New World Order and Small Regions

The Case of South Caucasus

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ISBN 978-981-19-4036-1 ISBN 978-981-19-4037-8 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4037-8

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

For my parents

Preface

The end of America's unipolar moment and the transition to a post-liberal world order is an exciting subject for research. Innumerable works have been published lately, but few if any shed light on the impact of this historic development on the South Caucasus region. Critical to regional and global powers, the region helps connect several areas of Eurasia in the age of changing connectivity and increasing trend toward the great power competition. Changes in the global power composition among the US, China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and EU are inevitably bound to cause significant reverberations in the South Caucasus.

Considering the importance of the South Caucasus, the lack of academic literature concerning the region within the present fluid global order is all the more surprising. Therefore, there is a glaring need to fill in the gap. I have been studying the changing nature of the present global order and actively published on the subject. It is both exciting and challenging since the author has to dive deep in history, know current geopolitical developments, and also provide a forward-looking perspective (and ideally not one) on how world powers will manage their relations, reshape the elements of the international order, and provide a renewed vision. The latter requires a certain dose of imagination from a writer. Is the world entering the age of heightened competition which at times could include proxy fighting among China, Russia, and the US or the change will be a more orderly one, but still characterized by rewriting

of the rules of the world order and introducing a new concept of bilateral relations? Will the world split into competing zone of geopolitical influence or a thinly spread liberal order will be preserved?

These scenarios are bound to have direct impact on the South Caucasus. Furthermore, envisioning long-term developments in the region also underlines the utmost difficulty of such an endeavor. The author must look at multiple sources from a number of countries, sift them through, analyze and build a long-term vision of the changes which take place regionally and also how they fit into the ongoing reconfiguration of global balance of power.

I have tried to write a book which is also less descriptive of the relations between the three South Caucasus and three surrounding powers—the research readers could find elsewhere. This book is also less engrossed in theoretical discussions, application of various models to the existing relations in the region. Rather, the narrative is based on providing a comprehensive analysis of the current geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus, evolution in foreign policies of China, Iran, Turkey, and Russia toward the region, and how this fits into the global developments such as the present shift of geopolitical power away from the West to the Indo-Pacific region.

The book is about explaining the global changes through the developments in the South Caucasus. I will try to show that ongoing changes in a small region can be more revealing about major actors' aspirations. The work is forward-looking too. It strives to picture the future geopolitical order in and around the South Caucasus, whether the region will be a part of a sphere of influence of illiberal powers or be placed within the limited Western liberal grouping.

This book is also about the region's smaller states and how they perceive the changing global order. Major revelation will be that they are highly perceptive of the changing global context. And despite the smallness of their geopolitical weight, those actors tend to build more diversified relations and act in a more independent manner. Their fate is deeply intertwined with the neighboring larger powers. This means that in the immediate future Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia will inevitably feel firsthand the effects of the unfolding global re-ordering. Still the geopolitical trends highlighted throughout this book will show how blurred the boundaries of the South Caucasus are. The space is no longer a part of the Russia–West competition, but rather in an increasingly multipolar world

has gradually turned into an overcrowded geopolitical space with multiple middle powers and global actors vying for a share in the region's future.

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Acknowledgments The publication of this book would not have been possible without the intellectual stimulation from my colleagues across the world. I would like also to extend my gratitude to the friends in Georgia. Special thanks go to the colleagues at European University and Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU). I am grateful for the insights I received for the research presented at several scientific seminars hosted by Professor Vladimer Papava from TSU. Victor Kipiani and a friend Gela I. Charkviani were of particular help as discussions on geopolitical matters with both of them helped develop critical ideas found in this book.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The world is amid a gradual shift from unipolarity to multipolarity which touches upon the South Caucasus and the three Eurasian powers around it—Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Moreover, the region's geography puts it under the radar in Beijing, which means that the book will be also about Chinese influence in the South Caucasus, which, however, is far behind what the neighboring regional powers enjoy. Furthermore, though no separate chapter is devoted to the collective West's interests in the South Caucasus, no story about the geopolitics of this crucial region is complete without discussing the drivers behind the US' and EU's policies—Western interests will be discussed repeatedly in each section of the work. Therefore, this is a story about the congested geopolitics of the South Caucasus as well as its evolving position amid tectonic changes in the global distribution of power.

Indeed, the changing global order affects the South Caucasus in multiple ways. It causes deep fracturing within the region when each of the three small states is associated with one of the regional powers or a distant great power. The process accelerated over the past several years with the roots going back to the early 2000s, though it could be also argued that it all began following the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991. Now the intense fracturing of the South Caucasus prevents establishing a comprehensive vision for security and development of the region. And this concerns not only the West and the projects it supports, but

E. Avdaliani, *New World Order and Small Regions*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4037-8_1

also puts limits on Russian and Turkish visions for unencumbered trade and energy flows and unhindered operation of railway, road, and pipeline infrastructure. But while the deep fracturing impacts all large players, it is the collective West, due to its geographic distance and resistance from the regional players, that loses the most. Indeed, despite critical differences Iran, Russia, and Turkey have a freer hand in attaining their geopolitical goals in the South Caucasus. Geographic proximity aides profusely, so does close cultural and historic connections. But most of all, the three are motivated by the need to limit the Western presence. This was well evident during and in the wake of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War when Ankara, Moscow, and Tehran were mostly in line regarding the Western interests.

I call this process "regionalizm" whereby the three regional powers tend to exclude non-regional powers from the region and deal with security and economic matters of the South Caucasus separately from the established norms which underpinned the liberal world order since the 1990s. This concerns methods of peace making, economic and military cooperation. These norms have been formulated in the age of liberal ascendancy and upheld ever since by the collective West. Now they are intensively disputed.

Therefore, the book presents the narrative about the South Caucasus which is deeply interrelated with the ongoing changes in the global order. China and the US are entering the period of intense competition which almost borders on evolving into an open rivalry. This takes shape in a number of ways. But perhaps a crucial area where China challenges the US and which makes it significantly different from the Soviet Union is Beijing's successful rivalry in the technological sphere. Serving as a backbone to the US economic and military dominance, China's growing pace of technological development would impact America's ability to sustain its unrivaled military position in the air and oceans. What also sets Beijing apart from previous challenges to Washington's position is a sheer size of Chinese economy. This reverberates across multiple fronts of competition. Chinese money dissolves the Western resistance, bites into vulnerabilities the Eurasian states have, effectively undermines America's preponderance and most of all its ability to garner necessary support from the allies. Furthermore, China's military resurgence directly impacts America's positions in the South China Sea and the larger Indo-Pacific region where Beijing has invested billions into constructing or operating multiple ports from eastern shores of Africa to the countries near India. Dominance over

immediate waters would give China the ability to challenge the US in global waters.

Ultimately this narrowing disparity in power trickles down every global institution, alliance and most of all economy. This causes debates in America and among its allies. Though the magnitude of resistance has yet to be determined, the need to address China's rise is what the policymakers in Washington agree upon. It brings about one of the seminal developments in the unfolding global geopolitics which has direct impact on the main subject of this book—South Caucasus: gradual shift in US' attention from various parts of the Eurasian landmass to South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific region. The process has already started and will be ongoing for some time. Europe and the Middle East, two regions traditionally close to American interests, will be most impacted. This does not mean that the US is withdrawing all its assets from the regions. Washington will maintain an effective geopolitical influence in Europe and parts of the Middle East, but it will be a far cry from what role the two spaces historically played in America's calculus (hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan is a part of the trend). The US will likely maintain its military presence in both regions. But ultimately what matters most is the level of American commitment to the spread of liberal values, democracy, and multilateralism at the edge of Europe, in what formerly were parts of the Soviet Union and now constitute a borderland region between Russia and the collective West. Russia will continue to hold a major role in America's foreign policy thinking. But in the longer-term perspective, the "Russian menace" is nothing similar to the Soviet challenge. Moscow will be a troublemaker for Washington with occasional upticks in competition in some spots across the Eurasian landmass, but it will no longer constitute a fundamental threat. This means that managing the existing disagreements will guide the future of the American–Russian relations. Groundbreaking concessions are unlikely to follow unless one of the sides does not give up on its crucial geopolitical aspirations. This means that America will be increasingly hesitant to make a major move regarding Georgia's or Ukraine's NATO membership prospects, but will also try to keep these countries within its sphere of geopolitical influence.

