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MODERN

GEOPOLITICAL CONJUNCTURE IN THE CAUCASUS REGION

COYUNTURA GEOPOLÍTICA MODERNA EN LA REGIÓN DEL CÁUCASO

Kenan Huseyn oglu Allahverdiyev

Email: kenan.allakhverdiyev@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6325-7765>

¹ Azerbaijan University of Tourism and Management (Baku, Azerbaijan). Azerbaijan.

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ABSTRACT

The Caucasus region, situated between Europe and Asia, has historically been an area of great strategic importance and a hotbed of competition between regional and global powers. In recent decades, this region has undergone significant transformations that have altered the geopolitical landscape. Specifically, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a turning point that led to the formation of new independent states but this process rekindled latent ethnic and territorial conflicts. Since then, the Caucasus has become an arena of increasing geopolitical complexity, where the economic, political and security interests of multiple actors are intertwined. Then, the article analyses the place of the Caucasus region in the geopolitical struggle, revitalized in the 21st century by a fundamental change in the configuration of the balance of power and the political and geographical borders of the states located in this region. It examines how the dynamics of the “New Great Game” unfold in the contemporary Caucasian context. The aim of this analysis is to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that the Caucasus presents in the emerging world order of the 21st century, and to consider the long-term implications of current geopolitical realignments for the stability and development of the region.

Keywords: Post-Soviet space, Caucasus region, International and Regional Security, Geopolitics.

RESUMEN

La región del Cáucaso, situada entre Europa y Asia, ha sido históricamente una zona de gran importancia estratégica y un foco de competencia entre potencias regionales y globales. En las últimas décadas, esta región ha experimentado importantes transformaciones que han alterado el panorama geopolítico. En concreto, el colapso de la Unión Soviética en 1991 marcó un punto de inflexión que condujo a la formación de nuevos Estados independientes, pero este proceso reavivó conflictos étnicos y territoriales latentes. Desde entonces, el Cáucaso se ha convertido en un escenario de creciente complejidad geopolítica, donde se entrelazan los intereses económicos, políticos y de seguridad de múltiples actores. En este contexto, el artículo analiza el lugar de la región del Cáucaso en la lucha geopolítica, revitalizada en el siglo XXI por un cambio fundamental en la configuración del equilibrio de poder y de las fronteras políticas y geográficas de los Estados situados en este macrorregión. Examina cómo se desarrolla la dinámica del “Nuevo Gran Juego” en el contexto caucásico contemporáneo. El objetivo de este análisis es proporcionar una comprensión más profunda de los desafíos y oportunidades que presenta el Cáucaso en el orden mundial emergente del siglo XXI, y considerar las implicaciones a largo plazo de los realineamientos geopolíticos actuales para la estabilidad y el desarrollo de la región.

Palabras clave: Espacio postsoviético, Región del Cáucaso, Seguridad internacional y regional, Geopolítica.

INTRODUCTION

The Caucasus is situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, straddling the boundary between Europe and Asia. It is home to three countries—Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan—they become independent in 1991 following the dissolution of the USSR. The region is renowned for its ethnic diversity, encompassing over 60 distinct ethnic groups, which has led to various issues throughout the area (O’Loughlin et al., 2007). This ethnic diversity has resulted in many inhabitants of the Caucasus changing their language or religion over time. The Caucasus is a vital corridor for the transit of goods and hydrocarbons between Asia and Europe. This role as a transit area underscores its importance as a bridge between the two continents (Coene, 2009). Additionally, the natural resources in the region, such as the oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea, are of significant importance, which has sparked renewed interest from various countries that are looking to diversify their energy and food supply chains, especially after the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war (Ultan & Saygin, 2022).

This situation of instability at the gates of Europe, the fentanyl crisis in the United States (Ciccarone, 2021) or the possible invasion of Taiwan by China (Cote, 2022) has highlighted the importance of the geopolitical game in the world. To briefly define it, geopolitics is the field of political sciences that examines how a state or other entity organizes and utilizes its space, and the political implications of these arrangements. Although classified as social, it is strongly oriented to applied practice since it aims to understand and guide a country’s national and international policies based on its knowledge and history (Flint, 2021). In the case of the Caucasus, the region is highly valued geopolitically due to its strategic location. As was stated before, situated at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, it attracts significant interest from both neighbouring countries and external powers, far beyond what its geographic size might suggest.

