

Extended European Security Complex and the South Caucasus: the US policy approaches

Tigran Yepremyan

YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY, YSU AMERICAN STUDIES CENTER, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY,
EMAIL: TIGRAN.YEPREMYAN@YSU.AM, TYEPREMY@ASU.EDU, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0619-913X

Abstract

This paper analyses the US's strategic interests and policy approaches towards the South Caucasus vis-a-vis competing geopolitical paradigms. It concerns the security challenges for the region, which arise from contradictions between integration, disintegration, and sovereignty in the shared neighbourhood of the European Union (EU) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The geopolitical, geo-economic and security interests of the United States, Russia, the European Union, Turkey, and Iran are all engaged in the South Caucasus, here is where their security interests intersect. The paper utilizes the Regional Security Complex Theory. From this perspective, the strategic fulcrum of regional security lies in the regions and powers. Therefore, the South Caucasus has an ever-increasing importance for the US interests both as a gateway to Eurasia and as the eastern edge of Europe. Thus, within the context of the largest competing alternatives of the geopolitics and geo-economics of the EU, the Russia-led EAEU, China's Belt and Road and India's North-South Corridor – the South Caucasus, an integral of European super-complex, appears as an insulator and corridor between the West and the East, the North and the South. Hence, the US policies have been aimed at making the South Caucasus an eastern extension of the enlarged European regional security complex.

Key words: European Security Complex, United States, South Caucasus, Russia, EU, geopolitics.

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Introduction

For millennia, the South Caucasus had made up the frontier between the Western and Eastern civilizations. The process of exchanging technologies, economic goods, arts, cultural and civilizational values as well as trade was taking place across this frontier. The aboriginal nations, including Armenia and Georgia, while being inherently western type societies have been simultaneously intensifying global processes between different civilizations (Stepanyan Minasyan 2013, 14). Although the current Western scholarly and political discourse continues to signify the South Caucasus as a gateway to essential hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian and Central Eurasia, the geostrategic location of this geographic region on the crossroads of East-West and North-South made it crucial far before the industrial revolution and oil-age and it will remain so in the post-industrial world and after the oil-age. Presently, the South Caucasus is considered an important key in diversification of sources of European energy (Cornell Starr Tsereteli 2015, 13-17).

The geopolitical and security literature on the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood including the South Caucasus deals with the reason under which the US aspires extension of the Euro-Atlantic structures, the EU engages in the development of the association with countries in its immediate neighbourhood and Russia in its "near abroad". Hence, ongoing *securitization* processes on both sides aim for establishing a system of 'associated' states around their periphery. In this regard, the area that may be called a 'New Eastern Europe' encompasses six countries (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus) has vital importance for both sides. As Buzan and Waever specify, the region contains two different security sub-complexes: the western group of states (Ukraine Moldova Belarus) and the Caucasus (as a mini-complex). For most of the states, security concerns relate mainly to other states in the sub-complex plus Russia and in the case of Armenia plus Turkey (Buzan Waever 2003, 397-423). Furthermore, there is a wide range of conflicts throughout the region that helps Russia to manage the sovereignty of these states (Cornell 2005, 394-399).

As Buzan and Waever define, a regional security complex (RSC) is "a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another" (Buzan Waever 2003, 44). The central idea is that an essential portion of the securitization and de-securitization processes in the international system is manifested in regional clusters. Thus, RSCs are durable substructures with a strong geographical component and have both internal structures and external frontiers that are essential to monitor continuity and change and to distinguish significant change from less important events. The essential structure of a RSC embodies four variables including its boundary, anarchic structure, the polarity of the distribution of power, and social construction of the patterns of amity and enmity. Buzan and Waever outline three possible evolutions to a RSC in time: preservation of the status quo; internal transformation within the complex and changes to the anarchic structure or polarity on the grounds of regional integration or disintegration, conquest, or changes to the dominant patterns of amity/enmity because of ideological shifts and regime changes; and external transformation by expansion or shrinks of the outer boundary, changing the membership of the RSC and transforming its essential structure. This happens when two RSCs merge or two RSCs split out from one (Buzan Waever 2003, 53). A merger of two RSCs might happen if a geo-economically and geopolitically significant grand infrastructure be in place extending the EU-Europe security complex towards the South Caucasus via deeper political-economic association and connecting the Persian Gulf to the Black sea and Europe through Iran-Armenia-Georgia, so, that the US becomes dramatically concerned with the security processes in the South Caucasus, as it is in the mainland Europe and the Persian Gulf.

Potentially, a possible success in the US-Iran rapprochement can appear as a game-changing paradigm in the South Caucasus and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, as Iranian gas supplies will significantly diminish the EU's geopolitical dependence on Russia. In this context, the American and European interests are against dividing lines and Turkish and Russian spheres of influence. So, the US will want to facilitate the EU-Georgia-Armenia-Iran transport corridor connecting India and the American-dominated Persian Gulf security region to the EU via the Black Sea. Accordingly, the South Caucasus plus Iran is a vital geopolitical pivot for both the US and EU and the Russia-Led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Yepremyan 2017, 89-108).