Therefore, to recalibrate its foreign policy away from the European theater, Washington needs stable, though at times inadvertently competitive, relations with Moscow. And this is of critical importance for the South Caucasus. The region has seen a significant growth of American security and political interests since the end of the Soviet period. In the

age of American unipolarity, the maximum extension of US influence was achieved when Georgia was close to becoming a NATO member in 2008. As the age of the US benign hegemony comes to an end, the South Caucasus will experience firsthand the impact of American shift to the Indo-Pacific region and Washington's willingness to reach a long-term understanding with Russia. This could mean freezing Georgia's NATO membership hopes for quite some time, and growing distancing from the South Caucasus overall. Moves like these will serve as a signal for Russia and other regional powers to fill in the emerging geopolitical vacuum by building an order of exclusion aiming at complete sidelining of the collective West.

Together with Russia, China's, Iran's, and Turkey's positions, namely their increasingly Eurasianist tendencies, are also considered in the book when analyzing their evolving geopolitical position in the South Caucasus. It will be argued that the regional trio and to a limited degree China grow increasingly cooperative at sidelining the collective West. It takes form in various ways from preventing the West from establishing and implementing its peacemaking traditions to providing alternative security measures and increasing economic influence.

Indeed, the regional three and China are motivated by the opposition to the collective West. The latter has pressured Ankara, Moscow, and Tehran in one way or another and has unstable relations with China. Incentives for cooperation among the Eurasian giants are multiple, but the decline of the liberal world order is arguably the strongest glue. The level of coordination varies, but all the Eurasian powers seek changes to the liberal order. They also seek to establish a different, Eurasianist model of state-to-state relations. Iran, Russia, and Turkey strive to build multi-vector foreign policy model and get rid of fixation on one geopolitical pole, while China, and it is becoming increasingly clear, intends to build a Sino-centric world order. Thence comes the trend to avoid formal alliances and consider the latter as a Cold War relic, a hindrance for the countries' greater geopolitical maneuverability. A new model of bilateral ties is also heavily dependent on the transactional approach—an easier way to reach consensus on critical geopolitical issues whether in northern Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, or elsewhere.

This book is also about how regional powers along with China strive to change or reshape the existing liberal international order by infusing new norms or striving to upend it altogether. They tend to carve out

a bigger space for themselves within the same order, though the intensity and scope of the demanded changes vary from country to country (Turkey is the least interested power in a complete re-ordering). All four powers tend to build spheres of exclusive interests. Some areas are coterminous with the influences of other Eurasian powers in which case condominium models or zones of exclusion are being constructed. The South Caucasus is a good example of orders of exclusion which, nestled in between regional powers, emerge across the Eurasian landmass.

Another important development related to the changing global order is the rise of illiberalism and China, Iran, Russia, and Turkey are also loosely interlinked through the support for this counter-Enlightenment movement. Illiberalism fights liberal views, but most of all it is seen by strongmen as a return to normalcy in human and state relations. Illiberal powers hail the primacy of state and strongman rule, and create something eerily reminiscent of illiberal governments between the two world wars, when smaller and newer European democratic systems were barely able to survive the pressures from within and outside.

Interconnection of the developments in the South Caucasus with the changing global order is also evident in the fact that the region's deep links with the Middle East has re-emerged. This is a development of historic significance. Ever since the establishment of the Russian imperial rule over the South Caucasus in the early nineteenth century, the region was gradually shut off from the geopolitics of the Middle East. Russian militarized rule and increased security brought relative safety to the South Caucasus. Much deeper dissociation took place in the Soviet times when borders between the Soviet Union and the neighboring Turkey and Iran were essentially closed. Even after the collapse of the Soviet regime, the South Caucasus was still dominated by Russian military, economic, and security interests. This makes the current re-emergence of deep geopolitical links between the South Caucasus and the Middle East all the more significant. A flow of fighters from the South Caucasus into the Syrian battlefield as well as the deep involvement of Iran, Russia, and Turkey in the Syrian conundrum made the processes in the Middle East reverberate in the South Caucasus. Furthermore, Turkey increased its dependence on energy inflows from the Caspian Sea. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 showed how interrelated the region became with Turkey and Iran. Since the two both cooperate and compete with Russia in Syria and elsewhere, their positions in the Middle East are now increasingly linked to the decisions they make in the South Caucasus. Henceforth,

the regional heavyweights link their policies in the Middle East to the developments in the South Caucasus and vice versa.

Thus the above discussion shows how dependent the South Caucasus is on regional and global developments. It also means that this book is forward-looking. It seeks to answer the question as to how the unfolding shifts in global economy, distribution of military and technological power will affect the geopolitics of the South Caucasus and what place it will have in the emerging post-liberal global order. As the region roughly stands on a putative line of division between the Western and Eurasian geopolitical influences, the book looks at the bottom of the nature of the US–China competition, Russia's place in it, Turkey's and Iran's evolving position, in order to answer the question of how large powers around the South Caucasus will be acting in the light of the grand strategic shift in America's position. Russia's position in this global re-ordering will be of special importance. Though with a significantly limited resource base than other geopolitical poles in Eurasia, Russia still a major player would have been wooed by China and the West, if not the deteriorated position following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. If played nicely, the Kremlin might have ended up receiving significant concessions from either of the sides. And Moscow's deteriorating position will concern the South Caucasus where Russia has historic interests and the US needs to retain some elements of its influence to ensure the flow of energy resources from the Caspian Sea to Europe in circumvention of Russian mainland.

This book is also about the future global order. The end of America's unipolarity ushers in the post-liberal order characterized by the emergence of several poles of geopolitical influence (possibly spheres of influence). This change will also allow the middle powers, such as Turkey and Iran, to seek greater autonomy, ability for balancing among several global centers—China, Russia, the EU, and the US. As all these powers have some longstanding interests in the South Caucasus, the end of the unipolar/liberal global world order will have direct bearing on the South Caucasus.

Thence comes the need to discuss multiple possible scenarios on emerging world order. And though the reader might at times rightly observe that the book is often more about Eurasian great power competition, dissociating the South Caucasus from the larger process in the world would not provide the whole picture, and in fact would be incorrect. High pace of global interconnectedness no longer allows it. Moreover, as argued above, larger powers around the South Caucasus are themselves

deeply engaged in facilitating the changes in the balance of power as each seeks larger place in Eurasian geopolitics. This means that their geopolitical outlook toward the South Caucasus is directly related to the process in the Middle East, ties with the West, and China.

With the liberal order likely to be transformed into either a more closed grouping of states (or bounded order), a thinly layered liberal system or to be unraveled altogether, in all the scenarios the South Caucasus will feel tremendous impact. It will be also a major test for the West to show how important the region is to it. Was its deep involvement in the South Caucasus a result of a unipolar moment when the collective West saw its greatest involvement in the region primarily through American support for Georgia and EU's Eastern Partnership initiative, or a result of a realist politics when the region's strategic position proved to be a primary motivator? It could be both, in which case Western influence of some sort, perhaps mainly in Georgia, will be maintained. Should the Western involvement have been a result of a unipolar, ideological moment led by George W. Bush, then American influence in the region would likely be further limited as a more realist approach of abstaining from involvement in the unstable far-flung region would prevail.

As the book seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the unfolding geopolitical changes in the age of increased great power competition across Eurasia and its impact on the South Caucasus, a special emphasis will be made on recent research on the geopolitics of the South Caucasus. The modern scholarship mainly focuses either on interstate relations between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia or on each regional actor's (Russia, Turkey and Iran) ties with the region's one or all three small states. The research into China–South Caucasus ties follow a similar paradigm. Little attempt has been made to see the region's shifting geopolitical importance from a global perspective: growing US–China rivalry and shifting balance of power in Eurasia; recalibration of the US' military and diplomatic vision in western Eurasia to adjust to the rising Chinese power. From a theoretical point of view, the book will argue that the increased competition in the region fits into the global pattern of unfolding great power competition, when military and economic calculations drive Eurasian powers to increase influence in their immediate neighborhoods by sidelining the collective West from the negotiating table and introducing alternative security architecture.

The book will also portray the increasingly fractured South Caucasus where geopolitical heavyweights, through their economic and military

support, stoke and likely purposefully maintain rivalry among the three states, especially Armenia and Azerbaijan. It will be also argued that though regional powers (especially Turkey and Russia) compete with one another they are nevertheless driven by a wider vision of limiting the Western influence in the region.

Another scholarly addition will be an argument about Iran, which, hampered by Western sanctions, sees its influence in the South Caucasus diminishing even further as Ankara and Moscow increase their military and economic footprint in the region. Pragmatism will continue to guide Tehran's stance and will explain the Islamic Republic's shift of position following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War—explicit diplomatic support for Baku and the willingness to further improve ties with Azerbaijan.

