

THE EFFECT OF GLOBAL GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION ON THE FORMATION OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS SECURITY COMPLEX: THE STRATEGIC MODELING OF ARMENIA'S SECURITY POLICY

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Abstract

This scientific article explores the intricate dynamics between global geopolitical competition and the formation of the South Caucasus security complex, with a specific focus on Armenia's security policy. After the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the geopolitical significance of the South Caucasus is beginning to change. In the conditions of the deepening of the Ukrainian crisis, the global importance of the South Caucasus is highlighted as an important economic corridor of strategic communication in the "north-south" and "east-west" directions. The region is entering a complex period of strategic competition with increasing security dependence and vulnerability from global geopolitical processes. It also creates new security threats for the restoration of the balance of power in the South Caucasus and the reconstruction of the security complex.

The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Central and South Asia create new security threats for maintaining the security balance of the South Caucasus. The trends of increasing influence of hybrid threats in the Middle Eastern region are beginning to spread in the South Caucasus as well. Based on all this, the strategic modeling of Armenia's security policy is presented in the article. It can have a guiding role in the process of developing the priorities of Armenia's foreign policy.

Through strategic modeling, the article elucidates possible future scenarios for Armenia's security policy, considering varying degrees of global geopolitical competition and regional instability. This modeling enables us to better anticipate the potential trajectories of Armenia's security choices and their consequences for regional stability and security dynamics. Moreover, it highlights the interconnectedness of South Caucasus security with broader global geopolitics, emphasizing the need for a nuanced and multidimensional approach to understanding the security complex in this region.

Keywords - South Caucasus, security complex, security policy, international security system, 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russian-Ukrainian war, strategic modeling.

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Introduction

The South Caucasus region has historically been a geopolitical crossroads, subject to the influences of major powers and regional actors, making it a critical area for analyzing the interplay of international politics and regional security dynamics. The research methodology involves a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses, integrating historical context, policy documents, and strategic simulations to develop a comprehensive understanding of Armenia's security policy formation. This article identifies and assesses the key determinants of Armenia's security policy, including its strategic partnerships, military capabilities, and diplomatic initiatives. This article contributes to the literature on international relations and security studies by shedding light on the intricate relationship between global geopolitical competition and the formation of security policies in the South Caucasus, with Armenia as a central case study. By employing strategic modeling techniques, it provides valuable insights into the potential pathways of Armenia's security policy, offering policymakers and scholars a foundation for informed analysis and decision-making in this complex and volatile region.

Transformations of international security architecture

The international security system has undergone significant transformations over the years, reflecting changes in the global geopolitical landscape, advances in technology, and evolving security threats. The transition from a unipolar world order to a multipolar one makes it necessary to reinterpret the framework of relationships between "centers of power" that influence global political processes. While at the beginning of the 2000s the "management" of global political processes was mostly carried out through the hegemony of the USA, now it will be impossible to ensure global stability without a number of Eurasian states. The end of the complete "hegemony" of the USA does not mean that the USA ceases to be considered one of the most influential states in global political processes. Moreover, as long as the USA continues to surpass all "centers of power" in the world with its economic and military capabilities, it will remain the leading state in the multipolar world order.

Two possible scenarios are discussed in international relations due to the change of the unipolar world order.

- Prominent actors in international relations are beginning to challenge US hegemony, attempting to establish bipolarity or multipolarity.
- The USA is trying to maintain its dominant position in the international security system, but already acting as the primary power in the multipolar system (*primus inter pares*).¹

Multipolarity is presented as an unbalanced system, where the role of classical mechanisms of deterrence is minimized. In the conditions of the formation of the new world order, the standards of the state's power are also changing to some extent. Not only has the degree of modernization of the armed forces and the state's economic

¹ Williams P., Security Studies: An introduction, 2nd edition, (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 155.

potential become important, but also the degree of vulnerability of the state to external security uncertainties, the degree of modernity of the state's communication infrastructures, the presence of a reliable network of allies and coalitions, and the possibilities to neutralize hybrid threats.