In the Caucasus, Azerbaijan stands out as one of the most important geopolitical actors. Its strategic position places it at the center of the interests of major powers such as Russia, Iran, the United States, and France. Historically, the Caucasus has been a hotspot of tensions and conflicts, and Azerbaijan’s role in these events has been crucial, further enhancing its geopolitical importance. For instance, Azerbaijan’s involvement in regional conflicts, particularly the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia, underscores its relevance to the stability and security of the area. The country’s military capabilities and its ability to engage in diplomatic negotiations have made it a

central figure in efforts to manage and resolve regional disputes.

These capabilities are increasingly extending beyond the region, as the country has successfully cultivated its relationships with powerful neighbours and global powers, demonstrating its strategic acumen. Azerbaijan has been able to balance its ties with Russia, maintaining cooperation while also seeking to strengthen its independence (Aslanova et al., 2019; Liaman, 2021). Additionally, it cultivates alliances with Western nations, leveraging its energy resources and strategic location to secure political and economic support (Garashova, 2023). Thus, Azerbaijan’s strategic location, vast natural resources, and active role in regional dynamics make it an indispensable actor in the Caucasus.

Against this background,

This study explores the Caucasus region’s role in modern geopolitics, focusing on the profound shifts in power dynamics and territorial boundaries that have characterized the area in the 21st century. It investigates the manifestation of contemporary power struggles, reminiscent of historical “Great Game” rivalries, within the unique Caucasian landscape. The research delves into the complex interplay of regional and global forces shaping the Caucasus, examining how recent geopolitical transformations have altered traditional power structures and redrawn both literal and figurative maps. The characteristics of the geopolitical position of the Caucasus region, current trends in the geopolitical situation in the region, as well as their scenario interpretations, discussed in this article, provide theoretical opportunities for an adequate vision of the strategic priorities of the policies of the main actors in this region.

DEVELOPMENT

The South Caucasus: a place of a new “old” geopolitical confrontation

According to the ten-year forecast of the respected analytical “think tank” Stratfor (2024a), “over the next 10 years, the world will revert to a multipolar power structure that will encourage constantly shifting alliances and create a more contentious global system”. Based on this global forecast, the Center’s analysts argue that “Elections in 2024 across diverse territories and amid various socio-economic and geopolitical contexts will collectively influence global affairs and shape international relations for the decade ahead” (Stratfor, 2024b). But, how much the emerging geopolitical clash of the 21st century is truly “new”, what its configuration, strategic plans of the participants, and expected results are, and how all this can

affect the fate of the “Greater Caucasus” in general, and the South Caucasus in particular.

First of all, we note that these forecasts essentially only extrapolate the general geopolitical view, originating in the work of Peter Hopkirk (1992) and continued by Russian scientists Degoev (2003), Manon (2003), Weitz (2006), and many other authors. For example, according to the neo-classical approach that looks at Afghanistan, western China, the Caspian, and the Caucasus as part of Central Asia, Lutz Kleveman argues that America, China, Russia, and Iran are all involved in the New Great Game for the sake of control over the region and its fabulous oil and gas reserves (Kleveman, 2004). Iran is seen as an independent actor.

In turn, the polycentric approach regards the New Great Game as a multi-board chess game of sorts in Eurasia: Central Asia, the Greater Caucasus, and the Middle East. The recent developments have demonstrated that the “chessboards” (Central Asian, Caucasian, and Middle Eastern) are moving into the international limelight depending on the geopolitical circumstances. Consequently, the number and composition of the sides involved greatly vary. Zbigniew Brzezinski writes about what he calls the Eurasian Balkans, which include the Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia) and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan) and, potentially, Turkey and Iran (Brzezinski, 1999, p. 151).

Unlike the previous two, the potamic approach is based on what Halford Mackinder said about the “marine pentagon” (the space between the Caspian, Black, Mediterranean, and Red seas and the Persian Gulf). There is a commonly shared conviction that control over the Land of Five Seas (with its nearly 70 percent of the world’s explored oil reserves and over 40 percent of the world’s natural gas reserves) is “the key for those seeking territorial and economic control over Eurasia” (the Heartland, according to the traditional geopolitical theory) and ensures domination over the entire planet.