Three relevant categories of scholarly publications will be examined for this research. First are those which have studied foreign policies of China, Iran, Russia, and Turkey in their general capacity and from different angles. The second group are the works that focus on the South Caucasus, its evolving importance, and touch upon the subjects such as security, energy, and other critical regional challenges. The third group comprise the works which discuss Iran's, China's, Russia's, and Turkey's bilateral relations with the region's states. Another addition to the scholarly discussion will be the use of official foreign policy documents and scholarly articles published in the South Caucasus states. Rarely used by western scholars studying the geopolitics of the region, the local literature helps to trace changes in thinking and perception among the local political elites on the region's changing geopolitics.

Literature on three theories regarding Iran's policy in the South Caucasus will be examined: ideology-based and bound on spreading Islamic fundamentalism; ideology-free approach; and a third that argues Iran has had only limited ideological inclinations. In case of theoretical approaches which can best explain Ankara's drive in the South Caucasus, the literature on "Turkish Eurasianism" will be examined. As to Russia, it will be argued that Russia in the South Caucasus has been leaning on transactional approach mixed with elements of pursuit of geopolitical advantages in a purely imperial manner. And to the contrary of the established academic view that Russia has been successful at increasing its geopolitical weight in the region, it will be argued that there is a growing

tendency in Moscow's foreign policy to rely on a heavier use of the military element. It underlines deficiencies in Russia's ability to effectively exercise an unrivaled influence over South Caucasus.

The work will be divided into seven chapters with the present one serving as first. Chapter 2—*Shifting Global Balance of Power and the South Caucasus*—will examine the evolving importance of the South Caucasus within the context of global geopolitical shifts. First major argument will be about US' growing passivity in the South Caucasus. In the light of increased competition with China, and US' refocusing on the Indo-Pacific region, American resolve to be present with high numbers of troops and active diplomacy in eastern Europe and the Middle East is undergoing fundamental changes. So does the willingness and ability to systematically confront Russia in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus. The trend will have a major repercussion for whatever plans NATO/EU have had for expansion into the wider Black Sea region.

Even under a president who is the staunchest supporter of the liberal world order, Washington, ideally, would need years to return to the pre-Trump period. A likelier scenario, however, will be the US containing or reducing those global obligations it presently has, and remaining moderate in assuming new ones in the decade ahead. The rules-based international order will continue to be under severe stress. Stalemate in the international organizations, Russia's military adventurism in the immediate neighborhood as well as China's push to set up its own institutions undermine the pillars of the US-led world. This leads to the strengthening of illiberal political trends in Eurasia, which reverse the operation of the Western-led multilateralism and embolden regional, often revanchist powers.

As the urgency for re-invention of the liberal order will be increasingly discussed, this will be causing a major re-alignment of forces in Eurasia where pivot to Asia has become a crucial component in foreign policy of Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Despite occasional competition, the three powers share long-term geopolitical objectives of changing the legacy of the US-led world order in the Middle East and building a new web of bilateral partnerships which would usher in a new security construct.

Critical to understanding the future of the South Caucasus is to picture various possible scenarios on the emerging world order. Triumphant China, declining West, emergence of spheres of influence, a thinly layered liberal order spread wide geographically or thick, but geographically limited order—these scenarios will be discussed in this chapter as a

necessary background to imagining the future geopolitics of the South Caucasus.

Chapter 3—*Multipolar World and the Return of Great Power Competition to the South Caucasus*—focuses on introducing the South Caucasus, its growing significance in the international system and its importance for the major Eurasian players—Iran, China, Russia, and Turkey. It outlines those often shared interests of the four powers, which include energy resources and transport routes, security and consumer markets. Reassessment of the existing connectivity is necessary in the light of the results of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War when according to the November 2020 ceasefire agreement, which ended the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, a transportation corridor from Azerbaijan via Armenia's southernmost province of Syunik to the Nakhchivan exclave was agreed upon.

Having regained its prominence in Russia's and Turkey's foreign policy discourses since the Syrian conflict and the war in Ukraine, competition among Russia, Turkey, and Iran is likely to grow in intensity. The November 2020 deal underlines this trend whereby the South Caucasus is increasingly turning into a region of great power competition in the era of China–US global rivalry.

Though applied to different regions of Eurasia where great powers vie for energy resources and the control of strategic territories, the application of the great power competition concept to the South Caucasus has not yet been made so far.

Geopolitical visions, immediate goals, and wider priorities of China, Iran, Russia, and Turkey in the region will be seen in the context of relative Western geopolitical distraction and the opportunities this provides to the three powers. Though Iran, Turkey, and Russia have traditionally opposing visions, the US pressure on the three provides a necessary glue to work toward limiting Western influence in the South Caucasus. China far more limited impact on the region, but it too largely follows the logic of the regional powers when it comes to the sidelining the West.

Another argument will be about putting the pursuit of the three states' geopolitical ambitions in the South Caucasus in theoretical frames. Each will be discussed at length in separate chapters, but a short description of Turkish Eurasianism, Iranian, and Russian pragmatism will nevertheless be presented in this chapter.

Chapter 4—*Turkey's Evolving Approach to the South Caucasus and the Black Sea Region*—will provide an overview of Turkey's changing geopolitical position in the South Caucasus and the eastern Black Sea. It will be suggested that despite the decline of initial strategic rigor that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ankara is once again on a path to pursue its geopolitical ambitions in the region—building an arc of geopolitical influence from Ukraine to the Caspian basin.

It will be shown that a shift in attention is taking place within Turkish foreign policy as the era of "strategic depth," which favored Turkey's closer geopolitical engagement with the Middle East and other regions, is now actively applied to the South Caucasus and eastern Black Sea. For Turkey these two regions are deeply interconnected making up a continuous space.

Turkey's evolving stance toward both regions is closely related to the ties with Russia. Ankara and Moscow, whose current close ties are increasingly based on long-term geopolitical realities (as opposed to what many think), are pulled closer to seek compromise and possibly even a long-term condominium over the South Caucasus. The Nagorno-Karabakh deal (though partially) signals to this development.

This, however, would not mean Turkey's competition with Russia would subside. As Ankara has grown increasingly vocal diplomatically and militarily through a robust support for Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine, its vision for the South Caucasus and the Black Sea will often clash with that of Moscow. The latter, seeing challenges to its position will increasingly rely on military tools to retain its primary role as a balancer between Armenia and Azerbaijan and a supporter of Georgia's two separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Since Russia is unwilling to share its major economic and military position with another regional power, let alone cede it altogether, competition between the two powers is bound to grow through the promotion of critical infrastructure and provision of military support for South Caucasus states and statelets. Turkey will increase its economic and military ties with Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Seen from a regional perspective, this arc of states under Russian geopolitical pressure thus represent a comfortable space where Turkey could work to offset Russia's growing influence in Syria and other Middle East states.

However, Turkey will be also careful not to make major political and military moves lest cause Russia's outright military reaction. For the moment, Moscow's military position in the region is unassailable and

Ankara will have to move slowly to increase its influence. The Nagorno-Karabakh deal and the agreement on allied relations with Azerbaijan shows that Turkish strategy pays off. To further offset the imbalance it witnessed with Russia, Turkey might be also more open to measured Western influence in the region. Yet, similar visions on the need to cut off the collective West from the region will mitigate the level of competition between Turkey and Russia.

Turkey's geopolitical activity in the South Caucasus will be also seen in the Eurasianist theoretical frame. Ankara's pivot to Eurasia takes place amidst a transforming global order, dynamic regional context, and turbulent domestic political scene. These factors reinforce one another and explain Turkey's growing interest in closer cooperation with Azerbaijan and pursuit of geopolitical ambitions in the Caspian basin and Central Asia.

Chapter 5 will focus on *Iran's Changing Strategic Position in the South Caucasus*. Though there is a great deal of research on Iran's policy in the South Caucasus, a striking deficit of conceptually based research on Iran's policy and relations with the region persists. There is also a need to address Iran's seemingly deteriorating geopolitical position in the region following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.

To fill in the above the deficit, instead of narrating Iran's relations with each of the three states since the 1990s (the task carried out by other scholars), Tehran's policies will be put into a theoretical perspective: continuity of its geopolitical approach since the 1990s based on pragmatism devoid of religious and revolutionary fervor; pursuit of balance of power and minimization of Western influence.