In contrast to the bipolar and unipolar world order, the effectiveness of global security mechanisms and the deterrent role of international security organizations are significantly decreasing in the current world order. Nation-states are once again becoming dominant, with the ability to unite their societies and defend themselves against external aggression. As the world order changes, the degree of effectiveness of security systems built on liberal principles is now diminishing, because international law, state democratization, and protection of human rights cease to be of primary importance in the context of ensuring international security. In the changing world order, the structure of the international security system becomes more anarchic, and the accumulation of military forces and deterrence becomes more important.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war, the defining element of the formation of the international and global security system continue to be the competition for the division of influence zones in different regions. That competition will shape two opposing camps in the coming years, led by the USA and China. In particular, in its National Security Strategy document adopted in 2022, the US presents the model of “integrated deterrence” strategic cooperation for coalition security.² It includes the formation of new collective security mechanisms through cooperation with AUKUS, the Republic of Korea, and Japan. Meanwhile, China will try to enter into competition with the USA with the partial support of Russia and cooperation with the states showing “strategic independence” within the multipolar world order. Given the recent shifts in global strategic rivalry, one can note that the basis of global strategic competition in the coming years will be the struggle for scientific and technological superiority or the “technological arms race”.³

The decline of US liberal hegemony and the tendencies to establish a multipolar world order have a serious impact on changing regional security complexes, including the South Caucasus. In the years to come, the most important element in shaping the international security system will continue to be the USA-China strategic competition over values and ideology, economic, technological and military supremacy. The USA-Russia rivalry will remian a competition between a global power and a regional power.⁴ Russia's geopolitical achievements will continue to be based on short-term goals. Beyond the USA-China-Russia “triangle” and European “centers of power”, countries with regional influence—such as India, Turkey, Iran, Indonesia, Japan, and Brazil—will play a significant role in shaping the multipolar world order.

² Biden-Harris Administration's National Security Strategy, The White House, Washington, 2022, p. 22.

³ The Power Atlas, Seven battlegrounds of a networked world, European Council on Foreign Relations, Berlin, 2021, pp. 107-125.

⁴ Pezard S., U.S. Strategic Competition with Russia, A RAND Research Primer, 2022, p. 16.

Strategic modeling of Armenia's security policy in the context of changes in the international security system

Current Situation

- Intensification of geopolitical competition between “centers of power”.
- Escalation of military conflicts.
- Establishment of a multipolar world order under the leadership of the USA.
- Decrease in the role of international law and organizations providing international security.
- Activation of regionalism tendencies.

Current strategy of Armenia

- Implementation of geopolitical maneuvers.
- Reducing the likelihood of becoming a new platform for global geopolitical competition.
- Implementation of additional geopolitical mechanisms to ensure the security of Armenia.

Armenia's Strategic Gap

- Lack of opportunities to implement geopolitical maneuvers.
- Lack of opportunities to involve new “centers of power” in ensuring regional security.
- Lack of evasion of geopolitically imposed decisions.
- Settlement of misunderstandings related to the existing mechanisms of allied and collective security.

Strategic Alternatives

- Strengthening cooperation with Russia and Iran in the area of mutual vital interests in the region.
- Engaging in active maneuvers with the involvement of non-regional “centers of power” without changing Armenia's foreign policy direction.
- Maintaining cooperation with the West.

Recommended Strategy

- Implementation of a foreign and security policy adapted to the deepening geopolitical competition between the West and Russia.
- Strengthening the geopolitical positions of Russia in the region by combining mutual national interests.
- Deepening security cooperation with the West and other non-regional “centers of power” without violating the vital interests of Russia and Iran.

Recommended Action

- Maintain and strengthen Armenian-Russian strategic alliance to reduce the dangers of interfering in Armenia's internal affairs.
- Balance the deterrence factors caused by Russia's geopolitical presence in the South Caucasus.
- Encourage Western initiatives aimed at modernizing the political institutions of all the states of the South Caucasus.

- Expand the geopolitical, commercial and economic involvement of Iran, India and China in the South Caucasus.

The problems of forming the security complex of the South Caucasus

After the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the South Caucasus has entered a complex cycle of global and regional strategic competition. Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Central and South Asia generate new security threats for maintaining the balance of power and rebuilding the security complex in the South Caucasus. The trend of increasing impact of hybrid threats typical of the Middle Eastern region is extending into the South Caucasus. In the long term, these processes pose serious security risks for the strategic autonomy of the South Caucasian states.

“Centers of power” have always viewed cooperation with the South Caucasian states not merely as bilateral relations but as a means to enhance their influence in the region. Consequently, the Armenian-Russian allied relations create opportunities for the preservation of Russia’s influence in the South Caucasus. Also, the West aims to reduce Russian influence in the region by deepening Armenia-USA and Armenia-EU relations. In the conditions of worsening relations between the West and Iran, it is in the interests of the West that the South Caucasian states do not contribute to the deepening economic and military-political cooperation between Russia and Iran. Therefore, Western countries often put pressure on Azerbaijan to prevent the latter’s support for the development of the Russia-Azerbaijan-Iran “North-South” economic corridor.

