialogue between Australia, Japan, India, and the United

States, might become a major factor in countering Chinese economic and military expansion. Armenia's expanded military cooperation with India and Greece, as well as its possible participation in US-led military exercises in Europe and its tense relations with CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) could indicate a shift in the country's military alignment. Georgia's internal issues created a dilemma in the country on the future of the South Caucasus state and sooner or later Tbilisi will be forced to choose its diplomatic and security future. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan brings other security and military elements into the region with its tight relations with Turkey, Israel, and Pakistan. It is fair to say that the security direction of the South Caucasus looks very vague, and it can turn one way or another. Possible scenarios of this future will be highlighted in this article.

NATO and its expansion

On April 4, 2023, Finland became the newest member of NATO nearly doubling the military alliance's direct border with Russia. Sweden will most likely follow its Eastern neighbor and join the alliance in the upcoming months. This expansion of the Alliance, which was described as "Braindead"¹ even by its member states, was triggered by the war in Ukraine and it seems like NATO will try to expand beyond Finland and Sweden. The war in Ukraine changed the entire political and security configuration of the world and it is unlikely to revert to its previous order. The new world order, if you will, demands a new security configuration, or at least that is what NATO is advocating for. NATO's main message after the start of the Ukraine war was calling for Russia's containment and unified Western support for Ukraine. These calls and messages were heard as most of the Western world consolidated around Ukraine and assisted the nation not only with statements and concerns, as per usual practice, but also in substantial form by sending an immense number of armaments, training Ukrainian sol-

diers, accepting refugees, etc. The US heads this operation of supporting Ukraine, using the UK as its satellite in dealing with affairs on the ground.²

This model has been seen as a victory and a very successful strategy from the NATO standpoint. Russia as the main adversary of NATO is being defeated in the eyes of the alliance. And what worked in containing or at least weakening Russia can also work against the next adversary – China. Or so the NATO leadership thought.

The steps seem simple: use the Ukraine war to threaten a war in Taiwan, draw a picture of Chinese-Russian friendship, make everyone believe that China would invade Taiwan, look for allies in Asia ready to join you, and use Japan as your satellite in Asia like the UK is being used in Europe. An additional preparatory step involves asking your British partners to throw the idea in the air to see others' reaction. Thus, in January 2023 Tobias Ellwood, chairman of the British House of Commons Defense Select Committee, suggested developing

¹ <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>

² <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1289233.shtml?id=12>

a so-called “NATO for Asia-Pacific” by further expanding the QUAD – the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among Australia, India, Japan, and the US as well as AUKUS – the trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK, and the US alliances.³ According to Hollman, the alliance should include the US, the UK, France, India, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, South Korea, and Vietnam.

With this additional mission in their minds, State Secretary Anthony Blinken and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited South-Eastern Asia before and during the G7 Foreign Ministers’ meeting in Tokyo.⁴ Prior to the G7 summit, Blinken visited Vietnam and explored the idea of containment of China and North Korea during the meeting with the Vietnamese Prime Minister. The main messaging coming from Stoltenberg and Blinken were conducted against China, citing the need of acting against Beijing and being prepared in case of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. However, the Vietnamese Prime Minis-

ter clearly stated that his country is not going to choose sides and will be consistent in its foreign policy.⁵ In order for the US and the UK to create the “Asian NATO”, they need to find allies who are ready to basically become the next Ukraine or the next Ukraine supporter in Asia. At this stage, the only country that is clearly in line with US policy is Japan, the other Asia-Pacific countries seem very cautious about making choices. The expansion of NATO in Asia-Pacific will not only create more tensions with China but also could be a trigger for a military escalation in the region. Most countries in the Asia-Pacific region are not ready for a catastrophe that would sabotage both their security and the economic development of the region.

With this current policy configuration and the fragile situation in the Asia-Pacific, it seems that the Asian NATO project will be put on hold and NATO will try to look elsewhere to expand or establish its presence. Taking into consideration Russia’s weakness, its limited influence in the South Caucasus, the region’s strategic and logistic importance, its proximity to Russia, Iran, and

³ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/2023/02/22/nato-should-keep-out-of-the-asia-pacifics-security-issues/>

⁴ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/29/ukraine-russia-war-nato-ties-asia-china/>

⁵ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/2023-04/1289233.shtml?id=12>

other factors it makes sense for NATO to try to somehow establish itself in the South Caucasus. During 2023 the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for Caucasus and Central Asia, Javier Colomina Píriz, visited the South Caucasus on several occasions, with the last visit taking place at the end of May.⁶ During his consultations with officials in Yerevan, Tbilisi, and Baku, Colomina stressed the importance of peace and stability in the region and highlighted NATO's readiness to assist in establishing it. In April, the U.S. Department of Defense listed Armenia among 26 nations that will send troops to the Defender 23 exercise designed to "deter those who would threaten the peace of Europe and defend the continent from aggression."⁷ Later Armenia was removed from the list with no explanation given. This strange incident could be explained by Russian pressure on Armenia and the country then backing down from its initial agreement to take part in the exercise. This is a purely speculative thought, however one thing that came up after this incident was some comments from the Arme-

nian Ministry of Defense (MoD). An MoD spokesperson, who declined to comment on the mishap itself, added that Armenian soldiers will likely participate instead in two other, more small-scale drills that are due to be organized by the US Army in Europe and Africa later this year.⁸ One of those drills will involve multinational troops making up KFOR, the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo.

The frequent visits to the region of high-level US and NATO officials, the very high tensions between Armenia and CSTO, ongoing Azerbaijani provocations, and Russian and CSTO silence about it can shift the balance in Armenia towards the West. An Armenia that is being attacked repeatedly by its eastern neighbor might need to seek security guarantees elsewhere as CSTO does not provide any. The deployment of a European Civilian Monitoring Mission⁹ can be seen as a first step of "Western promises."

6 <https://www.panorama.am/en/news/-2023/05/23/NATO-Javier-Colomina/28-40545>

7 <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/323-54054.html>

8 <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/69-6767/armenia-to-participate-in-us-led-military-exercises-this-year/>

9 <https://eurasianet.org/eu-launches-observer-mission-in-armenia>

CSTO and its demise

The Collective Security Treaty Organization is an intergovernmental military alliance between Armenia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan. In its current form it was established in 2002. Not dissimilar to NATO, the Organization has a NATO-like Article 5 type arrangement where a military attack against any member state must be repelled by the other members of the organization. However, in recent years the only instance when CSTO did something substantial was intervening in the internal affairs of Kazakhstan to secure its current leadership's positions during the public disorder during February 2022.¹⁰ Armenia has been a CSTO member since its establishment with the hope that if war breaks out in its territory, the alliance would fulfill its obligations to repel any external attack. The 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh shook Armenia's trust in its military partners. The CSTO and Russia explained that since the war broke out in the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan, they could not intervene, an argument which Armenia

could not deny. However, in the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Azerbaijan began in May 2021 to constantly attack and occupy internationally recognized territories of Armenia. Currently, according to different calculations, Azerbaijan occupies around 215 square kilometers of Armenian sovereign territory.¹¹ Per its agreement, the CSTO should have intervened when one of its members was attacked but it never did. After further major clashes in September 2022, Armenia started searching for more reliable ways to ensure its security. As a result, in October the EU adopted a decision to deploy a European Civilian Monitoring Mission (EUMA), whose presence began in early 2023 and was extended to two years. Obviously, Russia did not like this European presence in the South Caucasus and constantly criticizes the EUMA mission in Armenia. Meanwhile, Armenia also criticized CSTO's stance and refused to host CSTO's annual military exercises on its soil.¹² Moreover, in March 2023 Yerevan renounced its right to the

¹⁰ <https://eurasianet.org/csto-agrees-to-intervene-in-kazakhstan-unrest#:~:text=In%20light%20of%20the%20threats,and%20normalizing%20the%20situation%2C%20Pashinyan>

¹¹ <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/697545/azerbaijan-has-occupied-at-least-215-square-kilometers-of-armenian-territory-since-2020/>

¹² <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-refuses-to-host-csto-exercises>

organization's leadership rotation and rejected its quota of being one of the three CSTO deputy secretary generals.¹³

The signs are obvious that, sitting under constant threat from Baku, Yerevan cannot afford to be friends with unreliable partners such as Russia. Additionally, Russian failure in Ukraine makes CSTO even weaker and unable to defend its allies. Meanwhile, EUMA deployment was seen as a big step towards stability in the region from the Armenian side.

Newcomers and old friends

Since the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020, more actors have become more interested in the South Caucasus region. While most of their interest is based on the economic and connectivity potential of the region¹⁴, there is also interest in keeping the region stable. The stability of the region comes if there is a military balance or interdependency among all three states, the history of the region is proof of that. Currently, Azerbaijan is clearly the dominant military force in the

region, so Armenia, feeling threatened by Baku and abandoned by Moscow, has started to look further afield for friends and, in a sense, invite new actors to the region. As a result, Armenia has started deepening its economic and military cooperation with India. In September and November 2022, the countries signed two arms sale deals and agreed to deepen their military cooperation further. In March 2023, the Chief of the Armenian Army's General Staff and the Chief of India's Defense Staff met in New Delhi to discuss an expansion of defense cooperation.¹⁵ That same month, Armenia also signed a military cooperation deal with Greece.¹⁶

On the other side, Georgia signed the so-called trilateral cooperation format with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Defense cooperation among these countries has been deepening every year, with the most recent agreement signed between Tbilisi and Baku last April 24th.¹⁷

Thus, we now have military cooperation agreements signed by the South Caucasus countries with

13 <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-further-downgrades-participation-in-csto>

14 <https://www.freiheit.org/germany/circum-venting-russia-can-south-caucasus-connect-west-east>

15 <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32057951.html>

16 <https://www.mil.am/en/news/11390>

17 <https://civil.ge/archives/538634>

Greece and Turkey – NATO members and India – a QUAD member, effectively and indirectly increasing NATO and Western military presence on the ground.