In recent years, the enlargement of the EAEU and the Union State has become the prevailing discourse in Russia. President Putin's Eurasian idea is not only about the reintegration of post-soviet states, but also engagement in the "normative rivalry" with the West, the US, and the EU. The latter has exclusively exercised the normative power in the "shared neighbourhood" before (Dragneva Wolczuk 2012, 1-16). In December 2016, the Russian foreign policy marked a conceptual shift towards considering the enlargement of the EAEU and the integration of new states as the key task of its regional priorities stating that "the EAEU is able to play an important role in the harmonization of integration processes in the European and Eurasian regions" (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2016). Hence, the EU's and Russia's shared neighbourhood is gaining an increasing importance for the US and the EU for various reasons, one of which, as Arkady Moshes argues, is that "the success or failure of the transformation here will seriously affect the future of Russia" (Moshes 2006, 4-14). In this context, the systemic transformation in the 'New Eastern

Europe' is seen as a necessary condition for building a European community without divisions (Brzezinski 2004, 66-96). Moreover, the South Caucasus is the most direct link in the re-emergence of land-based trans-Eurasian trade corridors that connect China and India with Europe. Hence, emerging new infrastructure, roads and railways will come together in the South Caucasus making it a continental strait (Cornell Starr Tsereteli 2015, 17).

The prevailing uncertainty among the South Caucasus countries affirms both US's/EU's and Russia's changing priorities and strategies on regional integration issues and reasserts changing paradigms in the integration strategies in the region. Hence, the new game-changing initiatives of global and regional actors need to be contextualized to present the future of extension of the European security complex in general, and the regional security configuration in particular. Thus, the paper focuses very specifically on the geopolitical and geo-economic dimensions of the US regional strategies and the paths for extension of the European security complex towards the South Caucasus.

European Security Complex and the South Caucasus

The disintegration of the Soviet Union has not only resulted in the removal of a superpower but also created a new RSC. The regional and global levels play into each other in both Europe and the post-Soviet complex, as the regional dynamic is responsible for the reproduction of a great power. Despite the preservation of the Cold War time institutions, NATO and OSCE, connecting the United States and Europe, and the continued significance of the US in the European security architecture, Europe once again has its own distinctive regional security dynamics. After the end of bipolarity, among general optimism, there were expectancies of a large Pan-European RSC comprising Russia and the former Soviet space. The visions for OSCE as Pan-European collective security system were quite realistic, however the newly established organizations and informal relations together with OSCE and Council of Europe created subsystems of overlapping authority and multiple loyalty, and from around 1993 an EU-centred RSC and a Russia-centred CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) complex has emerged (Buzan Waever 2003, 453).

During the first two decades since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus at the global level was defined first foremost by the pattern of US-Russia competitive relations. The competition for influence in the post-Soviet space entered into a new stage with the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP), Russia's Eurasian, and China's Belt and Road initiatives. Initially, Russia's foreign policy strategy was aimed at reorganizing its "Near Abroad" with the CIS and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). These initiatives faced the challenge of the eastward enlargement of NATO through the Partnership for Peace and the US-supported GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) initiatives (Derghoukassian 2006, 1-18). As Buzan and Waever observed, the South Caucasus is "a complicated mini-complex," as it retains its "historical insulator functions", while due to remaining Russian influence "the region continues to be a subcomplex within the post-Soviet RSC". Its *sui generis* status as sub-complex is characterized by a strong Russian component of the main dynamics interlinking the region together, and the deficiency of active triangular relations among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. While the region continues to be contested, an impulse is given towards a possible scenario of "a more fully insulating mini-complex" beyond the post-Soviet RSC by the competing paradigms of European and Eurasian geopolitics involving both regional states and external powers (Buzan Waever 2003, 423).

A reason behind the South Caucasus being a complicated mini-complex is that the administrative borders of the former Soviet Union, drawn by the political expediency of Bolsheviks and not by historical consolidation and international legal consensus, suddenly became international borders. Thus, the conflicts in the South Caucasus highlighted the standing dilemma of the right to self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity, and final solutions to the conflicts are virtually captives of this dilemma (Derghoukassian 2006, 1-18).

According to Robert Kaplan, since the world is very diverse and historical experiences are so different, the foreign and security policy of any US administration should be about expanding the frontiers of historic