It will be also argued that currently Iran is reaching a point in foreign policy toward the region when a drastic adjustment and perhaps even a reassessment of its core approaches are to take place. Iran's geopolitical position in the South Caucasus worsens as it risks losing its traditionally small influence to Russia and Turkey. The changed balance of power following the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict shows the emergence of the emboldened Azerbaijan, weakened Armenia and Turkey's increasing influence along Iran's northern border. With Russia's growing military presence, a whole new reality to Iran's northern border is now unfolding. Historically keen on balancing between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran will have to adjust to the results of the war. No longer the policy of balancing will be as effective as before.

Pragmatism will be another tool to gauge Tehran's evolving stance. Leaning toward Armenia was expected with a more cautious approach toward Azerbaijan. However, pragmatism dictates that Iran re-adjusts to the changed geopolitical landscape by finding a common ground with Azerbaijan. The geopolitical changes will require a major investment of economic and military resources from Iran to shore up its weakening position in the South Caucasus.

Still, however, mindful of limits to its power Iran will comfortably operate in Russia's shadow as both are interested in limiting Western influence and seeking "regionalism" in the South Caucasus.

Chapter 6 traces the evolution of China's geo-economic vision of the South Caucasus with a particular focus made on the development of bilateral relations with the region's three states since the early 2010s.

It will be argued that presently Beijing could boast of only tailored geo-economic approach to each of the three South Caucasus states. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia recognize that China's BRI overlaps with their own foreign policy goal of transforming their respective countries into full-fledged connectivity hubs between Europe and Asia.

Though Chinese investments in Georgia cannot be separated from that in Azerbaijan and vice versa as both countries represent a continuous corridor, the discussion on the regional dynamics will show that in the projects connecting China to Europe, a solid base for Beijing's deeper strategic and economic engagement with the South Caucasus has yet to be established. The major reason for the lack of China's presence in the region is contingent upon its still developing position in Central Asia. This explains why China still does not have an overarching vision for the South Caucasus similar to what it has elsewhere. Without better infrastructure through Central Asia and between the latter and the South Caucasus, Beijing is unable to be more active in the wider Black Sea region.

There is also an element of potential competition with other large powers which serves as a further blocking factor for the BRI in the South Caucasus. The region has traditionally been a hotspot of competing geopolitical agendas of Russia, Turkey, to a lesser degree Iran, as well as other larger players such as the US and EU. In the context of the changing world order, the South Caucasus is becoming a part of the great power competition, which provides opportunities, but could also increases risks hampering long-term connectivity projects such as the BRI.

Chapter 7 will discuss *Russia's "Return" to the South Caucasus*. To be sure Russia has never left the South Caucasus after the collapse of

the Soviet Union, but its influence in the region varied ever since. This chapter will explore Moscow's quest for hegemony/domination in the region by underlining several trends which have emerged since 2008 when the Georgia–Russia war broke out. Russia's stance in the South Caucasus is increasingly about minding its limitations; backpedaling on its grand aspirations when necessary; and moving foreign policy beyond the personalities to be anchored more in state interests. A growing tilt toward transactional approach in Russia's relations with South Caucasus states is taking place. The model for this type of ties is Russian–Azerbaijani relations.

Another argument is Russia's understanding that in the era of intense great power competition, its military position in the region should be continuously strengthened. Its decision to send peacekeepers in Azerbaijan following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War underlines this development.

However, this does not mean Moscow is powerful enough to act unilaterally without a potential blowback from regional or global powers. The Kremlin sees it is largely unable to deny the region to other strong actors. On the contrary, this will be another argument in this chapter that Russia's foreign policy is increasingly about understanding that third powers can no longer be excluded from the South Caucasus. Sole-ruling imperial vision can no longer be sustained and Russia learns to adjust and deal with competitors rather than trying to shut them off. But there is a caveat when we approach this strand of Russian geopolitical thinking. Resigned to other players' involvement, Russia nevertheless differentiates between which power would be less damaging to its vital interests. In this way, Moscow prefers regional powers such as Turkey and Iran and, to a certain extent, China rather than the collective West. Turkey's recent resurgence in the South Caucasus is a good example. Unable to preclude Ankara from participating in the Nagorno-Karabakh resolution process, Moscow cooperated, let the Turks in, but tried to do this more on its own terms, minimizing threats to fundamental Russian interests.

Still, heavy use of the military tools for pursuing its great power posture is indicative of crisis of Russia's ability to solve the problems in its neighborhood based on prestige and negotiation. Fear of possible loss of geopolitical ground to other powers (US and NATO) led Russia to take drastic measures in 2008 against Georgia. With stationing of peacekeeping force in Azerbaijan the situation was different, but underlying trends were similar. Lest losing Azerbaijan to Turkey, Moscow had to

move militarily. This means that Russia has learned to see limits to its power and leverage those advantages it still possesses. Though mitigating Turkey's resurgence brings immediate results, in the longer term Russia's influence in the South Caucasus is being increasingly reliant on using military pressure and potentially coercive economic tools rather than on prestige and soft power as is often characteristic to a great power.

There are similar limits regarding the operation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The belief that Moscow is searching for ways to enlist Azerbaijan and impose heavy limits on member states proves unsatisfactory. On the contrary, mindful of its limited resources, Russia would rather seek limited integration of the neighboring states into the EEU or build close relations based on state-to-state approach. As the case with Azerbaijan showed, advancing close bilateral ties could bring far more results than a forceful imposition of supranational institutions.

In addition to summarizing the major arguments of the previous chapters, a forward-looking approach will be adopted in the concluding Chapter 8 to suggest what the new order in and around the South Caucasus will look like in the coming decade. Several scenarios will be suggested and one of them is that the South Caucasus will be firmly subject to great power competition. The security and economic development of the region will be often trampled by the neighboring heavyweights seeking greater status—the process accentuated by the West's absence and shifts in global balance of power.

Turkey, though hampered by the lack of resources in the post-Soviet period will be on the course of attaining larger geopolitical influence through its growing military cooperation with Georgia and especially Azerbaijan. Building a land corridor to the Caspian and having closer military and energy ties with Baku will cement Ankara's presence in the eastern part of the South Caucasus.

Russia, though increasingly challenged by Turkey, will manage to remain a major power in the region. To bar Ankara's moves, Moscow will be responding by increasing its military presence in the region, building closer bilateral ties with Armenia, pressuring Azerbaijan when deemed necessary, and supporting the separatist entities as the tool for denying NATO/EU expansion into the region. However, increasingly, a negative assessment of Russia's presence will be solidifying in Armenia and Azerbaijan as Russian troops rarely leave the territories they were let in.

Thus Russia and Turkey will be evolving into real power brokers in the region, while the collective West will be increasingly sidelined. Iran's

power will remain limited even if a major reconsideration of foreign policy by the Iranian political elites takes place.

On a broader level it will be suggested that the South Caucasus is likely to fall outside whatever version of the liberal world order is preserved. A thinly spread global liberal system will be revolving around such issues as climate change, prevention of cyber-attacks and terrorism and extremism. Below that, however, the liberal order will be unable to withstand the competition from Eurasian land powers. The South Caucasus, in between three Eurasian states, could be gradually sliding into the Eurasianist model of state-to-state relations, balancing in the newly emerging regional security architecture. One exception could be Georgia as the West will likely retain active engagement with Tbilisi. But here too concrete steps to provide military security are unlikely to follow.

In case of the liberal order bouncing back to the core liberal-democratic states of the West, Japan, Australia, and few others, the South Caucasus will be more easily subject to the great power competition and the concomitant rise of the concept of spheres of influence.

Either way, the future for the region is full of uncertainties. The Eurasianist model will be increasingly appealing, while the gradual recession of the elements of liberal order seems inevitable.

CHAPTER 2

Shifting Global Balance of Power and the South Caucasus

The Nature of Liberal Crisis

Liberal international order experiences fundamental challenges (Deneen, 2018; Schoen, 2020). It has witnessed numerous crises since the end of World War II, but perhaps the modern one is the most expansive as it goes much beyond the troubles in bilateral ties between any two Western democracies and punctures the very foundation of the order.

The challenge is multi-layered and much larger in essence than what the China–USSR strategic cooperation (in the 1950s) and generally the communist threat were during the Cold War. Moscow and Beijing threatened the very geopolitical vision of the US—to have Eurasia as much divided as possible. The communist idea also seemed threatening especially in the 1940s–1950s when Mao Tse-Tung's victory in China's civil war in 1949 further expanded the socialist agenda to much of the supercontinent. But the intensity of the challenge soon abated and remained to be solely military in nature. Soviet economic and soft power allure proved ineffective and it quickly became apparent that the liberal order and advantages it produced (technological and economic superiority) stood unchallenged. The current liberal crisis is also bigger than what France did when it withdrew from NATO's structures in 1966 or other subsequent disagreements among liberal allies.

