

## THE US, STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND ARMENIA: A SIGHT ON THE FUTURE

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### Abstract

The political, economic and geopolitical presence of the United States in the South Caucasus dates back at least a century, when, after the First World War, they emerged as a global political, economic and geopolitical actor. Cooperation has increased dramatically since 1991, when the three countries gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From this perspective, the article focuses on identifying core US interests in Eurasia and attempting to define US strategic interests and priorities with respect to the region. In this sense, the main research question is how the US relations with the South Caucasus and in particular with Armenia will look like in the future, especially within the current stage of the Ukrainian conflict that began after February 2022.

The article simulates and tests four scenarios for future US engagement with the South Caucasus. Based on these scenarios, it is argued that, despite the lack of strategic interests in the region, the Ukrainian conflict prompted the US to increase its presence in the South Caucasus. This study is based on strategic documents, including the US National Security Strategy (2017), the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance of 2021, other white papers, reports, and studies of US foreign policy priorities.

**Keywords:** US, South Caucasus, Armenia, foreign policy, cooperation, future, scenario.

### Introduction

The ongoing transformation of the world order, global turbulence, and uncertainty comprehensively impacted the role and strategic presence of the US in different parts of the world. In the context of the geopolitical importance of the region for the US, studying the evolution of US policy towards the countries of the South Caucasus, the region as a whole, studying changes in US behavior and tools for implementing this policy are necessary to protect the United States of its own national interests.

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Back in 2011 the then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton published an article entitled “America’s Pacific Century”. In the article, Clinton, particularly, wrote that “the Asia-Pacific has become a key driver of global politics”, hence, the US strategic focus in the future should be redirected, first of all, towards that destination (Clinton 2011).

Interestingly, a United States naval officer, strategist, and historian Alfred Mahan anticipated Clinton’s approach approximately one and half century ago. In his famously known “The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783” Mahan wrote that the US naval power (as a consequence geopolitical domination) will be determined by its strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific (Russell 2006).

In fact, Clinton’s article was a conceptual one and determined the foreign policy priorities for the US not only during the Obama administration, but also far beyond, being implemented with some structural changes by both Trump and Biden administrations, especially, given that in 2011 Biden held the position of the Vice-President.

The article received a non-official name “Pivot to Asia” and demonstrated the shift of the US strategic interests from the Middle East and in some sense Europe towards that region (Beitelman 2012).

These transformations raise questions about the future of the world order and bring uncertainty to various parts of the world regarding the future of the US strategic presence (Strategic Studies Institute 2020).

The South Caucasus, and particularly, Armenia, is not an exception. Being “sandwiched” in the middle of Eurasia, the strategic shift in the US foreign policy and security agenda will lead and has already led to major changes in the US relations with the countries of the region. From this perspective, this paper is an attempt to address those changes and develop potential scenarios for the future.

## **Methodology and scope of the research**

The research of the US interests towards the South Caucasus has been in focus of international and local scholars. Over years, such scholars as Martha Brill Olcott, Inessa Baban, Zaur Shiriyev, James Nixey, George Khelashvili, S. Neil Macfarlane, Mikayel Zolyan, Paul Stronski, Anar Valiyev, Rufat Ahmadzada, Stephen Blank, Andreas Persbo, Taras Kuzio, Beniamin Poghosyan, and many others has written extensively on the topic of this research (Börzel, Pamuk and Stahn 2009; Markedonov 2021; Olcott 2002; Asatryan 2002; Baban and Shiriyev 2010; Blank 2012; Nixey 2010; Khelashvili and Macfarlane 2010; Stronski 2020; Persbo 2021; Poghosyan 2022; Kuzio 2022).

However, this paper makes an attempt to analyze the US strategic approaches towards the South Caucasus and model potential scenarios for the future. Hence, the main research question is what the future of US relations with the South Caucasus and particularly Armenia will look like, especially, in the framework of the current stage of the Ukrainian conflict started after February 2022. To answer this question, the article starts with the discussion of strategic foundations which drive the US foreign policy globally and in the South Caucasus. Based on the US National Security Strategy of 2017, Interim National Security Strategic Guidance of 2021, other official and semi-official

papers and publications, the article analyzes the main US objectives and priorities in the region. Based on the above it continues and makes an attempt to draw potential scenarios on the future of the US strategic approaches towards the South Caucasus. The article addresses the US strategic priorities and interests, limiting the timeframe by January 2022. It continues with the “Discussion” section, where the article is making an attempt to analyze the impact of the current stage of the Ukrainian conflict started after February 2022 on the US strategic vision towards the South Caucasus and Armenia, in particular.