liberalism (Kaplan 2003, 63-64). Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth indicate, that “The United States’ globe-girdling grand strategy is the devil we know... A world with a disengaged United States is the devil we don’t know... How would the world work without an engaged, liberal leading power?” (Brooks Ikenberry Wohlforth 2012, 10). Concerning the liberal problem in American foreign and security policy, Kaplan highlights the limitations of the use of power, “In foreign policy all moral questions are ultimately questions of power... In the early and mid-1990s, there were four large-scale, ethnic killings going on in the former communist Europe, in Abkhazia, Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Bosnia. It was only in Bosnia that the West took action... Why was that? Because of questions of power that had nothing to do with morality... If any imperial enterprise is to be successful, it has to recognize limits” (Kaplan 2003, 63-64). Kaplan explains, that the ethnic cleansings and conflicts in the South Caucasus, although destabilizing for the region, were not threatening to destabilize the security complex in the EU-Europe, did not result in substantial refugee flows to the EU-Europe, and were not questioning the NATO and the EU enlargement at the time (Kaplan 2003, 63-64). In Mearsheimer’s view, America should put an end to its pursuit of global dominance and go back to the strategy of offshore balancing (Mearsheimer 2011, 16-34). According to Mearsheimer, “Predicated on the belief that there are three regions of the world that are strategically important to the United States – Europe, Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf – it sees the United States’ principle goal as making sure no country dominates any of these areas as it dominates the Western Hemisphere” (Mearsheimer 2011, 18). So, one can indicate, that the South Caucasus as a link between the Persian Gulf and Europe has strategic importance in this regard.

From the American perspective, the South Caucasus security region has been considered the most unstable in the post-Soviet space in terms of the number, intensity, and length of armed conflicts. The states in this security mini-complex have had deep security concerns about the roles of neighbouring regional powers including Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The United States and the EU and its major power members have pursued differing interests and policies toward Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. The US developed a value-based friendship with Armenia, interest-based (counterterrorism and energy spheres) partnership with Azerbaijan, and strategic partnership with Georgia, which has antagonistic relations with Russia. Meanwhile Russia continues to view the region as its traditional sphere of influence and holds a military base in Armenia, which is in the CSTO and EAEU. Besides, Moscow simultaneously developed a strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, which has antagonistic relations with its CSTO ally Armenia. Turkey is allied with Azerbaijan based on common ethnic ties and ideas of Pan-Turkism, while the Iranian strategy towards the South Caucasus is based on pragmatism. France has special relations with Armenia, while the EU is concerned with instability in what it views as the Eastern corner of Europe (CRS 2010).

The South Caucasus mini-complex is standard RSC and is largely Westphalian in nature and anarchic in structure, with military-political security agenda. In standard complexes, polarity is defined wholly by regional powers such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Since the 2020 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the South Caucasus mini-complex is increasingly becoming multipolar with the engagement of adjacent regional powers, who formerly were considered outside powers and were components of other complexes. While the Post-Soviet complex at large continues to be a centred RSC with Russia as the only great power (Buzan Waever 2003, 55).

In the post-soviet space, Russia seeks to reinforce a unipolar, centred complex through the Eurasian integration project, for in case of failing in this endeavour it risks declining to a regional power status. In the post-Soviet space, in addition to the problems of Russian general development, there are distinct security dynamics in the different areas - the western group of states, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia (Buzan Waever 2003, 454-455).

To a certain extent, the US policy has tended to view the South Caucasus as a gateway to Central Asia partly as a result of the operation in Afghanistan, as the area was used for air transit of American and NATO Europe based forces, partly because of the US policy focused on westward oil and gas transit routes from the Caspian and Central Asia. Notwithstanding this rationale, in 2005 the US State Department re-assigned “responsibility for the Central Asian states to the Bureau for South Asian Affairs”, keeping the South Caucasus within the Bureau for European and Eurasian Affairs. Moreover, the US military operational planning also

divided these regions, leaving the South Caucasus in the sphere of USEUCOM responsibility, which covers Europe (CRS 2010, 32).

What makes the South Caucasus an '*Intermarium*' between the Black and Caspian seas, a strategically key region to the United States, is the very point of access to Central Eurasia, the location of which makes access for sea powers difficult. Due to the current regional alignments, the American road into the Caspian Sea and Central Asia passes through the Black Sea, Turkey, and the South Caucasus. Hence, Washington "pushed for the creation of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline" (Cornell 2005, 379). However, the geostrategic importance of the South Caucasus is potentially much higher for the US and the EU in the context of the emerging North-South Transport Corridor connecting Europe to India through Iran (Tashjian 2021). From the Iranian perspective, the problem of oil and gas pipelines to Europe becomes crucially important for overcoming its isolation and economic development. From the Armenian perspective, the involvement in international transport infrastructure and transit pipeline projects is crucially important to safeguard its sovereignty and economic security.

The EU-South Caucasus collaboration and joint action forums at the regional level include arrangements such as the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA). The EU's TRACECA initiative communicates the South Caucasus the role it merits (Cornell Starr Tsereteli 2015, 47). The TRACECA initiative, endorsed by the US, was developed from oil and gas westward export projects. Hence, the US regional policy has gone beyond energy resources elaborating into a wider vision of regional geo-economics and a communications system from Central Asia to Europe across the South Caucasus. Here is where the Russian national interests clash with the US regional policies. The US has been trying to prevent Russia from re-establishing or keeping its hegemony over Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Former-Soviet Eastern European republics (Cornell 2005, 370-371). However, TRACECA's focus has only been about developing the East-West transport corridor and has never been extended to embrace the North-South transport corridor expanding the European trade outreach to Iran and India.