What comes next?

With the Trump administration coming to power, US policy shifted more towards internal issues rather than foreign policy and, as a result, US presence and interest in the South Caucasus declined significantly. However, the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 and the Ukraine war brought US attention back to the wider Eurasia region.

By looking at all the above-mentioned factors, we can see on one side the demise of Russian influence in Armenia and South Caucasus and, on the other hand, more Western presence and activity. In these circumstances the next logical step for the West would be to gain as much ground in the South Caucasus as possible. One of the steps to ensure would be NATO proposing Individual partnership action plans (IPAPs) IPAPs are agreements with non-NATO members to deepen their relations with the Organization and are seen as a step towards future membership in the Alliance.¹⁸

IPAPs were launched at the Prague Summit in November 2002. All three South Caucasus countries joined the IPAP plan at some point. On October 2004, Georgia became the first country to agree to an IPAP with NATO. Azerbaijan agreed to its first IPAP in May 2005 and Armenia in December 2005. Partners periodically review their IPAPs with NATO. However, Georgia and Montenegro later moved away from this mechanism as they pursued their membership aspirations through development of Annual National Programs. (Montenegro eventually became a member of NATO in June 2017.)

While IPAPs are revisited and resigned by partner countries regularly, there have not yet been many changes in the points of the plans signed by Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and NATO. Potential changes to these agreements with a deepening of relations between NATO and these three countries could happen since the main adversary of the alliance – Russia – is losing ground and influence in the region. Thus, we could see a potential “advancement” of NATO agreements and deepened cooperation of NATO with the countries in the region.

¹⁸ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49290.htm

Additionally, the denial by Armenia to host CSTO monitors shows that Armenia is keen on keeping the EUMA mission on the ground for the foreseeable future. Armenia might try to push for an IPRM-type of arrangement – Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms. The IPRM mechanisms in Georgia¹⁹ are often criticized for its non-contribution to the peace process, however they ensure stability and a ceasefire which could be very useful in the Armenia-Azerbaijan context.

In conclusion, it is obvious that Russia and the CSTO are losing ground in the South Caucasus and that a vacuum cannot last long in a region that was always heavily militarized. Thus, the most probable scenario is the emergence of new players, such as India, who would deepen direct and indirect cooperation between the three South Caucasus states and NATO.

On the technical level, since the West needs stability in the region, security expansion that can contribute to the peace process should be prioritized. The expansion of the mandate of EUMA in Armenia, the establishment of an IPRM-type of mechanism along the border of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and OSCE involvement in the potential demarcation and delimitation process are all possible mechanisms that we can see in the near future.

¹⁹ <https://smr.gov.ge/en/page/27/incident-prevention-and-response-mechanism>

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Since 2010, Hayk has worked with the CMI (Crisis Management Initiative) – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation. From 2016, he has been CMI's Regional Coordinator in the South Caucasus. Previously, Hayk worked at the Armenian UN Association, the OSCE Office in Yerevan, and in media and advertising. Hayk also worked at the Jinishian Memorial Foundation, facilitating and implementing debate trainings in schools in all regions of Armenia. Hayk regularly provides workshops and lectures for students in Armenia and from Eastern Europe on conflict analysis and conflict resolution. He is the author of the "Eight simple tools to analyze difficult conflicts" section of the Conflict Analysis Manual financed by the UNDP.

3. Iran and new realities in the South Caucasus

Anna Gevorgyan-Davtyan

April 2023

The developments in the South Caucasus during and after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war are closely tied to the security interests of all countries in the region, especially Iran. Concerns from the Iranian perspective include the war's movement of armies across borders, the use of Turkish-backed mercenaries, Turkey's involvement in the region, and Azerbaijan's expansionist rhetoric, not only towards Armenia but also towards Iran. This has prompted Iran to play a bigger role in the region. Though most of its efforts have just been political statements, there are already vivid results in the political and public attitudes towards Iran in Armenia. A recent survey conducted by the International Republican Institute shows that 54% of respondents think Iran is Armenia's most important security partner²⁰.

It is therefore important to fully understand and analyze the security interests of Iran in its relations with Armenia to manage

expectations regarding possible outcomes and not to exaggerate threats. This report tries to summarize the overall geo-strategic and security interests of Iran in the region by focusing on Iran-Armenia relations.

- Iran's national security interests in the South Caucasus region have always been and still encompass the important goals of maintaining its territorial integrity and upholding the principle of territorial integrity in general, ensuring that borders remain unchanged, and preventing or stopping any irredentist processes. In addition, Iran seeks to limit the presence of extra-regional powers such as the United States, Israel, and NATO, while also acknowledging Russia's role as a balance between Western and Turkish influences. Iran's security aspirations are lasting peace and stability in the region so also it seeks to limit the presence of mercenaries and other non-state militant actors in the South Caucasus.

²⁰ [Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia | January-March 2023 | International Republican Institute \(iri.org\)](#)

- Iran is also concerned with its international prestige and influence in the region. One of its important goals appears to be having its self-proclaimed status as a regional power be acknowledged by other players. This acknowledgement would help to enhance Iran's standing in the region and create a fertile ground for increasing its influence. Towards this same goal, Iran is also interested in active participation in regional developments and initiatives. Inclusion in regional developments would allow Iran to demonstrate its leadership and ability to shape the direction of regional policies. As a result, Iran is naturally interested in being part of the 3+3 security structure, in cooperation with the Eurasian Union, and in involvement in other regional initiatives. Iran sees all these formats as important tools for enhancing its regional profile and for increasing its capabilities to play a more active role in regional security and economic affairs. Finally, good relations with Armenia, as its only Christian neighbor, have always been a counterexample to those narratives that present Iran as a radical Muslim country with extremist regional aspirations. Thus, maintaining these relations is another important interest for Iran since it helps counter negative perceptions of the country in the region and potentially enhances its soft power and influence.
- Iran has several interests related to the protection of its national identity and values in the South Caucasus region. One of those interests appears to be maintaining its historic primacy in this region, which it perceives as a Pan-Iranian space. This suggests that Iran values its historical and cultural ties with the region because its policies aim to preserve them. In this context, it's important to stress that Iran considers it crucial to emphasize its special cultural, civilizational, and historic role for the people in the South Caucasus. Cultural and, where applicable, religious ties and commonalities are often used for preserving this goal.
- With all the features mentioned above, Iran places itself as a defender of all Shia communities in the world and their sympathy and affection are of foremost importance. Exercising its role as the most prominent defender of the Shia community helps enhance Iran's standing as a leader

of global Shia community and could also increase its regional and international influence. Thus, Iran is also interested in avoiding anti-Iranian sentiments in Shia Azerbaijan. Because of Iran's sensitivity to issues related to identity and its desire to protect its interests in the region, Iran has thus far considered Karabakh as an Islamic land and has congratulated Azerbaijan for "regaining its territories" after the 44-day war in Karabakh.

Considering all the above, it is in Iran's interest to diminish Turkey's role in the region by getting rid of those mercenaries used by Azerbaijan that still reside in the surrounding territories of Nagorno-Karabakh and by not allowing the creation of the so-called "Zangezur corridor". Both goals would help maintain Armenian security interests. In contrast, the interest of Armenia in promoting self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh and protecting the rights of Nagorno-Karabakh people do not coincide with Iran's global interests. That explains Iran's neutral political responses to the Nagorno-Karabakh wars, followed by congratulatory statements to Azerbaijan and silence about the blockade of the Lachin corridor and over Aliyev's anti-Armenian sentiments.

From Armenia's perspective, its relationship with Iran has been and remains crucial since it has only two open borders with its neighbors, the Iranian border being a vital lifeline. However, these relations have not been and are not directed against any other country. Though, Iran's political statements on the unacceptability of changing borders are of crucial importance, especially in the current demanding situation, it is worth also noting that these statements are consistent with the statements made by Western countries. Furthermore, Iran does not object to the presence of an EU monitoring mission in Armenia, as it shares the same political goal of preventing another large-scale war with Azerbaijan.

Within this context, it is important for Armenia to counter Azerbaijan's "anti-propaganda," which employs anti-Iranian and anti-Russian rhetoric to align itself with Western countries while also benefiting economically from its relationships with both Russia and Iran. The "war of words" between Iran and Azerbaijan, the attack on Azerbaijan's embassy in Iran and the latter's exaggerated response are meant to stress the position that Azerbaijan is part of the West and to gain support for its territorial demands.

Despite that, Azerbaijan is deepening its economic cooperation with Iran and Russia, and these countries in turn see Azerbaijan as an important partner in the energy field with an increasing role of a bridge between them. The recent agreements between Russia and Iran concerning the Rasht-Astara railway, seen as an important link meant to connect India, Iran, Russia, and Azerbaijan, are vivid examples of this.