The America-led order is a loosely organized hierarchical formation where US domination is felt and visible but not overwhelming to cause

E. Avdaliani, *New World Order and Small Regions*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4037-8_2

outright opposition, creation of coalitions, etc. (Ikenberry, 2010) US pushed for hierarchical relations but also agreed upon rules and institutions. This dualism which has made the US-led order resilient, appealing, and in many ways based on consent. It is an open system where all revolves around the US and other major democratic states. But smaller, less influential, or even subordinate states too have a share in the decision-making process through full participation in the inclusive institutions. This is a mixture of both hierarchy, even some sort of imperial influence, and consent on a part of weaker, dependent states (Ikenberry, 2010).

This loosely organized hierarchy is indeed unique. Yet another distinctive feature of the liberal order is that unlike any other world system the benefits of participating in it are not accrued to one or several powers, but are more or less evenly spread among its participants. Even China, which has only partly been a member of the liberal order, has witnessed the system's benefits firsthand as the participation in America-led multilateral institutions actually helped develop Chinese economy and elevate its geopolitical weight.

And this tells a story of how special the liberal world order proved to be. Some argue that it could be seen as a product of exceptional historical processes and not a culmination of a long-drawn and much logical development (Kagan, 2018). All, however, indicate that without liberalism the US and most of Europe could have remained inconspicuous places. Indeed, the reason of liberalism defeating authoritarianism cannot simply be attributed to exceptional circumstances or the luck on battlefield. The advancement of the liberal states has been a result of superiority of liberal thinking over the rival ideologies of the twentieth century and simply illiberal methods of governing we see today in some parts of the world.

A cornerstone of liberal internationalism is a normative frame within which it operates. It is contingent upon various rules, institutions, partnerships, and alliances which fuse into multilateralism. Liberal internationalism is expansive which means that it seeks to include newer lands and peoples under its fold. But this has always been bound to create tensions with the non-liberal powers. In previous centuries Asia's weak empires hardly managed to withstand on their own the technologically advanced West. They even failed to cooperate in creating a unified front. As a result, an extraordinary liberal awakening and its ultimate expansion in nineteenth and twentieth centuries followed.

Liberal idea was built around and influenced by the Westphalian concept of state sovereignty. But increasingly the modern-day liberal expansion undermined a core Westphalian idea of pluralism of political and ideological systems (Harris, 2015; Kundnani, 2017). Even if the Western leaders were more considerate in their foreign policy actions and less eager to extend liberalism deep into Eurasia where its tradition was sparse or non-existent, the unipolar moment was still bound to experience troubles. Even moderate spread of liberalism causes nationalism, questions the very idea of state sovereignty, and high pace of globalization incurs loss of countless industry jobs in the West (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Another way of explaining the present troubles might be that the liberal order is in the process of adapting. More than three decades passed since the end of the Cold War and after the initial euphoria of the "end of history," there might be an overextension. While previously it was nestled on mostly the western parts of the European continent, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and some other parts of what we nowadays call the Indo-Pacific realm, the liberal order made huge territorial inroads into the heart of Eurasia after the end of the Cold War. Though great Eurasian civilizations historically have not been immune to Western influence of some sort, they always resisted its cultural, political, and economic influence. Thus what nowadays Russia, Turkey, Iran, China, and even partially India do in resisting Western multilateralism should come as no surprise.

It is, however, startling to see the power these countries now possess and the level of cooperation they now enjoy. Their strength is rooted in the near uniform spread of technological prowess, i.e. the modernity, and economic benefits across the world. In twenty-first century the modernity empowers both liberal and illiberal camps and this constitutes a fundamental break with the past when progress and liberalism went hand in hand and were almost exclusively confined to the West. Thus America-led liberal internationalism brought about largest benefits for the world overall enabling large, but poor states turn into major regional or world players. This also planted seeds for effective resistance to liberal ideas and America's geopolitical vision.

From a historic perspective, this could be cast as a continuation of the struggle between the sea and land powers. Sea powers—liberal democracies—though unable to outcompete militarily the Eurasian land empires and change their state-building patterns, mostly resort to influencing their rivals' behavior, constraining their ability to unite or influence Eurasia in its entirety. It is no coincidence that the world's greatest democracies

were the lands hard to reach—British Isles and the US. Development of democracy took much longer time in the continental Europe or failed to take root in Asia because emerging liberal forces were often smashed outright or contained by the neighboring autocratic land empires.

Sea powers possessed technological prowess, but their potential was often checked by continental powers' far greater human and natural resources. And this is where the critical difference between modern and previous challenges to the West stands. The America-imposed liberal system allowed a more or less even diffusion of economic benefits and technological knowledge. Now powerful continental illiberal states are technologically advanced coupled with astounding human capital and natural resource base. They are increasingly tilting toward greater cooperation among themselves to confront the collective West.

There is also a problem of increasing incongruity between the social contract which was a basis of the modern liberal system and the decreasing benefits it currently brings to the order's leading members. The liberal order has been built through agreements and organizational structures. It is an outcome of decade-long cooperation among various states willing to advance a rules-based world order (Ikenberry, 2020). However, those very fundamentals which ensured the efficacy of multilateralism have lately been thinning out (Case & Deaton, 2020). Mutual military protection and social advancement have stopped to work as nowadays it has become increasingly difficult for Western societies to grasp the traditional interconnection between the liberal internationalism and progress at home (Ikenberry, 2020). There is also a growing sentiment that the order has been more beneficial to other parts of the world. Some of this thinking is correct. Global financial meltdown of 2008 brought about greater economic inequality, which in turn caused protectionist and populist tendencies across the world to scale back the pace of globalization. The latter is now increasingly associated with decline of numerous specific sectors and massive job loss among semi-skilled and unskilled workers (Loftus & Kanet, 2019).

Surprisingly, the current crisis in the liberal order began when the West triumphed in the late 1980s–early 1990s, and the universal spread of liberal democracy seemed inevitable. However, in a decade or so the West reached a certain limit of its capacities for expansion. In a way, the Eurasian pushback nowadays means that the liberal internationalism overextended itself, when it stumbled upon arguably the world's most powerful sentiment—nationalism (Mearsheimer, 2018). The latter

empowers the concept of sovereignty and serves as the glue for those who act against multilateralism. Nationalism blocks the spread of liberalism and helps motivate a collection of otherwise disparate states into acting uniformly against liberal internationalism. Since the liberal internationalism can function only in the unipolar world, gradual shift toward multipolarity could also mean the death of liberal expansionism and gradual shift toward more realist perspectives in international affairs and future world order building (Mearsheimer, 2018).

During the Cold War the liberal order was confined only to a cluster of states. The end of communism and the Soviet Union initiated critical changes. Opened borders, introduction of liberal ideas in trade and governance transformed the liberal internationalism from the closed Cold War period grouping to the global idea with no competitor. Spread of liberal democracies and open economies went hand in hand. No borders constituted a limit to the spread of the idea. Liberal internationalism obtained elements of proselytism which turned it into a near-religious idea.

It came as no surprise, then, that the expanded, unconstrained liberal order overextended itself. It reached the depths of the Eurasian continent—into those areas which till then had traditionally been under the influence or direct control of authoritarian states. Some of those lands had not experienced even the slightest Western influence before. The extension of multilateralism to new states shook the system to the core. From late 2010 the alliances and agreements no longer met the hopes of the founding states, primarily the US. Furthermore, even those who joined (eastern European countries) liberal internationalism in the wake of the Cold War are now among its most vocal challengers (for example, Hungary) from the inside. The challenge takes the form of constant obstructionism and public denigration of the Western multilateral institutions. In a way, what the modern liberal ideology experiences is an internal trouble – a result of its diffusion from mostly the Trans-Atlantic region onto the globe itself (Ikenberry, 2020). But the scale of the disagreements also signals that there are far more fundamental processes at play. Thence comes the growing willingness of the founding states if not change completely, then certainly reshape the contents of the liberal world order.

Another reason for the current crisis in the US-led world order is that following the Cold War Washington did not think about introducing a reshaped world system or even adjusting it to the emerging new realities. America merely extended it over the new swathes of lands—eastern

Europe and elsewhere (Lascurettes, 2020). And the logic was clear at the time as no significant military and economic competitor was in sight. Moreover, no alternative ideology or even movement was present which could rival liberalism. But despite this obvious argumentation, in the longer term it should have also been clear that the extension was about to produce a counter-effect. The pushback the West has been seeing from Russia, China, and smaller Eurasian states should be seen from this perspective.