The US presence in the Persian Gulf, a vital geostrategic region for the American national security interests, contributes to the value of the South Caucasus as a strategic crossroad. The United States viewed the South Caucasus as a gateway to Central Asia. Here, Azerbaijan appeared as a state whose co-operation has been important for the US in its Afghanistani operation (Cornell Helsinki Monitor 2005, 115-116). However, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan significantly diminishes the strategic importance of Azerbaijan for the United States. It could be argued that the US-Iran possible rapprochement will increase the strategic value of Armenia and Georgia both for the US and the EU. Such a scenario will further increase the role of the South Caucasus in the US national security.

Relying on historical, geopolitical and cultural criteria Armenia and Georgia are European nations, and their approximation with the European structures is not only a matter of civilizational identity, but also a valid paradigm for small states, whose foreign policy is centred on overcoming the effects of smallness and/or isolation. Based on the aforementioned factors and shared civilizational identity, the European community also considers Armenia and Georgia a part of Europe. Thereby, these shared perceptions shift and extend the European geographical and regional security boundaries towards the civilizational frontiers comprising Armenia, which at one point might enable it to escape its geopolitical entrapment (Mirzoyan 2010, 174).

The Caucasus, integrated into the Russia-centred security complex, in some respects plays a role of an insulator towards the Middle East, China, Turkey, Iran, and South Asia. The EU-Russia contested neighbourhood widely comprises the EaP area, six countries, four of which – Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – are closer to the EU, than the two others Belarus and Azerbaijan. Russia is concerned over the loss of influence and strategic presence in its "near abroad", while the EU is increasing its presence in its Eastern Neighbourhood with deep approximation and active integration policies with at least three EaP countries. Kremlin has perceived the EU's EaP initiative as a constraint to its interests and designs in the region. The rivalry between the West and Russia for the "contested neighbourhood" reached its apogee over Ukraine. Armenia with its unique position in the contested neighbourhood with its "both... and"

approach, driven by its specific national security interests, found itself in a complex web of overlapping authorities and multiple loyalties (Yepremyan 2018, 227-241). As in sector-specific developments, the EU's and Russia's regional integration "policies camouflage the complex and multiple cross-cutting influences" exerted on the states of their shared neighbourhood. Thus, as Ademmer, Delcour and Wolczuk put it, "The "contested neighbourhood" consists of states with limited capacity to steer and regulate domestically and a fusion of political and economic actors, both of which substantially shape the neighbours' receptivity to EU and Russian influences" (Ademmer Delcour Wolczuk 2016, 2). So, the main problem in the post-Soviet RSC, as formulated by Buzan and Waever, is "whether countries will drift off one by one, or whether Russia will manage to integrate the region as a centred RSC. This will crucially influence the role Russia can play outside the region. In EU-Europe, the question is about the internal and external consequences of integration, in CIS-Europe about the internal and external consequences of disintegration" (Buzan Waever 2003, 454-455).

As the United States transformed dramatically when it expanded westward integrating the lands up to the Pacific, Europe has been dramatically changing due to the EU enlargement eastward integrating post-communist countries of Eastern Europe (Kaplan 2003, 65-66). This new part of Europe brought with it entirely different security concerns, historical and cultural experiences, accordingly, it expanded the European security complex.

Hence, the EU enlargement in the 1990s and 2000s resulted in the emergence of a new contested neighbourhood between the West and Russia, a 'New Eastern Europe' in the post-Soviet space. This area, which Russia considers its 'near abroad', the EU with its EaP initiative backed by the US has been trying to organize a ground for potential eastward enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic community, meanwhile, overcoming the insecurity concerns by trying to push and extend its security frontiers further from the EU-Europe. Europe will change as it expands eastward, perhaps, integrating some of the countries of EaP into the EU, and accordingly into the EU-Europe RSC and European security architecture. One can indicate that the extension of the European security complex towards the South Caucasus can happen in parallel with regional transformation and approximation with the Western structures.

American policy approaches towards the South Caucasus

The US policy towards the South Caucasus has been shaped by an approach derived from the same principles Washington utilized in other parts of the post-Soviet space. Undoubtedly, the South Caucasus mattered to the US, but mostly as a part of a wider geopolitical puzzle, especially when it comes to Russia's Eurasian project and its ambitions in its near abroad (Rumer Sokolsky Stronski 2017, 10). Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the American policy towards the South Caucasus has gone through several phases. The region has become increasingly complex, due to the erosion of the post-Cold War European security order in the wake of wars in Georgia and eastern Ukraine, and the recent 2020 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh, and Turkey's active interference in it.

Since the mid-1990s, the United States has been allocating increasing strategic significance on energy supplies from the Caspian. The Clinton administration backed the construction plans of east-west oil and gas pipelines bypassing Russia and Iran. Under the Bush administration, the US National Security Strategy of 2006 have also given special significance to the Caspian region suppliers in strengthening of the American energy security. The Obama administration continued to support the "Southern Corridor" initiative for the transit pipelines of oil and gas from Central Asia to Europe via the South Caucasus and Turkey bypassing Russia and Iran (CRS 2010, 2).