The war in Ukraine has restricted trans-Russian east-west transit routes in Eurasia, prompting Russia to focus more on developing north-south corridors.⁵ From a strategic point of view, strengthening of its positions in the South Caucasian and Central Asian states has become increasingly important for Russia. Before the war in Ukraine, east-west communication routes through the South Caucasus and Central Asia competed with Russian routes, however, now Russia seeks greater involvement in managing these routes. By supporting the unblocking of communications in the South Caucasus, Russia aims to bypass Western sanctions and establish new railway connections with Iran, Turkey, and India.

In the conditions of changing world order, the role of India in the South Caucasus is also significantly increasing. India has serious ambitions to become a separate pole of international relations. The deepening of Armenian-Indian military-political cooperation does not imply a worsening of India-Azerbaijan relations. For India, Azerbaijan is one of the key states in the “North-South” transport corridor, which ensures the transit of Indian goods from Iran to Russia. Despite the crisis in India-Azerbaijan political relations, bilateral economic relations are developing at a great pace. This is mainly due to changes in communication geopolitics resulting from the Russian-Ukrainian war. Particularly, in 2022, the volume of bilateral trade through the “North-South” corridor has increased.

⁵ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Decree of the President 229, March 31, 2023, Information resources of the President of Russia.

Due to the war in Ukraine, the international communication network in the east-west direction is facing serious disruptions. The role of Azerbaijan as energy exporter and a key transit state in the “Middle Corridor”, which is part of China’s “Belt and Road” project, is significantly increasing. Azerbaijan’s role for Russia and Iran is also rising, especially after Azerbaijan and the EU agreed to double gas supply volumes and initiate electricity exports. Since Azerbaijan cannot meet the demand of European countries with its own resources, Russia and Iran will try to supply gas through Azerbaijan by entering into an indirect deal with the EU. The opportunities for Azerbaijan to become a transport hub between East and West, North and South are increasing. In this case, Azerbaijan does not intend to unblock the regional communication routes entirely under the control of Armenia. It will contribute to the economic development of Armenia and provide new control mechanisms. That is why Azerbaijan wants an extraterritorial corridor. If Armenia does not provide it, Azerbaijan will not restore communication links with Armenia. Adopting the strategy of becoming a communication hub, Azerbaijan will try to sign a peace treaty as soon as possible, as it needs long-term stability. On the other hand, Aliyev will not stop his anti-Armenian policy, as it helps sustain his regime. However, the preservation of the ruling regime in Azerbaijan is underpinned by an international consensus. Therefore, in the coming years, it is unlikely the change of the regime through external pressure or even application of international sanctions against Azerbaijan.

The Russia-Ukraine war has intensified security risks in the South Caucasus. If the South Caucasus becomes a new arena for military competition between the West and Russia, Armenia will have serious problems of preserving its sovereignty. Therefore, Armenia should avoid actions that deepen the competition between regional and non-regional “centers of power” in the South Caucasus.

The changing dynamics of the South Caucasus security complex creates a new need for Armenia to introduce additional security mechanisms, one of which is the establishment of the EU civilian mission in Armenia. The EU civilian mission offers new political opportunities for temporarily deterring Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia’s sovereign territory, as in recent years, Azerbaijan has become economically dependent on the EU for its energy exports. Due to the situation in the South Caucasus, the EU is expanding its influence from Georgia to Armenia to weaken the role of Russia and maintain leverage over Azerbaijan. One of the main goals of the EU mission is to prevent attempts to create a new zone of destabilization in the South Caucasus region near Europe. However, the EU mission cannot fully serve the purpose of ensuring the stability of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, as its monitoring activities are limited to the Armenian side. Consequently, the EU mission’s impact will be less about stabilizing the border and more about increasing the political role of the EU in the South Caucasus. The EU civilian mission’s limited mandate and representation prevent comprehensive monitoring of border incidents. The main goal of the mission is political, given that regional security regulation remains in the hands of states with vital interests in the South Caucasus. If the EU’s mission changes from civilian to military, Armenia will risk significant security complications in its relationships with Russia and Iran.