Anna Gevorgyan-Davtyan received her MA degree in Iranian Studies from the Chair of Iranian Studies in 2009 (Department of Oriental Studies, Yerevan State University). Since September 2009 she has been a researcher at the YSU Center for Civilization and Cultural Studies. In 2013, she was a visiting scholar at the Arizona State University School of Social Transformation. She has been teaching at YSU as a Chair of Applied Sociology since 2014. She was the head of the Scientific-Educational Center at the National Defense Research University, MoD, RA, from December 2016 till June 2018 and co-authored and implemented an inter-agency executive course for the Armenian military. From June to December 2018, she served as an adviser to the Secretary of the Security Council, Republic of Armenia. She has authored a number of articles on the internal politics of contemporary Iran, Armenia-Iran relations, regional security issues, as well as on women's issues in Iran, women's rights in Islam, and gender issues in Armenia.

4. Political Trends in Armenia since the “Velvet Revolution” in 2018

Artak Ayunts

April 2023

Introduction

The “Velvet Revolution” in 2018 marked a significant turning point in the political landscape of Armenia. The revolution, led by incumbent head of state Nikol Pashinyan, resulted in the ousting of the long-ruling Republican Party of Armenia and the establishment of a new government led by Pashinyan’s party, My Step Alliance. Since then, there have been several significant developments in Armenia, including changes to the electoral code, the establishment of an anti-corruption court, and efforts to improve transparency in government. The government has also prioritized economic development, with a focus on promoting investment, creating jobs, and diversifying the economy. However, the biggest challenge was, and still remains, the security crisis resulting from the war waged by Azerbaijan in 2020.

The 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war in September 2020 and subsequent national security crisis significantly impacted the pace of democratic reforms, highlighting once again the fragility of democracy versus secu-

rity in smaller states. Armenia is in a complex geopolitical situation, caught between ongoing conflicts of influence between Russia and the West, and threats emanating from Azerbaijan and Turkey. In the context of the new wave of escalation initiated by Azerbaijan on a regular basis after the end of the war in 2020 and the ongoing Russia-West cleavage, Armenian domestic policy has taken a huge blow in its attempt to align national policies with more democratic practices.

In June 2021, Pashinyan’s government faced a major political crisis after Armenia’s military called for his resignation, citing his inability to handle the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Pashinyan refused to step down and called for early parliamentary elections, which were held in June 2021. Pashinyan’s party won the elections, but opposition parties have disputed the results and accused the government of election fraud. However, a European international observation mission did not cite any major flaws in the election process. Thus, Pashinyan was able

to secure the legitimacy needed for his domestic and foreign policy, embarking on his concept of bringing an “era of peace” to the region.

Current issues

There are several challenges Armenia is facing currently, apart from ensuring security and addressing conflicts with the neighbors.

Growing political polarization: despite the initial enthusiasm for the “Velvet Revolution” in 2018, political polarization and ongoing mutual recriminations between the ruling party and opposition have decreased trust in them by the people and have negatively impacted social cohesion in Armenian politics. This continuous destructive critique, based on personal antipathy rather than political debate, has created significant tensions among the political parties. As a result of this, many people in Armenia do not sympathize with any political party.²¹

21 CRRC - Caucasus Research Resource Center, Armenia: Caucasus Barometer Survey results, Question on “Sympathy towards political parties”. 18 December 2021: <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2021am/PARTYSUPF/>

Growing discontent: grievances among people with respect to the foreign policy and national security of Armenia is growing. Instead of dealing with “real-life” security challenges and engaging with respective international state and non-state actors, political parties are using destructive rhetoric and approaches to vindicate their respective righteousness and blame each other for foreign policy failures. This has led to social apathy and a reluctance to trust the foreign policy of the “peace era” proclaimed by the ruling party despite the continued hostilities by Azerbaijan which have resulted in the occupation of around 150 sq. km territory of sovereign Armenia during the two years following the end of war in 2020.²²

Slowing pace of democratization: the “Velvet Revolution” was largely driven by demands for democratic reforms. Even though there have been significant achievements, in particular increased transparency and accountability, Armenia’s recent international indicators are dropping. For instance, according

22 Panorama.am, Azerbaijan occupied 150 sq. km of sovereign Armenian territory after 2020 war, MFA spox says. 29 April 2023: <https://www.panorama.am/en/news/2023/04/29/MFA-spox/2828766>

to the Freedom House's Freedom index for 2023, Armenia dropped one mark. Armenia is characterized as "Partly Free" in the report. Major areas where Armenia scored low are within the *Rule of Law* indicator, more specifically on factors such as the existence of an *Independent judiciary* and *Due processes of civil and criminal matters*. Armenia's low score for an *Independent judiciary* resulted from what was characterized as: *"The courts face systemic political influence, and judicial institutions are undermined by corruption. Judges reportedly feel pressure to work with prosecutors to convict defendants, and acquittal rates are extremely low. The government published a five-year judicial-reform strategy in 2019; reforms continued to be enacted in 2021, though progress has been slow"*.²³

Allegations of growing corruption: there have been several media reports accusing government officials and ruling party members of corruption. Even though it can be argued that Armenia has overcome widespread systemic corruption, recent reports by independent local media describe various Armenian

officials engaging in embezzlement and nepotism.²⁴

Incapacitated judicial reform: even though there were major promises that the judicial sector would undergo substantial reform to tackle corruption and increase public trust, recent data indicates that this has not been the case.²⁵

Well-being and social welfare: even though to achieve better results in this field it would be necessary to ensure political stability and ensure a "negative peace" characterized by the absence of war, poverty is still widespread in Armenia and policy reforms in healthcare, pension, and the provision of social services have yet to be set on track.

Economic challenges: Armenia has faced economic challenges in recent years, including unemployment and low economic growth. The government has attempted to address these issues through

23 Freedom House, Freedom in the World: Armenia. 2022: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2022>

24 Civilnet, Armenia risks backsliding on corruption, analysts warn. 14 December 2021: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/643361/armenia-risks-backsliding-on-corruption-analysts-warn/>

25 CRRC - Caucasus Research Resource Center, Public opinion study of corruption in Armenia. 2022: https://www.crrc.am/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Research-Report-Corruption-in-Armenia_ENG_Final.pdf

a range of measures, such as attracting foreign investment and implementing economic reforms. Even though Armenia was able to tackle the inflation caused by the Russia-Ukraine war, the influx of Russian citizens caused a significant increase in housing prices and created additional tensions among local population.

Geopolitical shifts: last, but perhaps the most important factor. Armenia has traditionally been closely aligned with Russia, but the new government has sought to pursue a more balanced foreign policy. This has involved engaging with the European Union and the United States, as well as attempting to improve relations with neighboring countries such as Turkey and Azerbaijan. This maneuver toward the West is harshly criticized by Russia and with the war in Ukraine still showing no signs of ending any time soon, it is difficult to predict how Russia will respond to Armenia in case of further rapprochement with the West.

Conclusion

Overall, political trends in Armenia since the “Velvet Revolution” have been marked by a complex mix of progress and challenges. While the country has taken steps towards democratization and pursued a more balanced foreign policy, it continues to face significant economic and political challenges. The security of its borders and guarantees of its sovereignty remain the key challenges of the government. In light of this, attempts to bring peace have so far failed due to the changing world order and geopolitical shifts, as well as the Azerbaijani appetite to force Armenia to make painful concessions. On the other hand, Armenia remains the trusted partner of the West in its attempt to build democracy, though the Armenian government is still urged by international organizations to take steps to strengthen democratic institutions, promote transparency and accountability, and respect the rule of law.

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5. Armenia's post-war dilemma: "Western in form, Russian in content"

Gor Madoyan

October 2023

The 44-day war of 2020; Azerbaijan's annexation of the sovereign territories of the Republic of Armenia in 2021; the nine-month blockade of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, and then, the one-day war in the Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19, 2023 that caused the deportation of 100,000 Armenians. These events have collapsed the status quo of the region's security and peace, as advocated by the Republic of Armenia (RA) for years, posing many challenges and issues that now need to be addressed.

Even after the war, Armenia continues to link its security to Russia, relying not only on Russian-Armenian bilateral relations, but also the international structures led by Russia: the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization), the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union), and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States). Simultaneously, Armenia retains its participation in platforms and negotiations moderated by the West. In particular, Armenia claims that it intends to reevaluate relations with its allies and to implement new approaches to long-standing challenges.

My analysis will touch upon the state of affairs of the security system and the peace agenda that can be described as a dilemma for Armenia's current government, ruling elites, and society. After the 44-day war, Armenia's foreign policy became a search for a new security system, more specifically, for models and concepts that can rebalance and reestablish a new status-quo for Armenia in the South Caucasus region. This will buy enough time for Armenia to master its strength and achieve a better outcome. On one hand, these aspirations and this search have various manifestations: from the elites, from opinion-makers and politicians, and from the citizens who initiate and organize the self-organizing structures such as NGOs, fraternal unions, etc., to the widely promoted and cherished hopes for military-technical assistance from the "Western Savior." And in this case that role of "Savior" varies, from Russia to Iran, from Germany to France. On the other hand, the dynamics of peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and between Armenia and Turkey, can be retrieved by fol-

lowing their respective government media channels to discern the theme these platforms and newscasts support. Yet the negotiations with the main regional powers are still pending and the outcome is still foggy and unpredictable for Armenia's future.

With all this in mind, I will describe a couple of key issues that could be key factors in explaining the current sentiments in Armenian society, political elites, and power groups. These sentiments are crucial to an understanding of Armenia's post-war dilemma of finding security and peace.