In the context of regional geo-economics, the US policy was focused on the building of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline linking Azerbaijan to the Mediterranean coast of Turkey through Georgia. This has been presented as a major achievement of US regional policy (Cornell Helsinki Monitor 2005, 112). However, after the pipeline became operational, the US started disengaging from its leading role in regional energy politics (Cornell Starr Tsereteli 2015, 13-27).

The US policy shifted into a new phase with the 2003 Georgian Rose Revolution, which raised hopes for the extension of Euro-Atlantic institutions further to the South Caucasus. Tbilisi made its intention clear on the Euro-Atlantic integration path, the White House exercised its active support, as democracy promotion was a top priority of the American foreign policy under the Bush administration (Rumer Sokolsky Stronski 2017, 6-16). Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has increasingly become an authoritarian state with a sultanistic-type regime and distant from the West. The establishment of the Aliyev dynasty with an increasingly oppressive form of authoritarianism widened the country's existent civilizational gap with the West. While Armenia's democratic transition has been slower but sustainable, it has taken a more balanced position between Russia and the West. In this context, Washington shifted its South Caucasus policy from Azerbaijan and its hydrocarbons as the assets of regional transformation to reformist Georgia and its Euro-Atlantic aspirations (Rumer Sokolsky Stronski 2017, 17).

The US policy towards Georgia has been based on support for its territorial integrity and sovereignty rejecting "any notion of spheres of influence in the region" (CRS 2010, 1-2). Even so, the 2008 Russian-Georgian war not only reaffirmed Russia's geopolitical pre-eminence in the South Caucasus, but also warned the US and the EU that Kremlin is not going to tolerate the NATO enlargement into its 'near abroad', as Georgia and Ukraine were hoping to join the NATO Membership Action Plan. The war undermined these aspirations and demonstrated the US reluctance to confront Russia. Besides, the war highlighted the fragility of the efforts in the South Caucasus to consolidate the EU's energy independence and security. In August 2008, for several days, the only export route of Caspian oil to the Western markets was indeed the Baku–Novorossiysk Northern Route Export Pipeline (Moniquet Racimora 2013, 25-26).

During the Obama administration, the US continued to foster the Strategic Partnership with Georgia recognizing its "key role in furthering U.S. interests" as a "premier partner" in the war on terror and as "a key conduit" for the Western access to the energy resources of the Caspian region and diversification of energy sources for America and Europe. The US policy towards Georgia has been focused on promoting democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration and supporting its territorial integrity. These policy goals were incorporated within the framework of the US-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership signed on January 9, 2009 (CRS 2010, 33).

Remarkably, the US-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership affirms the objectives of the extension of European security realm towards Georgia and, therefore, the South Caucasus, stating that "a strong, independent, sovereign and democratic Georgia, capable of responsible self-defence, contributes to the security and prosperity not only of all Georgians, but of a Europe whole" (CRS 2010, 37). The Charter also declares the US policy goals of supporting the integration of Georgia into NATO and broader Euro-Atlantic political, economic, and security structures. Hence, the American policy of promoting the prospects of Euro-Atlantic enlargement towards the South Caucasus converges with the EU's EaP initiative.

Besides, the US interest in the geo-economics of the region and the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian and traversing energy transportation projects, Washington has been engaged in the South Caucasus through conflict resolution initiatives. The Clinton administration took a more active role in the negotiation frameworks of regional conflicts. The main focus had been projected on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through the OSCE Minsk Group. In 1997, the US joined Russia and France as a co-chair of the Minsk Group. Initially, the US started to put more pressure on the Armenian side to compromise over the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh's status. Washington's pressure on Armenia was conditioned by the assumption that the conflict resolution would facilitate the establishment of East-West transportation corridor and pipelines for the export of oil westwards through Turkey (Cornell 2005, 369).

The democratization in the region has also been viewed as means for the facilitation of the peace process. However, as Fukuyama observed, democracy is not par excellence good at resolving various ethnic or national conflicts, such as the Armenians-Azerbaijani conflict, as the problem of national sovereignty is "inherently uncompromisable" and it either belongs to one people or another. Therefore, it is quite rare for different conflicting nations to solve their differences through peaceful democratic compromise (Fukuyama 1992, 119).

The United States is institutionally engaged only in the framework of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution mechanism as a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk group. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the most intense and long-standing one in the entire post-Soviet space, also stands out with its highest represented international mandate entrusted to the co-chairmanship of the OSCE Minsk Group, which includes three out of five permanent members of UNSC – America, France, and Russia (CRS 2010, 32). In the Caucasus, the United States' diplomatic efforts have been greatly focused on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This greater level of commitment in contrast to other conflicts in the region besides its much larger scale has also been related to the existence of a substantial Armenian-American community (Rumer Sokolsky Stronski 2017, 12).