The present weakening of the liberal order is also a crisis of legitimacy, or crisis of authority. During the Cold War, despite occasional troubles with the allies, the US had a legitimate role as a leader of the part of the world which opposed the Soviets. Following the collapse of the communism this legitimacy was increasingly questioned and a primary reason was America itself. Seen from the decades-long perspective, America's foreign policy has been chaotic since the 1990s: tranquility followed excessively active foreign policy to then be replaced by an openly anti-liberal political vision, and back to normalcy under Joe Biden. Though changeability has been characteristic to the US foreign policy throughout the twentieth century, the shifts in the post-Cold War period America's foreign policy have been quite radical.

US predominance following the military actions in the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and accompanied by the liberal proselytism, began to seem excessive. To this should be added the subsequent US-originated financial crisis of 2008—all these moves undermined a largely untarnished position America held during the Cold War. The Trump administration added a new level of tension to the troubled liberal internationalism as long-held partnerships and alliances began to unravel or were heavily criticized. The resulting void is now being filled by other powers.

Related to America's unipolar moment and the universal spread of liberal ideals has been an expansive erosion of the Westphalian concept of state sovereignty and inviolability of borders in post-Cold War period. Before 1990s the effectiveness of multilateralism was maintained among dozens of like-minded liberal states. Few if any were afraid of American excessiveness. Similarities in the governance style and geopolitical interests had a soothing effect. From the late 1990s, however, the circumstances were different. The US through its intervention into Iraq undermined the concept of state sovereignty. Differences with European allies ebb and flow, but overall they are of much fundamental character than in previous decades.

The Eurasian pushback against the US could thus be also attributed to the undermining of the Westphalian concept so dear to China, Russia, and others—those who are especially vulnerable to external pressure. This leads us to another layer of the present liberal crisis when the rise of Eurasian powers introduces the concept of multipolarity. Within a multipolar world it will be more difficult to build a new rules-based system considering China's and Russia's growing willingness to pursue an exclusive control over its immediate neighborhoods.

Thus the overextension of the liberal order brought about the world which is no longer an explicitly West-dominated one. Even within the order itself Washington's primacy is often contested, which means that America's era of exceptionalism is now gone (Sachs, 2018). Inclusion of other powers diluted the salience of the Anglo-American nexus. New states with diverse geopolitical agendas have made the operation of the order cumbersome. Eventually new partnerships will have to be negotiated. The present crisis could be regarded as a transitional period, albeit painful one, when some critical adjustments need to be made. In a way, what the Trump administration sought to do was to unravel old partnerships, but it lacked the necessary stimulus to convey an urgency to negotiate new deals. No wonder if future American administrations while criticizing what Trump did, will nevertheless pursue the same line, albeit more carefully, less radically, and in larger cooperation with the allies. America's exit from Afghanistan in 2021 is a revealing example of how much continuities there are between the Trump and post-Trump US foreign policies. Troubles within the liberal order are critical, but no less important is the challenge posed by America's competitors and outright rivals. We now turn to a more detailed description of the illiberal challenge emerging in Eurasia.

Emergence of Eurasia as a Rival Bloc—Shifting Balance of Power

"And, generally, the Chinese are the richest people in the world"—writes Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan explorer of the fourteenth century, in his travelogue following the adventures in Eurasia and the Indian Ocean (The Travels, 2004). China left the biggest impression on him. In another passage, he discussed large Chinese junks traversing the South-East Asian waters and effectively connecting China to the Indian Ocean and India. There were also large cities with products overflowing and trade activity as

immense as not seen elsewhere (The Travels, 2004). Ibn Battuta was not alone in giving such descriptions. Marco Polo too traveled to China and from there to the Middle East through South-East Asia and the Persian Gulf. He too marveled at large and affluent Chinese cities and advanced infrastructure and witnessed the level of commercial connectivity between China, modern-day Indonesia, and the rest of the Indo-Pacific region (Marco Polo, 1956).

The contrast with the nineteenth and early twentieth century China when foreign powers and internal troubles consumed the state could not be more striking. But revealing parallels can be drawn with the modern China which nowadays turned into a global player both economically and militarily. This leads to an understanding many in the West miss that China has always been rich, populous, and militarily powerful. A period of more of a century when China was weak and divided was the period of exceptional Western growth that turned it into a global power. Therefore for the Chinese their present powerful position is not an aberration, but a return to normalcy. The Chinese politicians call it a national rejuvenation. This desire has been driving Chinese political elites before (Mingfu, 2015) and especially since the establishment of the Chinese Communist State in 1949.

But the rise of China does not provide the whole picture. In fact, it is just a part of wide shifts in economic power: Asia rises as a unified economic and geographic space and increasingly challenges the West's centuries old domination in technologies, economy, and other crucial aspects. For the Asians the West's pre-eminence is more of an anomaly as Asia was traditionally richer and often technologically more advanced. For them Asia's growth is a return to traditional historical order (Khanna, 2019). Asia is increasingly attracting Europe and Africa. It is yet another historical correction as these two regions were closer to Asia than to North America. Thus, Asia is detaching Europe from North America, Russia from Europe, Turkey from its European fixation, etc. Geo-economic and ultimately geopolitical reconfiguration is taking place all over the Eurasian landmass and China (and East Asia overall) is an ultimate reason behind this.

China has benefited from the US-led world order as did generally the entire South-East Asia. Over the years since the end of the Cold War the US market increasingly was no longer a sole indispensable outlet as it has been the case during the Cold War. China expanded its foreign trade from

$20 billion in 1978 to $3 trillion in 2016 becoming the member of the World Trade Organization along the way (Ikenberry, 2020).

There is also a changed pattern in one of the crucial aspects of the liberal order—intergovernmentalism. If previously Western democracies were usually founders and major members of new interstate organizations, now illiberal states such as Russia and China have been successful in building their own organizations of various shapes and sizes to influence their immediate neighborhoods. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and others increasingly shape the perceptions of smaller states toward China and Russia, and eventually have significant bearing on their foreign policy.

We deal here with a global phenomenon—gradual shift of the world economic and geopolitical power away from the Trans-Atlantic space to Asia (Frankopan, 2018; Khanna, 2019). But it should be also noted that we do not necessarily deal here with the weakening of the West, but rather with the diffusion of the progress and wealth more or less evenly across the globe. And Asia is arguably the biggest winner in the process.

There was a moment, actually spanning decades, when the hope of liberalization of China's trade and economic relations was expected to be followed by more liberal governance. This thinking proved mistaken. In fact, it could not have been realized in the first place as the real problem with China is that it has been inseparable from the global economy, but at the same time sit well outside of it. This hybrid approach rendered China immune to global shocks which originate in the West. The 2008 financial crisis is one example, the COVID-19 pandemic and related global economic troubles is yet another instance (Ikenberry, 2020).

Global trends thus allow China to build necessary momentum to reshape the elements of the international order it does not consider beneficial to its national interests. Re-inventing the global system is an arduous process and it requires China to be active in the international arena. Indeed, the pursuit of rejuvenation in the increasingly interconnected world means that China would not be able to reach and sustain primacy in the global arena without engaging the outside world. Engagement however should be mostly on China's terms. This explains China's growing military posture in the waters of the South China Sea and Indo-Pacific region. It also explains why China has been increasingly bent on limiting the influence of the liberal internationalism by trying to dilute the elements of it. Critical to understanding the momentum China currently

holds is Beijing's growing cooperation with other Eurasian states in building various types of, what I call throughout this book, the Eurasian model of partnerships or state-to-state ties.

Most prominent element in China's strategic thinking is Russia. Both have been alert to America's unipolar moment and this forms the second important component in explaining the multi-layered nature of the liberal crisis—external pressure. The interrelated US power and the liberal order are contested at the peripheries of Europe and Asia where illiberal tendencies make inroads into fragile democracies, where liberalism is easily challenged and nationalism re-emerges in various forms. Powered by China and Russia, a systemic challenge also consists of attempts to promote privileged spheres of regional dominance via regional organizations and occasional intervention into internal affairs of neighboring states. Most troubling perhaps is that the challenge emanates from those states which for decades have been near integral part of the world economy. It tears the liberal system apart, challenges it on every level and distorts its function.