The Armenian formula: "Western in form, Russian in content"

A comprehensive analysis of the Armenian political landscape reveals that the struggle is not merely between the West and Russia within Armenian elites or power groups. Instead, it's a battle among representatives of different branches of these elites and representatives of Armenian authorities aiming to strengthen their positions and become key partners of the Russian authorities. Despite anti-Russian rhetoric from Armenian authorities, Armenia's export dependence on the Russian market has increased significantly. The escalation of this rhetoric fur-

ther entangles Armenia within the Russian sphere, fostering economic, political, and cultural ties.

For instance, parallel to the anti-Russian rhetoric of the RA authorities, Armenia's export dependence on the Russian market has increased²⁶. In 2021, Russia's share of Armenia's exports was 27.9%; in 2022, it reached 45%, and from January to August of this year, it stood at 51.7%. Moreover, high-ranking Armenian officials, from the prime minister to MPs, have repeatedly stated that Armenia has no intention of changing its foreign policy direction nor of leaving the EAEU or the CSTO. Instead, Armenia aims to strengthen its cooperation with European partners. Additionally, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has emphasized Armenia's interest in a common gas market within the Eurasian Economic Union, citing unprecedented economic growth in Armenia. However, this growth is primarily attributed to Russian migrants, capital from Russian companies, and parallel exports to Russia due to international sanctions against Russia. This economic boost is not the result of Armenian economic reforms or changes in the

²⁶ <https://www.hetq.am/hy/article/161618>

capital market; it is solely derived from Russian capital and import and re-export earnings. The escalation of anti-Russian rhetoric only deepens our entanglement within the Russian sphere, further involving us in Russian economic, political, and cultural initiatives, facilitating the flow of Russian money, and providing sanctuary to citizens fleeing conflict within the empire.

Post-war Syndrome or Devaluation of the State Concept

After the 44-day war, Armenian society experienced a surge in voluntary patriotic activities. This fervor didn't wane post-war; in fact, it has continued to thrive. People united spontaneously or through organized efforts to address a wide array of public and social issues. Remarkably, these efforts extended beyond typical civilian concerns, encroaching upon domains traditionally monopolized by the state, such as military defense. The issue at hand is that the extreme manifestations of the volunteer mentality can severely and dangerously devalue the concept of the state, the need for its institutions, and even statehood itself. In the short term, taking seemingly "positive" actions might inadvertently deal an irreparable blow to how the public perceives the state. This can lead people to

believe that living without the state or its institutions is feasible. Eventually, they may stop seeing themselves as defenders of the state and its fundamental principles. This erosion of the sense of collective responsibility can have profound consequences for the stability and cohesion of a nation. If civil activism and volunteering are the basis of public relations in western, developed societies and are focused on social and public problems, then in the case of Armenian society, activism is mostly confined to the safety and military spheres. All this speaks of the decline of the authority of the state and its institutions. According to a recent public opinion [survey](#), public support or satisfaction with the work of the RA Prime Minister's Office decreased from 82% to 38% in 2023 compared to 2018, for the army: 74% to 40%, the Courts: 34% to 29%, and so on.

Security and peace: is it an existential or a political issue?

Another important issue to consider is the perception of conflicts with neighbors as existential threats. When political problems are viewed as existential dilemmas, they reach a deadlock, becoming seemingly unsolvable challenges integrated into everyday life. Some power groups, backed by Russia, exploit and publicize this mentality, advocating for militarization and for transforming society into a "nation-army" and the country into a "fortress."

In conclusion, these points represent the key problems and challenges faced by Armenian society and the state within the emerging post-war status quo. These challenges hinder the development of a healthy, sovereign public mindset, inhibiting the possibility of a peaceful and sustainable future without conflicts for Armenia and its people.

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6. A Futuristic View on the South Caucasus

Giorgi Shaishmelashvili

October 2023

Introduction

The South Caucasus entered a new era after tectonic geopolitical changes occurred within and outside the region. The emergence of these changes has created an environment of uncertainty and fear, as the old security framework has been disrupted and a new one has yet to emerge. Contemplating the future can often be a daunting task, owing to the numerous uncertainties that are inherent in this endeavor. To reduce the issue of uncertainty, the rest of this paper will be based on the region's established political trends as well as verified facts. We can call them "known knowns" using the term US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld coined. Obviously, there are still many "unknowns" that could completely change the prospects of the Caucasus towards a gloomier future. However, for now, I believe that three emerging trends have the potential to shape a brighter future for the South Caucasus. Firstly, Russian influence in the region has diminished. Secondly, Western influence is on the rise. Lastly, the likelihood of major wars between South Caucasian states has decreased, which will likely drive the states toward greater connectivity and cooperation.

Russia is Down but not (completely) Out

Our Armenian colleague accurately pointed out that there was no place on earth that was more loyal to Putin than Karabakh and its inhabitants. Significantly, this particular place was abandoned by Putin on September 19, 2023, following the Azerbaijani offensive. The inaction of the Russian "peacekeeping" forces stationed in the region after the Second Karabakh War, in addition to Moscow's hesitation to support its Armenian ally, has led many Armenians to question Russia's commitment to their security and reconsider their foreign policy goals. This could have a lasting, positive impact on all the South Caucasian states.

The end of the Karabakh Conflict could hopefully lead to the signing of a sustainable peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and new prospects for the two states and the entire region. The end of the conflict will leave Russia without its most important tool to leverage the region. By securing (pretending to secure, as it turned out) the status quo established in 1994 after the first Karabakh war, Russia kept the

power to manipulate both countries' foreign and security policies, especially with Armenia.

Clearly, Russia's reluctance to fulfil its peacekeeping responsibilities is a result of its strategic failures during its unjustified invasion of Ukraine. Although Russia may have won battles, it has not been victorious in the war. I have argued this point since immediately after Kyiv was not captured, and my viewpoint remains valid today, despite the stalemate on the battlefield. Russia is unable to achieve its strategic objectives – the demilitarization and “denazification” of Ukraine and the prevention of NATO's eastern expansion. Instead, Ukraine has become the most militarized nation in Europe, and future European security will depend on its capabilities. The NATO border with Russia has doubled since Finland's accession to the alliance. Furthermore, the West is now more united and prepared to counter Russia's revanchist foreign policy behavior than before the war, including offering accelerated membership mechanisms to the Association Trio – Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

The West is In, but with Caution

As a result of the Second Karabakh war, while the Western influence was reduced, Russia managed to deploy its peacekeepers in Karabakh and grab the opportunity of the “peacekeeper” role under one of the terms of the ceasefire agreement reached on November 9, 2020. Turkey, another regional player, also gained prestige and influence in the South Caucasus due to its significant military and political contributions in the conflict. However, in 2023, the situation has changed. Russia did not anticipate the European Union's resilience in responding to its aggression in Ukraine, which included a discussion of an enlargement agenda. The European Commission has recommended EU candidacy for Georgia, and the country is likely to receive the status in December 2023. This historic moment opens up new prospects not only for Georgia but also for Armenia, as the factors that led to Armenia refusing an associate agreement in 2013 are no longer present. Furthermore, after September 2022, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the EU agreed to establish an EU civilian monitoring mission. The deployment of even unarmed civilian observers is a significant Western intervention, considering the circumstances mentioned above.

Low likelihood of major wars among the South Caucasian States

The probability of significant conflicts among the countries in the South Caucasus region is low. However, the absence of war does not guarantee cooperation in the area. Regrettably, the region has not yet experienced the benefits of productive cooperation, except for the existing synergy between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. The primary causes of this are the ongoing ethno-political conflicts, rooted in the past but exploited today by the only major player in the region, Russia. Historically, whenever colonial powers withdrew, the countries in the South Caucasus often resorted to conflict. Fortunately, at present, factors promoting peace prevail over those encouraging conflict. The South Caucasian states have made significant progress in both nation-building and state-building since gaining independence. They are more homogenized, and their political class, bureaucracy, and state institutions are more pragmatic and better equipped to handle the challenges they face than in the early 1990s. Given these developments, it is expected that there will be new opportunities for cooperation and synergy among South Caucasian states, particularly with increased Western engagement and a Russian retreat.

I believe this context of more Western engagement and a Russian retreat should naturally lead to new ways of cooperation and synergy among South Caucasian states.

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7. Security Debates in the Context of Armenia-Azerbaijan Normalization: Balancing Western Alignment and Regional Changes

Anna Gevorgyan-Davtyan

October 2023

This report delves into the ongoing debate within Armenia regarding the direction of its regional policies, exploring whether a shift towards the West is necessary or if leveraging Western support for regional changes is a more viable strategy. In this stance, three key security topics within the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process are scrutinized, shaping the discourse on Armenia's geopolitical orientation.

The Corridor Issue: The focal point of contention is the so-called "Zangezur corridor" mentioned in Azerbaijani and Turkish discussions and supported by Russia. In Armenia, these discussions are perceived as a major obstacle to the mutual understanding of the logic of opening regional communications. The story behind these mutual accusations reminds one of a thriller where it's not quite obvious "who promised what to whom". Though the fable of the history of the emergence of this mysterious "corridor logic" is still unclear, the scenario spins across multiple promises: Turkey insists

Armenia has promised a corridor²⁷, in Armenia there is an assumption that Russia has promised to Azerbaijan a corridor considering Azerbaijan's claims that it negotiates the issue of the corridor with Russia²⁸ in Iran they say the corridor is a "NATO corridor" and that the US and "Zionists" have promised it²⁹. Beyond these discourses about promises, Russia, though so far clearly opposing any "corridor" between Turkey and Azerbaijan and even publicly stating that such roads cannot have extraterritorial status (the main point of Baku's argument), has by

27 "Erdogan: We Will Develop Relations with Armenia If It Opens 'Zangezur Corridor,' Fulfills Other Promises." October 10, 2023, [Erdogan: We will develop relations with Armenia if it opens 'Zangezur corridor,' fulfills other promises : r/armenia \(reddit.com\)](https://www.redd.it/armenia)

28 "Azerbaijan is negotiating with Russia on the Zangezur corridor." Comment from Baku, [Azerbaijan, Russia, Zangezur corridor, JAMnews \(jam-news.net\)](https://www.jamnews.net).