### **South Caucasus in US strategic focus**

The US presence in the South Caucasus goes back for at least a century when after the World War One it appeared as a global political, economic, and geopolitical actor. Since then, the US foreign policy towards that region has faced significant changes and demonstrated zigzags of cooperation with the countries of the South Caucasus.

The cooperation has demonstrated major transformations since 1991 when the three countries in the South Caucasus has received independence after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. However, the current stage of the US relations with the South Caucasus countries seem to face gradual decline (Youngs 2017, 177-211; Glaser (Kukartseva) and Thomann 2022).

Particularly, the US National Security Strategy (Strategy) of 2017, which is still in force, does not provide a clear vision towards the region. It only touches upon Ukraine and Georgia in the section entitled “Europe.” This allows to expand that section towards the other EaP countries, provided their geographical location and the fact that no other section in the Strategy discusses that region.

Describing the US interests in Europe the Strategy states that “the United States is safer when Europe is prosperous and stable, and can help defend our shared interests and ideals. The United States remains firmly committed to our [American] European allies and partners. The NATO alliance of free and sovereign states is one of our great advantages over our competitors, and the United States remains committed to Article V of the Washington Treaty” (The White House 2017). Additionally, the Strategy outlines political and economic priority actions, stressing the necessity to collaborate with the European allies and partners to, particularly, confront forces threatening to undermine “our common values, security interests, and shared vision”, including those coming from Russia, North Korea, Iran, and China, as well as to provide strategic stability in the European neighborhood and energy security for the EU (The White House 2017; Shraibman 2019).

The regional visit of the former US National Security Advisor John Bolton paid to the South Caucasus in October 2018, once again emphasized the significance of the region in terms of strategic stability in the NATO’s neighborhood, as well as deterrence of Russia, China, and Iran (U.S. Embassy Yerevan 2018).

When it comes to the Biden administration, in March 2021 the White House has published an Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (Guidance). In the introduction section President Biden writes that he is “issuing this interim guidance to

convey my vision for how America will engage with the world” (The White House 2021).

The Guidance directs departments and agencies until the new National Security Strategy is published. Hence, it can be referred to a preliminary official document, which set the US foreign policy priorities.

However, the Guidance does not have any reflection on the South Caucasus. It does not even refer to Georgia separately as the Strategy did (The White House 2017). It speaks about the development and strengthening of relations with the US allies and partners, particularly, in the framework of NATO (The White House 2021). It speaks also about the necessity to contain China, Russia, and Iran. A very similar approach was present in the Strategy (The White House 2017).

At the same time, the Guidance in opposite to the Strategy sets the US decisive support towards democracy and democratic development in the world (The White House 2017, 2021). Very similar approach is presented in the article written by Biden for the Foreign Affairs in March-April 2020 and entitled “Why America must lead again”, before he formally announced to run for the US Presidency.

The article contained neither any specific reflection on the South Caucasus, as a region, nor any specific country of the region (Biden 2020).

Finally, it is important to mention that on April 24, 2021 Joe Biden used the term “Genocide” in speech devoted to the massive killings of Armenians in Turkey early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. On the one hand, this might be seen as a US claim to return to the South Caucasus. On the other hand, given the ongoing deterioration of the US - Turkey relations, Biden’s speech on Armenian Genocide might be a signal to Turkey.

Thus, we see that on strategic level the US does not have any special focus on the South Caucasus. It is interested in long-term strategic stability in the region, which is located in the NATO and EU neighborhood. At the same time, the US is interested to provide energy sovereignty for the EU, where the Caspian gas can play a vital role. However, provided the US natural gas export ambitions to the EU, this interest can decline with rise of US export capabilities. Finally, the US is interested to deter Russia (as a political and military threat), China (as economic threat), and Iran (military, political) in the region (Harold and Nader 2012).

## **The Future Dimension of the US-South Caucasus Relationship**

The demonstration and analysis of the US strategic interests in the South Caucasus allows coming up with the following potential scenarios for the future.