Geopolitical scenarios for the reorganization of the Caucasus region

According to the French geopolitician Yves Lacoste, at least three factors can contribute to the transformation of any geographical area into an object of interstate rivalry: belonging to a system of international exchanges; availability of vital resources; and symbolic meaning of some places. In the context of our article, taking into account the points noted above is of particular importance, because it is precisely depending on the dominant type of realpolitik in the plans for conducting the “New Great Game” that it

becomes possible to identify the place of the Caucasus region and its individual subregions in it.

Having accepted the fact that the 21st-century “New Great Game” is unfolding before us, we should identify, with a great degree of accuracy, the Caucasus region’s place in it. There are several paradigms to rely upon. First, passive involvement, which says that the Caucasus has no geopolitical activity of its own and can, therefore, be described as a zone of the global thalassic-telluric confrontation. According to The Financial Times analysts, the Caucasus is an area where the next chapter of the Great Game will be enacted (Gorst, 2007). Alexander Dugin of Russia is of a similar opinion:

Any discussion of the Caucasian region in the geopolitical system of coordinates presupposes that the highly complex real balance of regional forces can be reduced to global geopolitical dualism and to the clash between the geopolitical interests of Russia and the United States (or the NATO countries), which always and everywhere remain opposite. (Dugin, 2008).

Frederick Starr and Svante Cornell of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University suggest:

conceptualizing the Caucasus in the framework of a greater Black Sea Region: “Viewing the entire Caucasus within the prism of a greater Black Sea region makes sense politically as well as economically... In this context, the Caucasus is a discernible geographical entity forming an important eastern pillar in the Black Sea region, and hence a gateway to both Central Asia and Iran for the EU. (Cornell & Starr, 2006, p. 73).

Second, the active involvement paradigm, according to which the Caucasus possesses geopolitical activity of its own and, together with the Caspian, can be described as an independent entity of world geopolitics. In view of the Caucasian-Caspian region’s resource and pipeline potential, it can be seen as the central segment on the new Great Game maps. It should be said that the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the Caucasus’ communication potential goes far beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus and should be discussed in the broader Eurasian context.

Third, the autonomy paradigm supported by the majority of experts in the Caucasus: its geopolitical importance is evident and autonomous within the New Great Game framework:

- The Caucasus is a complicated system of relations among several states—Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Turkey, Russia, and Iran. For this reason, the region

can be tentatively described as the Greater Indivisible Caucasus (GIC)

- The Caucasus is a geostratum where geopolitical projects are either synchronized or confronted; etc.
- There are three common elements in the paradigms discussed above:
- The central geographic location of the Caucasus (or the Caspian-Caucasian region) in the Great Land of Five Seas (or the Eurasian Balkans, a much more popular geopolitical formula);
- An open and fierce confrontation of the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian geopolitical strategies;
- Multi-variant combinations of interaction among the players in the New Great Game, both old and new.

The instruments used to achieve the strategic goals in the Caucasian states that form part of the New Great Game zone can be divided into three groups:

- Military interference in the domestic affairs of these states, realized either as “humanitarian intervention” or “a struggle against international terrorism”
- Secret scenarios realized to bring about regime change (so-called Color Revolutions);
- The “permanent tension” strategy achieved by “freezing” and “defrosting” ethnopolitical conflicts.

The above suggests that the New Great Game has reached an active stage in the Caucasus in the form of a manageable chaos scenario. Experts from the Stratfor analytical centre raised this issue in 2005. Today, after the events of 2008-2024, this is no longer a question. The frozen conflicts have become points of accommodation where the basic elements described above are applied and where the geopolitical interests of the global and regional centres of power meet. The question is: Can this statement be applied in its entirety to all the conflicts in the Caucasian region?

Normally, when looking at the vectors of geopolitical activity in the region, experts in Caucasian studies tend to classify them according to the countries involved: American, Russian, Turkic, Iranian, etc. They discuss the vital interests of the geopolitical actors in the region and point to possible political strategies. Today, much is being said about America’s geostrategy in the Caucasus, the Russian-Turkish gambit, Iran’s strategy, etc.

Although academically justified, this approach is hardly practicable when it comes to short-term, to say nothing of long-term, forecasting. This probably explains why the analyst community is repeatedly caught unawares by the “hot” developments in the Caucasus, be it the August

2008 war in Georgia or the Second Karabakh war of 2020-2023. This is caused, on the one hand, by the analysts’ efforts to visualize the vectors of the actors’ geopolitical activity in the absence of reliable information about their plans. On the other hand, they tend to analyse the vectors individually and outside the New Great Game context.