29 Ahmad Kazemi, "Conspiracy of creating "NATO Turani Corridor" with Geopolitical Consequence against Iran, Russia and China", [Conspiracy of Creating "NATO Turani Corridor" with Geopolitical Consequences against Iran, Russia and China - Strategic Council on Foreign Relations \(socfr.ir\)](https://www.socfr.ir)

several statements of its deputy prime-minister Alexey Overchuk³⁰, seemed to concede to Azerbaijani demands as it has in almost every other regional issue because of its weakened position as a result of its invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan and Turkey are manipulating this issue from one side by presenting it as a necessary implementation of the 9th point of the trilateral agreement of November 9, and from the other side by presenting it as an attractive regional project for the West. By the Armenian interpretation, the trilateral agreement was about the environment across Nagorno-Karabakh, and now, because of ethnic cleansing, the overall logic and necessity of the agreement has changed. Besides, even if there is an assumption that the 9th point of that agreement is still relevant, there is no mention of an extraterritorial corridor in it. It declares the necessity of opening all regional communications and giving access to Azerbaijan to reach its Nakhichevan exclave with

the Russian FSB being the security guarantor of transportation using it, not of the road itself.

The choice of a mediator for this matter is crucial. The Western interpretation aligns with Armenian aspirations by emphasizing the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity³¹. This dimension underscores the strategic significance of Western support in navigating the intricacies of the corridor issue. Furthermore, it's important to mention that only through the implementation of this kind of project can the regional integrity of Armenia be possible, whereas an extraterritorial corridor will once again exclude Armenia from regional economic communications, will create a new risk for military escalation, this time with Turkey and Iran also involved, since Iran expresses harsh opposition to the cutting of the Armenian-Iran border³².

30 "There Is No Talk of Any 'Extraterritorial Corridor' in Negotiations of Trilateral Working Group and Cannot Be - Overchuk." n.d. Armenpress.am. Accessed November 12, 2023, [There is no talk of any "extraterritorial corridor" in negotiations of trilateral working group and cannot be - Overchuk | ARMENPRESS Armenian News Agency](#)

31 "Joint Statement of Nikol Pashinyan and Ursula von Der Leyen | EEAS." n.d. [Www.eeas.europa.eu](#). Accessed November 12, 2023, [Joint statement of Nikol Pashinyan and Ursula von der Leyen | EEAS \(europa.eu\)](#)

32 "Iran's Military Warns about Border Changes in the Region." 2023. Iran International, September, 2023, [Iran's Military Warns About Border Changes In The Region | Iran International \(iranintl.com\)](#)

The transit route via Armenia can be a crucial part of the middle corridor and help Western countries to reach Asian markets by bypassing Russia. Azerbaijan manipulates this advantage of the road by declaring that if Armenia “will not give the corridor,” then Azerbaijan will create a corridor via Iran. The manipulation here is the fact that Azerbaijan has always had a transit route to Nakhijevan via Iran and if it constructs a new and shorter one, it still is just another transit route in the framework of Iran’s sovereignty. It uses this narrative to mislead the West and misdirect its main assumptions concerning this issue by portraying alternative routes passing through Azerbaijan or Iran, thereby creating support for Azerbaijan regarding the relations between Western countries and Iran. But the reality is that the alternatives are: a transit route under the sovereignty of Armenia and a reopening of all regional communications peacefully via negotiation or gaining an extraterritorial corridor by military means, creating a new chance for a regional war where Russia will gain a new opportunity to intervene and “relocate” some of its “peacekeepers” still in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Demarcation and Delimitation:

Russia tries to assert dominance in the demarcation and delimitation process by citing the original maps in its archives as the only basis for the process³³. This dynamic raises questions about the extent of Russian influence in shaping the regional landscape. The negotiation power balance in this regard requires careful consideration, as it directly impacts the outcomes of the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process. One of the most challenging decisions that Armenia’s government has made is the reconfirmation of its obligation to recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan according to the Alma-Ata declaration, in both Prague and Brussels, in the framework of the Brussels format of negotiations. The government explains the importance of this decision by the growing risk of an Azerbaijan invasion of the southern parts of Armenia, whereas its opposition and Russian authorities claim that it was a big mistake and a reason why the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh has been declared resolved by Azerbaijan. While Armenia’s authorities on several occasions reaffirmed their commitment to acknowledge

33 “Lavrov Says Partners May ‘Try Their Luck’ in Brussels.” Mediamax.am, November 2023, [Lavrov says partners may “try their luck” in Brussels - Mediamax.am](https://www.mediamax.am/en/news/2023/11/23/lavrov-says-partners-may-try-their-luck-in-brussels)

the Alma Ata declaration and the recognition of the exact square kilometers of the respective states (29,800 for Armenia and 86,600³⁴ for Azerbaijan), after the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh, the president of Azerbaijan has only once referred to the recognition of Armenia's territorial integrity and that did not mention any numbers for the area. This fact, in parallel with the threatening texts of Aliyev on an almost daily basis, including threats towards the Syunik region of Armenia, Sevan Lake, and even the capital of Armenia, Yerevan, by circulating the notion of "Western Azerbaijan"³⁵, creates an atmosphere of growing risk of yet another military escalation in the region. This minimalistic approach and brutal militarization of the political discourse negate the possibility of a peace agreement between these states.

34 "Pashinyan: Azerbaijan's 86.6 Thousand Square Km of Territory Includes NK.", [Mediamax.am](https://mediamax.am), May 2023. [Pashinyan: Azerbaijan's 86.6 thousand square km of territory includes NK - Mediamax.am](https://mediamax.am)

35 "Aliyev Says Yerevan 'Historically' Azerbaijani." 2022. OC Media. December 24, 2022, [Aliyev says Yerevan 'historically' Azerbaijani \(oc-media.org\)](https://oc-media.org)

Enclaves and Nagorno-Karabakh:

The issue of enclaves is closely tied to existing maps and the overarching logic of demarcation and delimitation. The evolving situation necessitates a nuanced approach in addressing the complexities surrounding the issue since Azerbaijan does not agree to attach a map to the possible peace agreement, giving itself space in the future to present new territorial demands. By its logic, the Azerbaijani enclaves in Armenia that existed during the Soviet period must be returned to Azerbaijan. At the same time, it refuses to discuss the possibility of returning the Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan. The authorities of Armenia insist that the topic must be discussed considering that both countries have enclaves in each other territories and that exchanging them would be the most logical resolution of this issue. Azerbaijan, though, keeps demanding "its villages" and threatens to "regain them by force." Considering the strategic geography of those villages, being near the strategic roads connecting Armenia with Georgia in the North and Northern and Southern regions of Armenia with each other in the South, this topic has become manipulated within the Armenian context. The issue of Nagorno-Karabakh in its turn has evolved to the issue of the forcefully displaced population of Nagorno-Karabakh: more than 100,000

displaced people entered Armenia after the military attack and ethnic cleansing of the region by Azerbaijan. Baku tries to portray these developments as the free will of these people whereas many international organizations have proven that there was an ongoing genocide during the nine month blockade of the Lachin corridor, including threats and atrocities towards Armenians³⁶.

Thus, the debate within Armenia on adjusting regional policies towards the West or leveraging Western support for regional changes is intricately linked to three key security topics in the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process. The corridor issue, demarcation and delimitation challenges, and the complexities surrounding enclaves underscore the delicate balancing act Armenia must perform in its pursuit of geopolitical objectives. All these issues are manipulated by the Azerbaijani side and are used to legitimize its further maximalist approaches and military aspirations towards Armenia. As a result, there are new security and geo-strategic layers in the debates within Armenia on these issues.

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36 "SOS Alert - Artsakh - 2.", Lemkin Institute. September, 2023, [SOS Alert - Artsakh - 2 \(lemkininstitute.com\)](https://www.lemkininstitute.com)

8. A Western Path for changes or Changes for a Western Path? The Need for a Value-based Foreign Policy for Georgia and Armenia

Ivane Abramashvili

October 2023

The geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus has witnessed a significant shift in recent years, with countries reevaluating their foreign policy trajectories and commitments. After wars in Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia are finding themselves at a critical juncture where decisions about aligning with the West are inextricably linked to the pursuit of security, the establishment of lasting peace, and the promotion of sustainable development. This paper delves into the dichotomy between pursuing changes for a Western path and embracing a Western path for changes. By examining the implications of these two approaches, it aims to provide insights into the potential trajectories for security, peace, and development for Georgia and Armenia.

One approach to addressing the challenges faced by Georgia and Armenia is to actively seek a Western path for changes. This entails aligning foreign policy, economic strategies, and security frameworks with Western values and institutions. For

both countries, deepening relations with Western organizations such as the European Union (EU) and NATO can offer a roadmap for transformative change. Historically, nations that have adopted Western democratic norms and economic systems have experienced increased stability and development.