Remarkably, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the US has supported the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all newly independent states refusing the recognition of *de facto* states as sovereign countries. The only exclusion from this general policy approach has been the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), as the resolution of its final status has been entrusted to the OSCE Minsk group. Moreover, since 1998 the US has been providing funds for humanitarian assistance programs in the *de facto* state of the Artsakh Republic (Markedonov Suchkov 2020, 11-12).

Under the Obama administration, Assistant Secretary of State Philip Gordon stated that the US policy toward Armenia has been aimed at supporting it to “strengthen its security and prosperity by settling conflict with Azerbaijan over NK and by encouraging Turkey and Armenia to normalize their relations” (CRS 2010, 1-2). The US foreign policy was significantly involved in the initiatives of normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations (Nixey 2010, 125-142). In October 2009, the US Secretary of State Clinton mediated the signing of the Armenia-Turkey Zurich Protocols (CRS 2010, 32). However, the Protocols have never been ratified as President Erdogan's rise to power resulted in a more aggressive Turkish foreign policy.

The long-standing American pressure on Armenia not to pursue close economic ties with Iran but rather to normalize relations with Turkey has been a key constraint for deeper political and economic cooperation and the development of geo-economic projects and international transit infrastructure initiatives. While Armenia values its relations with the United States, it is also concerned about further deterioration of US-Iran relations, Armenia shares with it one of two open borders left (Hunter 2010, 183). The Armenian-Iranian bilateral relations, subsisting in a complex global and regional geopolitical context, are often predetermined by the divergent interests of regional actors including Russia, the United States, Iran, and Turkey. The discrepancy and often contradiction of Turkey's policies in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean with the United States, the Turkish-Russian relative rapprochement, or the US-Armenia good relations between are revealing the complex dynamics of regional geopolitics. The divergence of the US and Russian interests is more visible in the post-soviet space, which Russia considers a legitimate sphere of influence, and where the US is trying to penetrate through the enlargement of NATO or instalment of its anti-missile systems in Eastern Europe or supporting the ‘velvet’ revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. These divergent policies contribute to the relative tension and mistrust in the US-Russian relations (Zarifian 2008, 139).

The clash between the US-backed Euro-Atlantic enlargement and Russia's post-Soviet designs in the South Caucasus culminated in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, which marked a turning point in the evolution of US policy to the region, as the developments in Georgia were halted and Washington lost its regional momentum (Rumer Sokolsky Stronski 2017, 18).

Subsequently, the policy leadership in the South Caucasus had been transferred from the US to the EU within the framework of the EaP initiative. In 2009, when the Eastern Partnership was initiated, it marked a watershed in EU thinking and practice concerning the EU's eastern neighbourhood. More concretely, the EaP states have been offered the perspective of Association Agreements (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) that would provide mechanisms of integration with the EU (Yepremyan 2017, 89-108). Georgia signed the AA/DCFTA with the EU, while Azerbaijan showed little interest in approximation with the EU or the Russia-led EAEU. Armenia, a member of the EAEU, signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU. Remarkably, the EU managed to make the CEPA, a lighter version of AA/DCFTAs, compatible with Armenia's membership in the EAEU.

The US policy goal has been the integration of the South Caucasus states with the West via the EU's EaP initiative and NATO's Partnership for Peace program. Washington's regional policies aimed at reducing Moscow's political and economic leverage in the region. By strengthening the domestic institutions and promoting democracy in these states the US sought to make them less vulnerable to foreign influence that might be conflicting with the US interests (Chausovsky 2021). However, Russia came with its own grand geopolitical project trying to reinforce its traditional positions in its "near abroad". As a result, only three EaP countries have signed the AA and DCFTA with the EU. This caused a geopolitical and geo-economic "schism" in the EaP area (Yepremyan, Mkrтчyan 2016, 174-195).

The Ukrainian crisis marked another phase in the extension of the European security complex signifying the end of the post-Cold War security order, as competition for the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia escalated, and the objective for common security without divisions or spheres of influence have been abandoned both by the US and the EU, and by Russia. Due to these cardinal differences in national security perceptions the US and EU foreign policies toward Russia had shifted from a cooperative trajectory into an increasingly confrontational path (Rumer Sokolsky Stronski 2017, 19). The US engagement as a co-chair of OSCE Minsk Group in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, despite their differences, remains perhaps the only area of American-Russian cooperation (Novikova 2019).

In contrast to the conflicts in Ukraine, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, the positions of the United States, France, and Russia, the three co-chairs of OSCE Minsk Group, mainly overlap in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Even when the American-Russian relations have reached their lowest level since the end of the Cold War, the US diplomats positively assessed Russia's role in facilitating the process of de-escalation of the relations of war and supporting the negotiation process (Markedonov Suchkov 2020, 11).

Nevertheless, the problem of US interests and policy in the South Caucasus continues to be largely indefinite. Although the United States has important interests in the region, its relations with the states in the South Caucasus have not been considered vital for the American national interests, therefore, not sufficiently compelling to warrant American military engagement to meddle in the regional conflicts and stop them. In contrast, the conflicts in the Balkans had received much bigger attention from Washington (Rumer Sokolsky Stronski 2017, 11).