Both Iran and Russia strongly oppose the involvement of non-regional actors in the South Caucasus. According to Iranian officials, security risks in the region are escalating due to Azerbaijan-Israel military-political ties and Armenia's cooperation with Euro-Atlantic structures. According to Ali Akbar Velayati, senior adviser on international affairs to the Supreme Leader of Iran, amid the Russian-Ukrainian war, the West tries to encourage pan-Turkism, which will encircle Iran from the north and Russia from the south. Velayati believes that the activation of the regional policy of the West contributes to the weakening of Russia's geopolitical position in the South Caucasus, and the West wants to strengthen the factors that create tension in the South Caucasus, which will have a negative impact on regional security.⁶

Strategic modeling of Armenia's security policy in the process of forming the South Caucasus security complex

Current situation

- Changing the inclusion of the South Caucasus region in the post-Soviet geostrategic complex.
- Uncertainties around the final formation of the security complex of the South Caucasus.
- Rising tendencies toward regionalism.
- Increasing the importance of unblocking transit communications in the region.
- Aspirations by South Caucasian states to diversify their foreign and security policy directions.

Current strategy of Armenia

- Diversification of foreign policy without full cooperation with other "centers of power".
- Implementation of extra-regional mechanisms for overcoming regional conflicts.
- Seeking to establish Armenian-Turkish diplomatic relations.
- Building security systems based on the principles of liberalism.

Armenia's strategic gap

- Lack of capabilities to neutralize threats beyond Armenia's control.
- Lack of a national security strategy, military strategy for the formation of a regional security complex.
- Lack of a regional strategy for common agendas regarding cooperation with regional states.

Strategic considerations

- The unresolved Nagorno Karabakh conflict, lack of prospects for a comprehensive settlement, change in the geopolitical balance of the settlement and the increasing role of Turkey.
- The existence of military conflicts in the wider neighborhood of the region.

⁶ Velayati Stresses Vigilance regarding NATO Plot, Future of Caucasus, Tasnim News Agency, July 12, 2023, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/07/12/2924987/velayati-stresses-vigilance-regarding-nato-plot-future-of-caucasus>

- Decrease in the regional effectiveness of the activities of international security structures and collective security organizations.
- Uncertainties related to the future of the presence of the Russian peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh.
- The de facto interruption of the OSCE Minsk Group activities and attempts to adapt other Middle Eastern negotiation formats.
- Isolating Armenia from participating in international economic, transport, energy and communication projects.

Recommended strategy

- Taking into account the interests of Russia, Turkey, and Iran, as well as counterbalancing their neo-imperialist aspirations.
- Restoring the balance of power in the South Caucasus through an integrated deterrence strategy.
- Balancing the influence of regional and non-regional “centers of power”.
- Preventing the adaptation of Middle Eastern cooperation formats in the region.
- Maintaining the status quo and preventing Azerbaijan from capitalizing on the war successes.

Recommended Action

- Reinterpret the Armenian-Russian Mutual Assistance Agreement and the Declaration on Allied Cooperation.
- Initiate new formats of Armenian-Iranian security cooperation, without violating the principles of Armenian-Russian alliance relations.
- Use certain positive dynamics in Russian-Georgian relations for the activation of Iran-Armenia-Georgia-Russia cooperation.
- Initiate new formats of Armenia-India, Armenia-China military-political cooperation.
- Avoid interference in strengthening of Russian-Azerbaijan relations, as well as the development of Eurasian Economic Union-Azerbaijan economic relations, thereby contributing to the preservation of Russian influence in Azerbaijan.
- Separate the process of Armenian-Turkish reconciliation from the process of establishment of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey.
- Support the restoration of the activities of the OSCE Minsk Group.
- In the process of establishing Armenian-Turkish diplomatic relations and unblocking regional communications, try to involve the EU and China, and emphasize its necessity for them with the "Middle Corridor" factor.
- Make new assessments regarding the economic and political risks and opportunities associated with region's becoming the main platform for bypassing Western sanctions on Russia.

Conclusion

Our analysis of Armenia's security policy within the South Caucasus security complex vividly illuminates the intricate nexus of global geopolitics and regional security complexities. We have demonstrated that Armenia's security decisions are deeply

interlinked with the broader global geopolitical landscape. Russia's role as a historical ally and security guarantor, Turkey's regional aspirations, and the USA and the EU engagement in the South Caucasus all exert profound influence on Armenia's strategic choices. Additionally, Armenia's evolving relationships with Iran and India further complicate its security calculus, underscoring the multifaceted nature of its security policy formation. The South Caucasus remains an arena of considerable uncertainty, with global geopolitical competition continuing to impact regional stability. The main conclusion of this article is that international relations are becoming increasingly anarchic, and Armenia should carefully navigate its security policy choices. In particular, the main idea is that Armenia should strive to avoid becoming an arena for competition between the West and Russia, while seeking to balance its security policy directions as much as possible. In summary, this scientific article makes a significant contribution to international relations and security studies by unraveling the intricate relationship between global geopolitics and the formation of security policies in the South Caucasus.

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