Embracing a Western path for changes can enhance the security landscape of Georgia and Armenia. Closer ties with NATO, for instance, can provide a collective security umbrella, fostering stability and deterrence against external threats. Additionally, cooperation with Western intelligence agencies can contribute to counterterrorism efforts, mitigating security risks in the region.

A Western-oriented approach promotes diplomatic engagement and conflict resolution mechanisms endorsed by the international community. The EU's involvement in peace processes, for instance, can provide mediation platforms and incentives for regional cooperation.

Moreover, shared values with Western partners can facilitate peaceful dialogue and conflict resolution, fostering a climate of stability. Similarly, integration into Western economic frameworks opens up avenues for sustained development. Access to European markets, foreign direct investment, and developmental assistance can catalyze economic growth. Western-oriented reforms in governance and institutions can enhance transparency, reduce corruption, and create an environment conducive to sustained development.

Conversely, an alternative perspective suggests that changes within Georgia and Armenia should precede a commitment to the Western path. This approach advocates for internal reforms, institutional strengthening, and the consolidation of democratic values before pursuing full integration into Western structures. Proponents argue that this strategy ensures a more sustainable and organic transformation, addressing internal challenges before engaging with external alliances.

Implementing comprehensive internal changes can contribute to a more resilient security apparatus. Strengthening domestic institutions, the rule of law, and effective governance can enhance the ability

to respond to security challenges. A stable internal environment is a prerequisite for effective collaboration with Western security partners.

Addressing internal issues, such as minority rights and governance challenges, can build a solid foundation for lasting peace. By fostering social cohesion and inclusivity, the potential for internal conflicts diminishes, contributing to regional stability. This approach emphasizes the importance of resolving existing conflicts before seeking external alliances. Changes for the Western path focus on creating a conducive environment for sustainable development. By prioritizing education, healthcare, and economic reforms, these changes can empower local communities, creating a more robust foundation for economic growth. External partnerships with the West can then become catalysts for accelerated development rather than prerequisites.

Taking the two trajectories into account and realities on the ground, obviously this is something that can be done in parallel, however the question itself implies an answer about the greater design: a value-based foreign policy is the new realism for Armenia and Georgia to survive in long-term as stronger nations.

To unpack the relevance and benefits of value-based foreign policy in the case of Armenia and Georgia, it refers to a diplomatic approach where their actions and decisions in international relations are guided by a set of fundamental values and principles. These values often include respect for human rights, democracy, the rule of law, social justice, and other ethical considerations. The benefits of a value-based foreign policy can be analyzed through various lenses:

- A value-based foreign policy enhances the moral legitimacy of a country's actions in the international arena. Adhering to ethical principles can garner support from the global community and strengthen a nation's standing as a responsible actor in the international system.
- A value-based foreign policy contributes to a country's soft power, which is the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. A nation that upholds values such as democracy and human rights may be more appealing to others, fostering goodwill and cooperation.
- A value-based foreign policy can lead to the diffusion of norms,

spreading certain values across borders. When a country consistently promotes democratic principles or environmental sustainability, for instance, it may inspire other nations to adopt similar practices, contributing to the global promotion of shared values.

- Countries that are perceived as upholding ethical values may enjoy favorable economic relations. Trading partners may prefer engaging with nations that share common values, leading to stronger economic ties and partnerships.
- Emphasizing values such as diplomacy, human rights, and conflict resolution in foreign policy can contribute to stability and conflict prevention. By addressing root causes of instability, a value-based approach may reduce the likelihood of conflicts that could have broader regional or global implications.
- Adhering to values in foreign policy can strengthen a country's legal standing. Upholding human rights and international law can make a nation more credible and respected in multilateral forums, allowing it to participate in shaping global governance structures.

To sum up, a value-based foreign policy offers a long-term framework for both Armenia and Georgia to become part of the Western world. Integration into the cooperative and stable international system will require painful reforms and decisions, however adhering to values and strengthening internal resilience is the new pragmatism for long-term development.

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9. A New Security Architecture for Old Problems? A Fragmented Landscape in Armenia

Anna Gevorgyan-Davtyan

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The security landscape in the South Caucasus, particularly in Armenia, is undergoing significant transformation, marked not by a new security architecture but by the absence of any security architecture. Instead, there has been the intentional destruction of the old security and political frameworks, leading to the emergence of spontaneous and fragmented constructions without a cohesive strategic security plan or implementation. This report highlights the existence of three parallel reality portrayals within Armenia, each contributing to the complex security environment.

Destruction of Old Security Architecture:

The current absence of a security architecture in the South Caucasus is associated with the dismantling of its old framework. The aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, as well as the invasion by Azerbaijan into the territories of Armenia proper in May 2021 and September 2022, and the latest military escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh leading to the ethnic cleansing of the entire Armenian population of the region, have

played a pivotal role in reshaping regional dynamics and challenging established security structures. According to the November 9, 2020 trilateral statement, Russian peacekeepers were responsible for the security of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as for preventing military escalations in the region. Shortly after that statement, however, Azerbaijan started to violate it by gaining by force more and more territories, both in Nagorno-Karabakh and in Armenia proper, by keeping prisoners of war, and by continuing its rhetoric of threatening new escalations and demanding almost the entire Armenian state. These led to growing tensions in the region and a disappointment with both Russian peacekeepers and Russia itself, now seen as a state that does not fulfill its obligations towards its strategic ally. These developments have led to the necessity to internalize not only the conflict resolution but also the overall normalization process of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. In this framework, the mediation attempts of both Brussels and Wash-

ington have been perceived in Armenia as an opportunity to escape from a security trap. As a result, we are witnessing the growing tendency of mutual accusations between Russia and Armenia.

Three Parallel Portrayals of Realities in Armenia: Considering the growing tensions at the discursive level between Armenia and Russia and the growing expectations from Western parties of negotiations, parallel realities of Armenia-Russia and Armenia-the West relations have been created in internal discussions of Armenia.

a. Official Papers Reality: According to official documents, Armenia remains a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and other organizations led by Russia. However, the practical implications of these memberships are subject to scrutiny, with a widening gap between official commitments and effective security guarantees. Armenia has not sent a representative to CSTO since the term of its previous representative expired. Before that, Armenia refused to sign a declaration of the CSTO with the explanation that there is no consensus on its proper wording when referring to

the Azerbaijan's invasion of Armenia proper. Furthermore, Armenia refused to participate in a series of joint drills, meetings, and discussions within the CSTO and CIS. All these, however, did not result in any changes in the series of strategic agreements between Armenia and Russia, as well as between Armenia and the organizations mentioned above. Moreover, some new agreements in the economic field have strengthened further the cooperation between the economies of Armenia and Russia.

b. Armenian Media Reality: The Armenian media portrays a different narrative, projecting Armenia as an integral part of Europe. This alternative reality suggests a desire for closer ties with European institutions, indicating a shift in Armenia's geopolitical orientation. These narratives, circulated both via public and pro-governmental media resources, stress the importance of Government "decisions" to diversify its security field and create closer ties with the EU, its member states, and the USA. In the creation of these narratives, the representatives of expert communities and political circles who frequently meet with Prime Minister Pashinyan frequently have the upper hand. They use the fact of their "advantage" of

having “first-hand information” and often create an atmosphere of exaggerated expectations from the West.

The opposition media, on the other hand, uses the same narratives to explain why the security of Armenia became so vulnerable and why Russia has changed its attitude towards Armenia. These circles backed by the parliamentary opposition blame all the security failures of the state on the pro-western aspirations of the government and pro-democratic features of state policies. For them, it's the West and the government of Armenia that are responsible for losing Russia as a security guarantor of Armenia, and the unwillingness of Armenia to be a security guarantor of Nagorno-Karabakh.

c. Security Gap Reality: Beyond the two portrayals of the current developments mentioned above, a significant security gap exists due to challenging relations between Armenia and Russia, as well as the organizations it is officially a part of. This gap is compounded by the absence of alternative security guarantees from elsewhere, leaving Armenia in a precarious position. Several steps have been taken via the EU to fill the gap: they are important but not suf-

ficient ones. The deployment of the EU civilian mission to the borders of Armenia, as well as the latest decisions to enlarge its resources and to add Canada, coupled with the decisions by France, the US, and Iran to open their consulates in the center of the Syunik region of Armenia, Kapan, are the main features of those steps. The involvement of the US in the negotiation process has been perceived as another restraining factor on military escalation, but these steps failed to prevent the ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh and, since there were no consequences afterward, have shattered the reliability of these factors. Stronger prevention measures must be taken by the West by at least starting discussions of possible individual sanctions on Azerbaijani authorities. The lack of this kind of discussion and the shattered global security system, with the developments in Ukraine, in the Gaza strip, and in Israel only empowers Azerbaijan to implement its military plans for the region.