The US strategy towards the South Caucasus has been static and has largely failed to perceive the implications of fundamental changes in the regional geopolitical visage. The issue is especially acute concerning the internal changes in Russia and Turkey, as well as the US dealings with Iran. American and European outreach to Iran might profoundly impact the regional configuration of powers, while the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey, signified by the construction of the "Turkish Stream" natural gas pipeline, makes these regional powers increasingly hostile to Western interests. Under President Erdogan, Turkey is pulling away from the Euro-Atlantic community and following a trace of strongman authoritarianism with an Islamist face (Cornell Starr Tsereteli 2015, 44). Its relations with both the EU and the US have deteriorated as a result of different national security pursuits and conflicting visions of their regional designs (Rumer Sokolsky Stronski 2017, 22). Erdogan's rapprochement with President Putin of Russia raises serious security concerns in Armenia, Georgia, the US, and the EU. In light of these uncertainties, a new interregional North-South geo-economic corridor and transit links with Iran's growing regional power and India's emerging power is worth pursuing both for Armenia and Georgia, and the US and EU.

With the end of the ideological confrontation of the Cold War order, in many countries the development of new and the revival of old enmities and affiliations restarted. These affiliations and alliances have been including the countries of the same civilization or similar culture. Political and public discourses in many countries have been perplexed to identify their publics "with 'greater' cultural communities that transcend nation-state boundaries", including "Greater Turkey" and "Greater Azerbaijan" (Huntington 1996, 127-128). From the regional security perspective, no bilateral relationship is more disturbing, than the ever-growing Turkish-Azerbaijani integration under the slogan "two states, one nation". And no US bilateral relationship with states of the South Caucasus is more striking than the downward spiral of the American-Azerbaijani

relationship (Cornell Starr Tsereteli 2015, 29). Furthermore, Turkey has actively influenced Azerbaijan to accept its regional leadership under the ideological auspices of Pan-Turkism in return providing military and political assistance against Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, as happened during the 2020 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war (Yepremyan 2020).

Yet neither the US nor the EU has a clear strategy for the South Caucasus. While the United States has an important role in the regional affairs, its interests in the South Caucasus are not considered vital with only a few key national security interests. In contrast to the armed conflicts in the Balkans, the conflicts in the Caucasus received much less American attention and engagement due to the perceived absence of crucial national security interests (Cornell Helsinki Monitor 2005, 111). The US also has significant cultural links to two countries in the South Caucasus – Armenia and Georgia. The over 1,5 million strong Armenian-American community has extensive ties to Armenia, while the US-Georgia cultural-educational and political relations continue to expand (Rumer Sokolsky Stronski 2017, 23).

In December 2017, the Trump administration introduced its National Security Strategy which, having no mention of the South Caucasus, declares that the “America First foreign policy celebrates America’s influence in the world as a positive force that can help set the conditions for peace, prosperity, and the development of successful societies” (US National Security Strategy 2017). In contrast to President Obama’s “strategic patience” and the emphasis on the “rules-based international order advanced by US leadership,” President Trump’s foreign policy had several distinctive features characterized by unpredictability, as the latter viewed foreign policy per se as his personal domain attempting to reform the international order per his vision of American primacy, therefore, exercising “strategic impatience” (Novikova 2019).

In October 2018, the US National Security Advisor John Bolton during his visit to Yerevan described the relations with Armenia as “a top priority” and expressed the US interest in bringing Armenia closer to the West, and reducing Russian influence in the region. Bolton also proposed arms purchases from the US, stating that the American military “equipment is better than the Russians’... it increases Armenia’s options when it’s not entirely dependent on one major power” (The Armenian Weekly 2018). Bolton’s South Caucasus visit indicated a growing American interest in the region motivated by the Trump administration’s efforts of isolating Iran and reducing Russia’s sphere of influence (Borshchevskaya 2019).

From the American perspective, the South Caucasus is not valuable in its isolation but is essential as a forum where the US can work on various wider security and geopolitical puzzles. Apart from the activities of different lobbyist groups and the American-Armenian community, the South Caucasus affairs have a disparately lesser role in US domestic politics than in Russia. On the whole, the US grand strategy is focused on the international order viewing the developments in the South Caucasus mostly through the prisms of the EU’s, Russia’s, Turkey’s, and Iran’s aspirations, and the war on terror. Therefore, the US considers the Caucasus affairs as components of a wider geopolitical conundrum (Markedonov Suchkov 2020, 4).