### ***Scenario 1: Delegation of strategic presence***

In April 2021 the US launched indirect talks with Iran around a new “Iranian Deal” (DeYoung 2021). Given that majority of the top officials in Biden’s Administration were part of the negotiations and supported the “Nuclear Deal” in Obama Administration (Blinken, Salivan, Burns, Austin), there is a high possibility for a new deal. At the same time, in opposite to the Strategy, the Guidance stresses the importance of diplomacy to

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<sup>1</sup> BBC. 2021. “Biden says Armenian mass killing was genocide.” Accessed June 1, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56874811>.

stop the Iranian nuclear program and its “other destructive actions” (The White House 2021).

A question can be raised, what we can expect if the Deal is signed. To answer this question, it is necessary to understand, why the Biden Administration wants a new deal. It can be suggested that the US has the following interests:

- to contain the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),
- to balance rising Turkey in the region,
- to decrease Russian influence in the Middle East,
- to decrease geopolitical tensions or achieve balance of powers in the Middle East to be able to put more efforts into the successful implementation of the “Pivot to Asia” Doctrine.

From this perspective, the “New Iranian Deal” will allow containing and decreasing Chinese influence in Iran, which, according to some experts, might be considered to be the “gate” to the Middle East for the as the BRI. This becomes more urgent given the recent Strategic Partnership Agreement for 25 years signed between China and Iran (Stanzel 2022; Figueroa 2022).

On the other hand, the Western capital might be cautious to enter the Iranian market, having the experience of 2016, when after coming to power, Trump canceled the US participation in the Deal and threatened to sanction any company, which was going to work with Iran. However, given the current developments, the Deal will lead to gradual West-Iran normalization with subsequent political, geopolitical, and economic consequences.

The US-Iran normalization will most probably lead to decrease of tensions in the Middle East with even potential Iran-Israel normalization over time. This will foster a new balance of powers in the Middle East, when, particularly, such “middle powers” as Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia will contain each other and make a new “concert” in that region. Those developments will allow the US paying more attention to the Asia-Pacific, while keeping the Middle East under control through its allies and balance of powers.

Recently India started showing growing interest towards the Middle East and, particularly, Iran (Rowden 2020). Given the US interest to involve India to contain China (Zhang 2022; Pu 2022), as well as its complex relations with China and Turkey, India might have strategic role in the US Middle Eastern “balancing” agenda as a “middle power”, too. The EU might also play a role in that balance of powers as an economic, normative, and soft power.

Thus, in this scenario the US will decrease its strategic presence in the Middle East (as argued in “Pivot to Asia”) and South Caucasus, delegating its strategic presence to the “middle powers” in the region (Hillary 2011; Beitelman 2012).

Finally, in this scenario, Turkey might “play” both pro and anti-US side based on the further developments in the US-Turkey relations.

### ***Scenario 2: Rise of US presence in the South Caucasus***

In April 2021 U.S. Senate confirmed Victoria Nuland as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. Nuland was actively involved in supporting Ukraine during the

“Revolution of Dignity” in 2013-2014, while taking hard stance on Russia (Razom 2016).

According to the National Interest “reports of Victoria Nuland’s future appointment are sure to come as a source of elation to the government in Kiev. By the same token, they send perhaps the clearest message yet to Moscow that the prospects for meaningful U.S.-Russian rapprochement under a Biden administration appear exceedingly slim” (Episkopos 2021).

This allows coming up with the second scenario, according to which the US will stay in the post-Soviet space and increase pressure on Russia including through post-Soviet “periphery”, particularly, in the South Caucasus.

If implemented, the following might take place:

- Georgia will receive additional support,
- The US will substantially increase its role in the OSCE Minsk Group for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict,
- The US will activate its work with Azerbaijan, including by brokering conflict resolution with Armenia after Azerbaijan invaded Armenia’s sovereign territory<sup>2</sup>.
- The US might attempt to improve relations with Turkey to balance Russia,
- A new nuclear deal with Iran will allow the US bringing it in and use as another balancer against Russia in the South Caucasus. The region might even serve to export Iranian gas to Europe, which will mean further decrease of Russia’s role in the region.
- The US might bring in also India as both geopolitical balancer and economic power.