Management of Expectations: Given the diverse and sometimes conflicting narratives within Armenia, there is an urgent need for an effective management of expectations, particularly concerning relations with Western countries and organizations. Navigating the delicate balance between existing alliances and aspirations for possible European integration requires strategic planning to address the current security vacuum and uncertainties. Armenia and the EU have an unrealized potential to deal within the framework of the SEPA agreement signed by the sides. In this regard, several steps can be implemented to open a wider window of opportunities for the diversification of Armenian political, security, and economic fields. Starting negotiations for a visa liberalization process for its part will send a good message to Armenian society about the changing attitudes of Western countries towards this state with a fragile democracy and a society with anti-Russian sentiments at an all-time high. The economic sphere can also be freed from growing Russian influence by supporting the diversification of the energy sector. In this regard, the discussions on small modular nuclear reactors as well as the bigger investment in the green energy sector have crucial importance. Fur-

thermore, acknowledging the importance of Armenia-Iran relations in the energy field as an alternative to dependence on Russia, is a crucial part of the framework of the North-South corridor and the proper sovereign leverage on the transit route between Azerbaijan and Nakhijevan. Instead of all these important issues, however, the discussions on Armenia-EU relations are overwhelmingly anchored on the false assumptions that all the security problems of the country can be solved immediately if Armenia declares louder that it has European aspirations and has no interest in continuing its relations with Russia. Actions like replying to the International Court of Justice for the punishment of war crimes made by Azerbaijani authorities, the ratification of the Rome statute, as well as the statements confirming the support to Armenia's territorial integrity by the Western authorities, are perceived not as a possibility to tighten relations but as a sign of existing reality. Furthermore, "reality" is referred to as a strong tool for the prevention of any aggression towards Armenia. This notion can evolve into a miscalculation of the security threats and as a result, create a big disappointment with the West and a new risk of having more Russia involvement in the region and Armenia.

Thus, the South Caucasus, particularly Armenia, is experiencing a nuanced and multifaceted security landscape characterized by the destruction of the old architecture, the emergence of parallel assumptions of realities, and a notable gap in security guarantees. Proactive management of expectations and strategic planning, as well as stronger support from Western countries, are essential for Armenia to navigate this complex environment and address the challenges posed by evolving geopolitical dynamics.

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10. A brief overview of the political and security issues of the South Caucasus: a view from Tbilisi

David Bragvadze

October 2023

“May you live in interesting times” – if this Chinese curse has ever applied to someone, we can surely say that the South Caucasus nations are among them.

After the Karabakh war in 2020, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the tragic events in Karabakh again in September 2023, the situation in our region is changing, and it is not yet clear what the final result will be.

Regarding Azerbaijan, everything seems to be clear. Aliyev’s regime was able to restore territorial integrity fully and leave Karabakh with neither a separate political status nor any Armenians at all. This in itself is a tragic situation and does not reflect positively on the reputation of Azerbaijan. However, within the country these results were considered a victory, which no one could have imagined until recently.

It is important to note that regardless of any end to the conflict, the Armenians living in Karabakh deserved to live in their homeland. Un-

fortunately, today we see Artsakh (Nagorny Karabakh) without an Armenian population, which has nothing to do with justice.

Even though Aliyev’s regime officially gave them security guarantees, the People of Artsakh couldn’t live under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan, especially in the absence of a political status for their territory.

Today, Azerbaijan is experiencing the euphoria of triumph, although emotions are much more measured than in November 2020.

According to the general assessment, Aliyev’s regime has received a practically eternal guarantee of being in power. He restored the territorial integrity of the country and forced Armenia to recognize the new reality of Karabakh without conflict and without an Armenian population. He has the most powerful army in the South Caucasus, the full support of the population, is deepening economic relations with the West, and starting new energy and infrastructure projects.

However, I believe that the government of Azerbaijan may face new challenges in the future. For decades, the regime has stood for the idea of returning Karabakh. Achieving this will work for a while, but every authoritarian regime needs an idea to get the population to tolerate its rule. What new idea could have an effect like Karabakh had? It's hard for me to imagine.

From the Georgian perspective, the current situation in Armenia is much more complicated, although not all Georgians see the future of their neighboring country similarly. According to my observations, it is widely believed that the final settlement of the Karabakh issue frees Armenia from a great burden and opens up new development opportunities. This opinion is supported by the recent steps taken by the Armenian authorities and the statements of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Many people in Georgia want to see Armenia completely freed from dependence on Russia.

On the other hand, the old and new challenges facing Armenia remain beyond the attention of a large part of the Georgian society. Considering such a solution to the Karabakh issue only in a positive light is quite mimetic. It certainly creates new

opportunities, but it also creates new problems. More than a hundred thousand refugees, who will become participants in the political life of the Republic of Armenia, will most likely not be kind to the current government. In my opinion, Armenia may face a new political crisis, whose result will be crucial for the country's future.

Like a large part of the Georgian society, I am a warm supporter of the democratic development of Armenia. This is especially important at a time when all the countries around us are strongly authoritarian and Georgian democracy itself is not in the best shape.

I strongly believe that to save Armenian democracy, it is necessary to save the current government of Armenia once again. Unfortunately, at this stage, there is no real democratic alternative to Pashinyan.

However, there are a multitude of challenges to this: the anger of a large part of the Armenian population towards the current government, disappointment due to the insufficient pace of reforms, the presence of the Russian military base in Gyumri, the FSB forces on the borders of Armenia, Russia's unfavorable attitude towards the

current government and Armenian democracy in general, and the economic dependence of Armenia on Russia and others.

At the same time, despite the conclusion of the Karabakh conflict and the steps taken by the Armenian authorities, threats from Azerbaijan have not completely disappeared. To me, the widespread opinion that Azerbaijan could occupy the southern part of Armenia to develop the Zangezur corridor seems too conspiratorial. Nevertheless, this danger cannot be completely excluded. Azerbaijan is much stronger from a military point of view and its appetite could increase, therefore Armenia should be ready for a threat from this direction.

In such a situation, it is difficult for me to say what choice the people of Armenia will make. However, I would cautiously assume that Pashinyan has a better chance of survival now than in 2021.

Georgia's position in the confrontation of its South Caucasian neighbors is traditionally moderate and neutral. The only thing that the government of Georgia does is often host the leaders of both countries and express their readiness to mediate in the negotiations between

them. This idea is acceptable for Azerbaijan, but not acceptable for Armenia. This is understandable because the mediator should at least be stronger than the conflicting sides and Georgia today is not stronger than Azerbaijan, which is a difficult situation for a negotiator.

In the current situation, the main problem of Georgia is the current government. From this point of view, Georgian democracy looks much worse than Armenian democracy. Tbilisi's moderate policy towards Russia is increasingly resembling capitulation. Georgia is waiting for the EU to grant it candidate country status, which it should have received much earlier, but the Georgian government is in confrontation with the European Union, Ukraine, the United States, and the entire Western world. The government of Georgia simply fails to fulfill the 12 recommendations necessary to get the candidate status and instead talks to the European Union in the language of blackmail.

This happens at a time when the Georgian government no longer supports resolutions against Russia at the international level. This month, the Georgian government did not support the PACE resolution, in which Russia is referred to

as a terrorist state. The Parliament of Georgia refused to adopt a resolution condemning the relocation of the Russian Black Sea Fleet to the occupied territories of Georgia, to the Black Sea port of Ochamchire in Abkhazia, and limited itself only to a formal statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It is not yet known when Russia will be able to bring its warships to Ochamchire because the infrastructure on the ground does not allow it, but the government's attitude towards the issue cannot withstand criticism. This happens when the representatives of the Ukrainian government, including President Zelensky, openly declare that they are ready to attack the Russian Black Sea Fleet anywhere, including the occupied territories of Georgia. If Ukrainian drones attack the Russian ships stationed in Ochamchire, I am almost completely sure that this will be followed by much harsher assessments from the Georgian authorities.

Recently it was reported that the Russian military has started patrolling one of the churches in territory controlled by the Georgian government. The government did not respond to this report and representatives of the church said that this did not happen and that the

Russians have quite friendly relations with them.

Georgian authorities have stopped the construction of the Anaklia deep-sea port, a project of strategic, economic, and national security importance for the country.

The prime minister of a state awaiting the status of an EU candidate country has signed a strategic partnership agreement with China, which reactivated the issue of the construction of Anaklia port, but this time with Chinese investments. By the way, Aliyev, who recently visited Georgia, also expressed his desire to join this project. Also, Tbilisi's new airport will likely be built with Chinese investment, which also raises many security questions, as it is located very close to the strategically important Vaziani military base and training ground.

The government of Georgia waits for the status of a candidate for the European Union but is practically ignored by the same European Union. The only European leader with whom Gharibashvili has gotten close to is Victor Orban, who recently visited Georgia. During this visit, the most important thing the parties agreed on was the issue of cooperation in "family affairs".

The Georgian authorities have so far refrained from participating in the 3+3 format, but despite this, Tbilisi's recent positions have been constantly praised by the likes of Putin, Lavrov, and Margarita Simonian.

Georgia faces important elections to be held in a year. Its results can be influenced by many factors, including any decision by the European Union, although at this stage the situation is not so favorable. According to the latest surveys, only three parties can overcome the 5 percent threshold: Georgian Dream, National Movement, and former Prime Minister Gakharia's party. The government is what it is; the National Movement is in a deep crisis mostly because of the completely inadequate behavior of its leader; nobody knows what Gakharia's positions will be after the elections.

In general, the entire Georgian political class is in a deep crisis and completely unqualified for the challenges ahead, both in the government and in the opposition since it lacks both ideas and the support of the population.

There is not much to be optimistic about in such a situation. However, the European Commission is ex-

pected to make a political decision and recommend the granting of candidate status to Georgia. This decision will be important for Armenia as well because, without Georgia's European future, it is impossible to turn Armenia's foreign policy towards the West. Georgia and Armenia's interests are the same in the current situation: to get closer to the West and strengthen security as much as possible. From Tbilisi, it seems that the government of Armenia is doing more than the government of Georgia to achieve these goals, even though Georgia's starting conditions are incomparably better.