The geographical adjacency of the EU and Russia, two great powers of Europe, creates a possibility of a unification of the two complexes, and currently they form a loose super-complex. The most important zone of contact is the EaP area, yet the EU and Russia are not involved enough in each other’s security matters to transform the whole of Europe into one large RSC. The so-called GUUAM organization has been an attempt for a counter coalition to Russia in the CIS area, which if successful might raise Ukraine to the status of regional power as part of a regional polarity structure. Turkey, an active insulator and therefore not part of the polarity of any RSC, strives for a role of regional great power within a loose European super-complex comprising EU-Europe, Russia-EAEU and the Middle East, which altogether form an interregional constellation. The United States, the world’s lonely superpower, is so systematically involved in the European institutions (NATO, OSCE) in ways that often is defined as a European power, although not a member of the European RSC (Buzan, Waever 2003, 343-344).

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, both US and Russia have often supported competing or even mutually exclusive initiatives, such as the Nabucco pipeline project vs the South Stream pipeline, the NATO enlargement, the GUUAM vs. the CSTO, supporting Georgia’s territorial integrity vs. the recognition

of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence (Markedonov Suchkov 2020, 5). The tensions in US-Russia relations are at their worst since the Cold War. On July 27, 2021, in his speech at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in McLean, Virginia, President Biden warned that Russia is trying to interfere in the 2022 US midterm elections via spreading disinformation and, hence, violate American sovereignty (The White House 2021).

Presently, the primary problems for the European super-complex are the European integration for the EU-dominated complex; the enlargement of the Russia-dominated EAEU in the Post-Soviet complex; the visions for a merger between the two complexes either through harmonization of ties between the two integration projects or through increasing tension and (in)security interdependence and by strengthening of Pan-European security institutions, and creating an overarching security order (Buzan Waever 2003, 437-438). At the interregional level, EU-Europe interacts with the post-Soviet RSC and with the Middle East. The EU's relation to the post-Soviet complex and Russia is important for its enlargement prospects, particularly including Ukraine and Moldova, where the frontier between EU-Europe and the post-Soviet RSC is contested. The EU-Russia relationship is very intense in the contested neighbourhood. Due to some all-European organizations such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe, which are the main institutional expressions of the European super-complex covering both EU-Europe and the post-Soviet complexes, there are shared political processes and agendas. However, their relative weaknesses do not significantly contribute to the strengthening of this super-complex. Buzan and Waever have suggested that a crisis in the borderland between the two RSCs could strengthen the loose European super-complex (Buzan Waever 2003, 372-374).

On the whole, the geopolitical and geo-economic visage of Eurasia is undergoing an accelerating and fundamental transformation. For the first time since the beginning of the 16th century, the single largest concentration of global economic power will be found neither in Europe nor in North America, but in Asia. Kishore Mahbubani calls Asia's rise as an "irresistible shift of global power to the East" which will transform the world (Mahbubani 2008). In this context, Russia and the EAEU tend to become a buffer between the enlarging Europe and rising China. Analysing the deceleration of the West and the accelerating rise of the East, Mahbubani suggests that, driven greatly by the logic of one world and technology - a force that is irresistible and irreversible, the East and West meet in the great convergence, "Because everything that rises must converge. The great convergence that our world is experiencing is now irreversible. Too many forces have been unleashed to shrink the world. They will only gain momentum in the coming decades... The world will get smaller and smaller and more and more densely interconnected and interdependent" (Mahbubani 2013, 247). Potentially the South Caucasus may become a key touchpoint and a continental corridor of great convergence.

In its entirety, America's position in Europe is remarkable due to a high degree of institutionalization by establishment of superregional projects. America's position in the post-Soviet complex varies, as the latter is not closely linked to the US and contains Russia, a traditional great power. This explains the uncertainty and ambivalence in US-Russian relations. Any US penetration into the post-Soviet space is bitterly sensitive for there is a keen interplay between Russia's fragile great power status and its control over its near abroad. As Buzan and Waever put it, "Whichever of these futures lies ahead, the structure of international security will be defined by the interplay of regions and powers" (Buzan Waever 2003, 460).

Conclusion

As has been discussed, the South Caucasus has a key significance in the context of competing alternative paradigms of the geopolitics of European enlargement and Eurasian schemes, i.e. the Russia-led EAEU, the Chinese Belt and Road project, and India's vision for the North-South corridor. Therefore, the South Caucasus has an ever-increasing importance for the US national security interests both as a gateway to Central Eurasia and as the eastern edge of the extended European security complex between Russia and the Middle East. Hence, the US policies have been aimed at making the South Caucasus an eastern extension of enlarged European regional security complex and the Euro-Atlantic community in security,

governance, education, culture, and an environment of information unity, democracy and human rights that might serve as a paradigm for neighbours and regional transformation.

In addition to its importance for European energy security as a transit route, the economic significance of the South Caucasus to the Euro-Atlantic community as its reliable extension can be grand enough as a geo-economic corridor/crossroad, with grand infrastructure on the ground for West-East/North-South trade, and multimodal transport links between the EU, Iran, India, Russia, and China that are not controlled by any single power but guaranteed and protected by all. So far, the EU and the US have been unsuccessful in the struggle of retaining their position in the territories that link the West with the East. The problem replicated in the EaP area, where different national interests and visions have torn the project apart. This was the case with the Ukrainian crisis and this is what happened in the South Caucasus.

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