China and Russia were always interested in multipolarity which is less constrained by liberal norms and any orders hampering the exercise of great power. As early as 1997 China and Russia submitted a document to the United Nations entitled "Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order." Though at the time China strongly benefited from US-led world order and rather worked from within the order itself, Russia suffered and was eager to make critical changes to the order (Loftus & Kanet, 2019). For Russia a fully operational liberal world order has been an insurmountable obstacle. Unlike China, it could not work from within, and only saw negative results such as diminution of its sphere of geopolitical influence in the immediate neighborhood and economic havoc inside the country. Weakening and eventually toppling this order stands much higher on Russian leadership's agenda than that of the Chinese. This would create space for Russia to return to the world stage, to greatness. But at this stage when Russia and China both experience the pressure from the US and EU, this critical difference between the Russian and Chinese leaderships' understanding of the global order does not yet create tensions between the two Eurasian powers. Both states are content with expanding their Eurasian type of bilateral cooperation by touting their ability and the need to counter the West when necessary.

Russia and China consider themselves as civilizational states as opposed to the Western concept of "nation-state" (Cross, 2016). The former tend to dominate their neighborhoods in exclusive manner, while "nation-states" strive to build more equal ties. Chinese-Russian vision of multipolar world is less about human rights, democracy, self-determination, etc., and more about sovereignty (Cross, 2016). Though China and Russia join their forces to oppose the liberal world, it is still China with growing geopolitical weight which could provide an alternative system. Russia too thinks broadly—introduction of concert of great powers is feverishly pursued. But in comparison with China, it has provided few detailed ideas on how the world should be operating beyond the general notion of great power coexistence.

Historical pride, belief in destiny, and the pursuit of exclusive spheres of interest coupled with historical insecurities rooted in geography, propel the two powers to seek a wider understanding of critical issues and gloss over potential differences and general distrust both have toward each other. Both seek to establish either military or economic (at times both simultaneously) control over large swathes of inner parts of Eurasia. The US confronts such ambitions as it goes against the core stipulation of US grand strategic vision of keeping Eurasia landmass from dominance by one or several like-minded powers. Thus China and Russia often see America as a primary external threat.

Both powers also understand that for the US to keep the same rigor in the post-Cold War era as it did in the 1990s and early 2000s is unrealistic. The necessary fortitude within the US' political and economic elites is lacking. As a cure, some even suggested that remembrance of old gloomy days would be essential to uphold motivation. The Americans are now far from perceiving the essence of tragedy—dark days which might befall the nation and the world if the US leadership wanes or is withdrawn (Brands & Edel, 2019).

Growing convergence of Chinese and Russian interests and the two states' resistance to the liberal world order ushered in the age of great power competition in Eurasia (US National Strategy 2017). It revolves around who controls infrastructure, state governance methods, security, and increasingly hearts and minds of the vast continent. Success in these areas will allow China and Russia to increasingly influence the fluid world system.

But unlike the attempts to portray this global competition exclusively in the context of China–US struggle, much in the following pages

will be written on Russia's perspective too. This is especially important as Russia holds considerable influence on the South Caucasus—a major subject of this book—and other areas in Eurasia. Understanding Moscow's maneuvering, therefore, will also help provide some clues regarding the emerging world order.

Because of its location and substantial nuclear arsenal, Russia will play a key role in the US–China conflict. Given the long-term nature of the Russia–West conflict, the US–China rivalry presents an opportunity for Russia's political elite to fix its deteriorating geopolitical position. The Kremlin will aim to establish itself as a distinct geopolitical pole, while China and the US will try to entice Russia to increase their respective strength. Moscow is well aware that the West is concerned that Russia will become solely pro-Chinese. Beijing, on the other hand, does not want Russia to join the Western camp. The assumption in Moscow that in the new multipolar world, Russia will be able to avoid geopolitical fixation of the past motivates this thinking.

It is difficult to predict which direction Russia will ultimately go. So far, it seems that Russia's dependence on China following the invasion of Ukraine will only increase. Much will be determined by the direction the West and China will be taking. Moscow's ties with the EU and the US will continue to be vital, but not as much as those with other major geopolitical players. And this is a significant departure from Russian history. Russia and the West are currently experiencing their lowest point in ties since the end of the Cold War. But crises in ties have been taking place intermittently ever since Russia emerged as a major Eurasian power in the early eighteenth century. Crises were always followed by reconciliation and, on occasion, complete military and security collaboration. However, one constant in those connections was Russia's lack of foreign policy choices to counterbalance its geopolitical vision that was dominated by the West. Despite at times posing an existential threat to Russia, the West remained a geopolitical preoccupation, a key source of scientific, economic, and political advancement.

However, with China's ascent, Russia now has the opportunity to play the Chinese card as an alternative to its Western-oriented geopolitics. The Russian political elites are attempting to create a more balanced foreign policy in which the Kremlin's interests are represented in every major Eurasian region and the country's external policy is no longer tied to a single region, but is evenly distributed, ushering in the era of "Global Russia."

How important Russia's Asian pivot is depends as much on China as it does on the West as a whole, but Russian mindset is also crucial. For many, Russia's turn to Asia (including the Middle East) is far more than a result of dissatisfaction with the West or an effort to establish a strong negotiating strategy. Rather, the process is deeply embedded in Russian historical narrative—the search for what I refer to as "de-Westernization" of foreign relations, in which the preoccupation with the West is abandoned in favor of a multipolar international relations, with "Global Russia's" policies uniformly directed at all regions around the world, allowing more room for adjusting and maneuvering. This hostility, as well as other attempts to "de-Westernize" Russian foreign policy, can be traced back centuries, demonstrating how ingrained in Russian culture the quest for foreign policy alternatives has always been. Many have admired Peter the Great since he modernized Russia and extensively Europeanized the ruling elite in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but there have also been some who have been bitterly dissatisfied. They thought Peter shattered the link between the Russian people and the ruling class. Many people also argued that Russia's Europe-centrism hampered the country's capacity to assert itself as a truly global force. After the Crimean War of 1853–1856, the Romanovs attempted to do the same. With all of their unique perspectives on the world, the Soviets played the balancing game as well. These efforts faltered due to a lack of resources and reliable Asian partners. China's current power, on the other hand, presents Moscow with a historic chance. Then there's Russian President Vladimir Putin's "de-Westernization" efforts, which should be understood as a continuation of the previously mentioned great historical cycle of Russian political ideology.

All of this points to a well-established pattern, indicating that Russia's estrangement from Europe is not a one-time occurrence. Even if the West enters into a major geopolitical deal with Russia over Ukraine and other bordering countries, Moscow's "de-Westernization" of foreign relations is likely to persist. Though frequently seen as a more recent phenomena that evolved in the 2010s under Putin and as a byproduct of the breakup with the West over Ukraine, the current trend of alienation has been at work since the 1990s, when signals of hostility against the West's unipolar moment first appeared. This shows that even if there had been no problems with Ukraine or the seizure of Crimea, which precipitated a break with the West, Russia still would have pursued this goal.

This also implies that while discussing Russia–China collaboration, we should go beyond the "partnership of convenience" concept. Growing collaboration and Russia's general Asian pivot are only two interconnected elements of Russia's developing perspective of the international order and its position within it. The shift is intrinsically linked to Moscow's efforts to break free from its reliance on the West.

Card-playing, however, could be a deeply misleading approach. In the West the concept of luring Russia back into the West's embrace is a deeply ingrained vision (Bugajski, 2019; Kupchan, 2021). It is based on the Cold War experience and Henry Kissinger's diplomatic triumph following his secret talks with the Chinese. The reality nowadays is nothing similar to what was in the 1950s–1970s. Back then deference to Moscow was a part of the Soviet approach and much resented by Beijing. The two sides also had deep geopolitical differences occasionally spilling into actual warfare. Nowadays, on the contrary, China and Russia are united by a wide array of issues. They have differences, but importantly they see them and agree to cooperate further. Casting the Chinese–Russian ties as marriage Russia was forced into is also misleading. For Moscow China's rise provides opportunities and the bilateral ties are not as bad as many think (Radchenko, 2021). Even in Central Asia, the region often cited as a space where both powers will eventually clash Beijing and Moscow tend to build a new order conducive to their interests (Avdaliani, 2021a, 2021b).

As argued above, from the Russian perspective, the US–China competition is a geopolitical development which could bring multiple opportunities. Along with focusing on Russia, containing it through a wider support for the vulnerable territories from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the South Caucasus, focusing on Syria and other Middle East problems, the US also has to dedicate its attention to the Indo-Pacific region. Moscow hopes that, despite the scale of military and economic support for Ukraine, in the longer run the American power and willingness for whipping up resistance in eastern Europe and South Caucasus will be thinning out. This also means that Russia's pivot to the East and attempts to rebalance the West with the China option, serves much larger geopolitical agenda: Moscow is accentuating the West's fears of China and the need to find a compromise with Russia.