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11. The Global War(m)ning

Hayk Toroyan

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If you are looking for proof of global warming, look no further than the melting of the frozen conflicts across the world in the last few years. One must open this article with an attempt at a joke considering the times and places we live in. While Global warming is hardly the reason for the recent emergence and heating of the protracted, so-called “frozen conflicts” (although the fight for water resources is a reason that should be investigated), it is evident that the world in the last decade became more violent and wars erupted almost everywhere.

Through this paper I will try to investigate the reasons behind these recent wars and find trends that brought the world to this stage. I would argue that there are two main reasons for the current atrocities taking place around the world. Firstly, the world geopolitical order as we know it is changing rapidly and everyone is trying to find their place in this brave new world and understand with whom they should align. Secondly, the feeling of impunity and impotence of the international community to act beyond

issuing statements and expressing concerns has led to a world where the strong devour the weak without punishment.

Four seasons of Geopolitics

Let's start with the geopolitical order. According to the Strauss-Howe Generational theory, the US and Western world relive the same history or shall I say cycle of history roughly every 80-100 years. The theory insists that every generation and cycle has its own four phases, each lasting around 20-25 years. The phases of the cycle are: 1) **the High** – where the world recovers from crisis and goes upwards 2) **the Awakening** – where the world enters the phase of creation and new ideas 3) **the Unraveling** – where people become more individual and distant and finally 4) **the Crisis** – I guess this one needs no explanation.

I would argue that these phases are now relevant not only for the US and West but for the whole world since globalization has led to a very interconnected and intertwined world. Now, let's put the theory into practice. I will analyze

the four phases from the perspective of a person who lives in Armenia and sees the world from the suburbs of Yerevan.

The High of the current world started after the Second World War (the previous crisis), when everything was being rebuilt and all the economies were thriving including the USSR's, which was rebuilding its shattered infrastructure and economy. The Awakening phase started somewhere after the death of Stalin and the resignation of Nikita Khrushchev. An obvious example of the Awakening in the South Caucasus was the beginning of the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. The unraveling phase started around Perestroika, when the USSR's nations and ethnicities started to distance themselves from each other, enforcing their identities and highlighting differences among each other. Funnily enough, however, many conflicts were indeed frozen and suppressed during the Cold War, especially in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. While there were no sustainable solutions offered, at least the central governments were strong enough to suppress nationalistic feelings and create a system where war was not beneficial for any side. The world, or at least

most of it, was clearly divided between the two main superpowers – the USA and the USSR. Both had their zones of influence which the other could not easily penetrate.

In the middle of the unraveling phase the Soviet Union ceased to exist. The collapse of the USSR led to the destruction of its locally created systems that had been suppressing internal conflicts, thus most of the existing and frozen conflicts in former Soviet territory ignited in wars and chaos. Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan erupted in violent conflicts which, though fighting stopped after several years, still had no sustainable solutions. Similar events happened in the former Yugoslavia and other parts of the world. Everywhere from Northern Ireland to Indonesia was in flames with violence becoming their main form of resolution.

Due to the fall of Communism and Russian weakness, there was no force counterbalancing the United States. Thus, the US seemed to start to solve issues from West to East by its own parameters, starting with the Good Friday Agreement in Belfast and continuing with assisting Kosovo to get its independence, to “dealing” with Saddam Hussain, and then trying assert its influence

in ex-Soviet territories. However, slowly but surely, Russia started to gain its power back and affect those conflicts that Moscow used to have influence in. For example, it is evident in the Nagorno-Karabakh case, where the final US-brokered solution discussed in Key West was so close in 1998 and 2001, but due to Russian “promises” (mainly threats) the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides did not agree to sign the final agreements.

When Russia regained its influence back in the post-Soviet space it was already too late for the West to try to address any conflicts, thus the conflicts froze again, but not for long. The Russian comeback and recovery marked the end of the Unraveling phase. And thus, the Crisis phase started. I’d argue that the Crisis phase started in 2008 with the peak of the economic crisis in the world and the Russian invasion of Georgia the same year. The invasion had a major influence in the post-Soviet space, it became obvious that in this space, conflicts can only be solved by force and that some regional powers, including Azerbaijan, realized that it was time to prepare for military solutions. After that, the world watched silently as Crimea was annexed and war broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh

in 2020. The Ukraine war finally woke up the West to the new realities in the world. All these events, including the recent military actions between Israel and Palestine and China’s continuous preparation for a possible invasion of Taiwan are obvious evidence of the worldwide Crisis phase, which, considering the theory, will end around 2027-2028 and the world will restart the history cycle with a new High phase.

Rose Colored Glasses and Red Flags

Before going into the geopolitical shifts and a theoretical vision of the future, I’d like to address another highly important reason of the worldwide firestorm – Impunity. After the conflicts in the post-Soviet space and ex-Yugoslavia were frozen and or “solved,” the West and the EU relaxed a bit. Most of the western experts and politicians I spoke with before the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh explained to me that the world had entered a stage where countries no longer go to war with each other and that the main conflicts that still exist in the world are internal ones rather than between states. Borders were set and major inter-state conflicts were being addressed. Thus, the EU and international organizations prepared for the “solution” of inter-

nal conflicts only through dialogue and communication, and through inclusive peace and hybridity (yet another fancy word describing the academic approach). When I would cite the 2008 war against Georgia, most of these experts called it an exception rather than the rule.

However, for me it was the start of the active phase of changes, where conflicts are going back to forceful solutions. Meanwhile, the EU wore its rose-colored glasses and pretended that not much is happening and continued its cooperation with Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. Cooperation was highlighted by the gas pipeline agreements: Northern Stream 2 with Russia, TANAP with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The EU tried to solve its energy problems while neglecting these countries' leaderships. Russia used the EU's dependence on its gas and oil to invade Crimea, while Azerbaijan used the same to start a full offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. What started with a Russian attack on Georgia during the Olympic Games (breaching a century-old tradition of keeping the peace during the Games) continued with Crimea, Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, etc. These conflicts should have awakened the EU and the global West from its slumber

and made them call things by their real names. However, the West did not act against the aggressors and instead usually called for both sides to stop fighting and released statements of deep concerns. The problem with rose-colored glasses is that all the red flags look like just flags to you (that is a quote I stole from my favorite cartoon); the EU chose to ignore those red flags until the War in Ukraine. The first bombs that were dropped on Ukraine shattered the rose-colored glasses of the West and the EU. The latter understood that they were played by their "partners" in a game they were not ready for. The thinking that conflicts are internal and are not between states in the 21st century collapsed in a day. The impunity and lack of punishment against Russia and against Azerbaijan led to warfare in different spots around the world.

Combining the current ongoing wars and the awakening of the West from its "beauty sleep," we can conclude that the world is on the verge of change. All the wars raging now around the world, the very probable confrontation between China and the US, and between Israel and the Arab world will end in one way or another. Subsequently, in the next five years the world will reshape itself

as new walls, new zones of influence, and trenches will be created. The war among giants will hurt the smaller countries which are facing a crucial dilemma – who to align with.

This new reality will divide the world like the Berlin wall divided it back in the day. The main problem now is to understand which side you are on now, on which side of the wall you will be as a country. Obviously, I cannot speak for the other countries, but I think I can say that Armenia has chosen its path towards democracy, human rights, and towards the Global West. The country and mainly the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh were severely punished for their choice by the Russian-Azerbaijani-Turkish ad hoc alliance. Currently, Yerevan finds itself in a difficult situation, on one hand Armenia wants to be the part of the Western world, however the problems in the South Caucasus are still solved using force rather than the rule of law. The military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh and the mass exodus of Armenians from the region is a further proof of this theory.

Armenia, which finds itself in a pickle between West, Russia, and the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance is now seeking peace with Azerbaijan and normalization of its relations with

Turkey. The main reason behind this is not only a peaceful future, but also a sustainable one based on democratic values, human rights, and sovereignty. It became obvious that Russia – “the guarantor of peace” in the South Caucasus – is no longer willing to assist Yerevan with its security. Meanwhile, the West is eager to help with dialogue and facilitation between Yerevan and Baku but is not ready to intervene if there is a new war between the countries and it is highly doubtful that the next military action of Baku against Armenia will receive any attention beyond concerns and statements.

The end of the Crisis phase, as mentioned above, will shape the new Wall, most probably this Wall will go through the South Caucasus. One question remains open though, which side of the wall the three countries of the region will stay on; on one side we would have the global West and on the other the “Red flags” Russian-Chinese alliance. It is of outmost importance for all the South Caucasus countries to set aside their differences and agree on a sustainable future. If the region does not agree on one vision of the future, then it will always be torn apart by different superpowers that will come and go throughout

the different phases of the historical cycle and everything will repeat itself every 80 years or so.

In conclusion, it is crucial for Armenia to sign a dignified and sustainable peace agreement with Baku and normalize its relations with Ankara. Georgia can play a massive role in facilitating and mediating this process, especially with Ankara, as there are platforms currently addressing the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace talks. If that happens it might provide an opportunity for the 3rd Republic of Armenia to continue and for the South Caucasus to enter the High phase. If no peace agreement is reached, I predict that there will be another attack on Armenian sovereign territory from Azerbaijan with the aim to take over the southern region of Armenia (Syunik) and connect Azerbaijan to Nakhijevan and Turkey. I do not believe that Baku wants to do this; however it might be forced to do so by the bigger players who divide the world now and use smaller actors as tools. Thus, we go back to the essential question of which side would South Caucasus align with. The side that sees no military solutions and is ready to cooperate for a sustainable future or the side that sees war as a means to “solve” problems. And the region then will decide if its destiny is warming or warning.

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