No matter how kaleidoscopic, everything going on in the Caucasus belongs to the New Great Game algorithm and follows “unwritten rules” of sorts:

- To prevent an alliance among the great powers (the American “nightmare,” according to the Halford Mackinder tradition, is a strategic alliance among the continental powers [Russia-Germany; Russia-China, etc.]), or between a great and regional power;
- To avoid playing into the hands of actors of “secondary importance;”
- To let the rival, believe that it has scored a victory by giving it a chance to score a series of tactical victories that will inevitably end in a strategic disaster;
- To keep the smaller regional states away from a stable alliance in order to prevent their transformation from an object of geopolitics into its subject;
- To set the region’s parts against one another and draw them into opposing alliances;
- To pursue active militarization of the region’s countries which, together with the contested ethnopolitical and state borders, creates a set of tools to be used by the key actors for their own geopolitical purposes;
- To haggle behind closed doors while leaving the smaller countries (which have become pawns in the New Great Game) out in the cold. In fact, nothing much has changed since the Munich Deal of 1938 except the forms and geography of exchange;
- To be actively involved in the so-called peace process in the form of:
 - Blocking the rival’s geopolitical strategy;
 - Weakening/dividing the local states by insisting on all sorts of projects (“a common state,” “peace for territories,” “partnership” programs, etc.), which perpetuates these countries’ dependency, indispensable for geopolitical re-drawing of the region’s borders.

The most likely point of “no return” that could destabilize the geopolitical situation not only in the Caucasus but also in the Greater Black Sea-Caspian region, and even in the entire Middle East, is, of course, a full-scale major military conflict. Let’s look at this issue in more detail. There is no shortage of pessimistic scenarios on this topic, even with concrete times specified. Although they are all quite variable, several key storylines can be identified:

- a) A war between the United States and its allies (for example, Israel) on the one hand, and Iran, on the other;
- b) Russia's war with one of the Caucasian states;
- c) A full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Of course, among these, the worst scenario is a war between the countries of the collective West and Iran. Taking into account the fact that Iran potentially has nuclear weapons, according to many analysts, such a conflict would have dire consequences, figuratively called in the media "Iranian Armageddon." These consequences include: retaliatory Iranian strikes of "retaliation"; possible military actions along the entire perimeter of its borders; "colour revolutions" in Tehran or in the north of the country, populated predominantly by ethnic Azerbaijanis; the collapse of the Iranian state into three parts; and even preventive wars with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

In fact, this implies a radical breakdown of existing interstate borders in the spirit of the previously mentioned "New Great Game," which comes into insurmountable contradiction with the prospects for possibly overcoming the fragmentation of the Caucasus (Gadjiev. "Great Game" in the Caucasus. Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow) (Gadzhev, 2012).

However, let us ask ourselves: is a pessimistic scenario inevitable in the unfolding big geopolitical game for the Caucasus? To answer this question briefly, we believe that there is a chance it is not. This chance is connected with the strengthened Azerbaijan, a new actor that has emerged in the modern geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus. Its increase in economic and military-political potential, and most importantly, its demonstrated political will, largely disrupts the plans of participants in geopolitical games in the Caucasus and neutralizes the instruments of their pressure on the countries of the region.

Therefore, summing up what has been written, we can agree with the forecast that in the near future we will witness interesting events in which Azerbaijan, in close alliance with Turkey (and other friendly countries), will once again demonstrate a non-standard approach in the name of peace and security of the entire region.

CONCLUSIONS

After our analysis a question arises: is it even possible, in a situation of geopolitical pluralism that has created a stalemate, to make a breakthrough in resolving conflicts in the Caucasus region? We can endlessly discuss various options for their settlement - forceful, compromise, intermediate, package, phased, etc., but there is no practical

result and apparently there will not be for a long time until the "pendulum" of the balance of power swings in the current status quo in the Caucasus. Almost two centuries have passed, but even today the geopolitical grip is firmly pressing this conflict into the "new world order," the general configuration of which each of the "players" sees in their own way. And this again gives rise to a vicious circle of increasingly violent conflicts, wars, and struggles for new divisions of the world. However, we can agree on one thing: the Caucasus region will play, as it has until now, an important role in world geopolitics.

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