In case of this scenario, there might be a rising confrontation between West and Russia in the South Caucasus. Artsakh and Armenia seem to be most vulnerable to become a battlefield, but Georgia and Azerbaijan are not fully secured, too.

### ***Scenario 3: US leaves the South Caucasus***

Over more than ten years the US has been gradually losing strategic interest towards the South Caucasus. Particularly, the region is facing decline in FDIs and foreign aid from the US, trade is also suffering a lot (Elamiryan 2017; Kondratov and Johansson-Nogués 2022). In the meantime, there is decline in US interests in the Middle East and Afghanistan, for which the South Caucasus served as a bridge. Finally, the US might gradually lose its interest towards Caspian gas as it is striving to sell its own resources to Europe (Ellyatt 2019; Boute 2022).

Hence, the third scenario suggests a narrative where the US is completely leaving the South Caucasus. In this case, Russia and Turkey will dominate the region (Rumer, Sokolsky and Stronski 2017; Novikova 2014). Moreover, without the Western support Turkey would have to compromise to Russia in most important for Russia issues. However, this scenario is not very realistic, as the containment of Russia, China, and

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<sup>2</sup> RFE/RL. 2021. “France’s Macron Calls For Azerbaijani Troop Pullout From ‘Armenian Territory’.” *RFE/RL’s Armenian Service*, June 01, 2021. Accessed November 1, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/france-macron-nagorno-karabakh/31284862.html>.

Iran is an important priority for the US. As a result, it will hardly leave a region, which is right on the crossroad of those three powers.

***Scenario 4: US-Russia rapprochement***

The final fourth scenario might be the US-Russia rapprochement. Given the details of such a potential deal, the sides can either divide the South Caucasus or keep it open for cooperation for both sides. However, given the current geopolitical developments and the level of Russia-West relations, it is hard to imagine the implementation of this scenario in the near future.

**Discussion and conclusions**

The current stage of the conflict in Ukraine, started after February 24, 2022 has dramatically changed security landscape in whole Eurasia, including in the South Caucasus. Being one of the peripheries of US interests, as demonstrated above, it very soon received a special attention as, for instance, a new old energy hub to provide energy security for US allies in Europe.

In May 2022 the US Department of State has approved the Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) for Armenia. In particular, it states that Armenia's defeat in Third Artsakh war, as well as "ongoing tensions along its borders highlight the importance of the U.S. role as a Minsk Group Co-Chair and other diplomatic efforts to improve Armenia's ties with its neighbors." Moreover, the ICS says that "the U.S. role has become more important as regional tensions increase following Russia's invasion of Ukraine." (US Department of State 2022).

On the other hand, conflict in Ukraine has shifted the attention of Russia, as one of the key security actors in the region, which, as a result, created not full, but substantive power vacuum in the region. It enabled Azerbaijan to play much harder and freer with Armenia. Azerbaijan (supported by its ally Turkey) started demanding some parts of sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia. Moreover, it went further and occupied some of them, and then in September 2022 it launched a full scale military aggression, targeting more than thirty communities on the territory of Armenia, including such cities as Jermuk, Vardenis, Goris, etc. (Holmes 2022).

The US became one of those few major powers which named Azerbaijani aggression an "aggression" and called for immediate withdrawal of Azeri troops from the territory of Armenia (Gowen and Wang. 2022). Moreover, in September 2022 Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, paid an historical visit to Armenia. She became the most top official to visit Yerevan since Armenia received independence in 1991. During the visit, Pelosi restated US support to Armenia, its democratic way of development, as well told, that the delegation expected to hear what kind of support Armenian government expected from the US (U.S. Embassy in Armenia 2022).

Summarizing the recent developments and four scenarios presented above, it can be concluded that given the Ukrainian conflict and level of relations between the US (and West, in general) and Russia, the "great game" in the South Caucasus and for the region will continue with high intensity.

In the given reality, the *second scenario* is the most realistic, when the US will increase its presence in the South Caucasus, of course, relying on the allies, but without delegating to them the main strategic issues (as showed in case of Scenario #1).

The rising US presence in the region will provide Armenia with much larger opportunities. Particularly, Armenia can even try to position itself as a platform of cooperation between the US (and West, in general) and Russia. However, the rising West-Russia animosity might make Armenia to make a “geopolitical choice”, finding itself on a geopolitical fault-line.

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