It is frequently forgotten that Russia has roughly the same level of distrust for both China and the US. The Russian geopolitical outlook is based on avoiding direct engagement in the US–China struggle

while utilizing its geographic and military advantages to entice the US and China to seek geopolitical assistance from Russia. The longer the economic and military rivalry between the two giants continues, the better it will be for Moscow's geopolitical goals in the South Caucasus, Ukraine, and the Middle East. Russia may be able to establish itself as a distinct geopolitical gravitation pole as a result of the competition, albeit on a much lesser level.

The US is interested in having Russia closer to itself than left to China. Perhaps some serious efforts will be made to salvage broken relations with Moscow. The problem though is how large concessions can the US and the EU make. Ukraine first of all, then Moldova and Georgia will be focal points. Some sort of compromise might indeed follow (RAND Corporation, 2019), though it is unlikely that the collective West will entirely abandon its decades-long economic and military efforts in the former Soviet space. An understanding could comprise interests of both sides—Russia's pledge of limited intervention in internal affairs of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which would ensure some basic Western interests, in exchange for halting NATO expansion along the Russian borders. Similarly, Russia will try to garner points in the Middle East where the West might be more conceding. With this in mind, however, bargaining over the neighboring countries will be far more critical for Moscow's positioning as a great power. For Moscow a great power status is based on the hegemony in the immediate neighborhood.

This all is highly hypothetical and yet a more radical scenario too could develop when the West will not try to pull Russia closer, but rather through sanctions and diplomatic pressure will push it closer to China. Counter arguments to this proposition are based on historical examples and the belief that the collective West simply will not have enough resources to match Russia's and China's teamed-up efforts. The argumentation might sound logical, but there is also a tradition of the US containing the two states simultaneously. In the 1950s the Soviet and the Chinese, together with their satellites, controlled much of the Eurasian landmass. American resistance was decisive back then and this experience could serve as a basis for a more pronounced future confrontation between the US with the two major illiberal powers.

It would mean that in an extreme scenario Russian hopes for geopolitical gains through grand geopolitical trade-offs with the West might not materialize. The country might be further pulled into the Chinese sphere of technological, military, and security influence. The possession of

large nuclear arsenal would not be a point of leverage for Russia. Chinese influence would be expanding in every non-nuclear sphere and Russia, essentially shut off from the West, will be unable to contain China's economic and military power in Central Asia and the Middle East.

From a realist perspective, the West, however, despite the Russian atrocities in Ukraine, fears that an indiscriminate pressure on Russia could produce a geopolitical catastrophe. Despite endless discussions in Russia over where the country really belongs to, Asia or Europe, the Western world always considered the Russian world as its part, sometimes fully, sometimes partially. True, in wartime Russians were often deemed barbaric by westerners, tsarist ruthlessness was appalling as were the Soviet methods of state-building. But Russian culture was also considered an extension of the West. In a sense, the Romanovs, Soviets, and presently Russian political elite have always copied the West, which made them a geographic and cultural extension of the European civilization. This means that from a grand strategic, even philosophical perspective, for the West to have Russia closely aligned to China would mean the reversal of almost millennium long western European economic and cultural export eastward which essentially began with the Crusades and then stalled for several centuries before resuming globally with the Age of Discovery.

The Russians understand this all well and as argued above there are worrying signs for the West that many in the Russian political class no longer want the same level of psychological and geopolitical attachment to the West, but rather want to have an evenly directed foreign policy and economic relations toward both Europe and China. Moreover, if necessary, Moscow will also be active in the Middle East too, build closer relations with Turkey and Iran, and thus make this a third theater of active Russian diplomacy. So far Russian vision works only partially as the unsuccessful invasion of Ukraine created significant troubles for Russia's global strategy of positioning itself evenly between the West and China.

Chinese Vision

The Russia–West struggle is seen as defining in modern geopolitics, but China's approach to this rivalry is little discussed. For China's imaginary map of the Eurasian landmass the lands lying to the west, from Xinjiang to Portugal and Scandinavia, is the space where China's rise to pre-eminence will be played out. Deeply jutted into the Eurasian continent, China's geography makes the country highly vulnerable to potential instability

in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Russia. And though it is often argued that China's economic rise is the most important aspect of the quickly changing world order, it should be also said that economic progress, albeit grand in scale, could not alone reshape the world. As any aspiring great power in world history before, China would also need opportune geopolitical circumstances on the Eurasian landmass to advance its Eurasia-wide interests.

One of such opportunities is being provided by the Russia–West confrontation. For the Chinese both Russia and the West fall within one category—those which once pursued establishing colonial presence on China's territory and presently regard the country's successes as threatening. There is no outright hatred, but the vision that Russia, the US, and other western powers are not particularly happy with China's geopolitical rise is well ingrained within the communist state's political culture. It is thus in China's interests to keep its Eurasian powers as divided as possible. The tradition of playing one against another is reflected nowadays in Beijing's policy of tacitly/at times openly supporting Moscow in the latter's confrontation with the West whether through votes in the United Nations or deeper economic and military cooperation in the time of western sanctions imposed on Russia.

This allows China to have Russia as a distraction since the US constantly has to dedicate time, military, and economic resources to contain Russia in Africa, the Middle East, or the Black and Mediterranean seas. This Chinese approach creates a certain chaos among the group of states which were historically prone to dominating China. In this game Russia is an ordinary piece in China's Eurasian geopolitical calculus, whose growth of influence under Putin is not as fundamental as that of China. Thence comes reservations in Beijing about potential Russia/China-led Eurasia. The different geopolitical weights of the two states preclude an even distribution of influence. China will be close to Russia as long as it helps Beijing keep the West distracted from the Indo-Pacific.

Russia–West confrontation is also beneficial to China in the light of Russia's policies in the Middle East. The region is economically important to Beijing, but it has traditionally been dominated by the Western powers. Over the last decade or so Western influence in the region diminished, while Russia's actions further disrupt America's posture. In the long run, China could play a more active role in the resource-rich region, because

of the region's geography as one of the connection points with European market within the framework of the BRI.

A look at the map of China shows what the country's geopolitical imperatives have been throughout most of its history (Doshi, 2021). Perhaps the first goal of all successive Chinese dynasties and then the communist government has been to maintain control over the heartland—Han core—which consists of major Chinese rivers, is abundant with productive lands and full of people. A further logical step is the influence over zones, which surround the Han core and consist of mountainous regions to the west, desert lands to the north-west, and impregnable forests in the south.

The third major imperative is to protect China's coastline from foreign powers. In the medieval period intermittent military naval incursions into the Indian Ocean or attempts to dominate Japan and other neighboring islands were made. It could be argued though that the Chinese did not see any long-term need in developing powerful naval capabilities, because external threats emanating from sea were non-existent.

Geographic barriers as well as external threats almost exclusively emanating from the nomads in the north limited political and trade contacts with the outside world and conditioned China's nearly autarkic economy. China's insularity was a significant geopolitical advantage. It provided security in ancient period and middle ages. But this was no longer a case in the twentieth century when in the age of globalization, international trade, and multiplicity of supply chains, China has to be open and rely upon raw materials from abroad via sea routes. Thence comes China's fourth geopolitical imperative—security of international trade lines and diversification of resource bases. This will only be possible to achieve through establishing alternative—land—routes such as BRI or building a powerful military fleet capable of protecting supply chains across the Indo-Pacific. Modern China does both.

Building a powerful navy means competition with the US, whose primacy rests upon the control of sea lines. Though Chinese naval technology may still be substantially behind US capabilities there are trends which indicate that China makes significant progress in several decades as the country is rapidly developing new destroyers, stealth fighters, and long-range weapons. This could potentially expand expeditionary military operations around the globe. China continues to construct an array of offensive and defensive capabilities to gain maritime superiority within the first island chain in the Indo-Pacific—which runs from the Kurils,

through Taiwan, to Borneo, roughly encompassing the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea.

China's naval ambitions also fit into the pursuit of greater connectivity in the waters around the Eurasian landmass. It serves as a complementary vision to Beijing's BRI connectivity plans across Eurasia. Beijing's emphasis made on economic integration across the continent distinguishes these efforts from earlier similar attempts to expand connectivity over the continent—the BRI is based on strong economic potential as well as wide-ranging institutions undergirding the cross-continental integration. Nascent Chinese Eurasianism allows Beijing to gain additional foreign policy tools against the US who has little direct influence in Central Asia, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran where the BRI goes (Yilmaz & Chingming, 2018).

The emerging Chinese Eurasianism is about attracting Eurasia's natural and financial resources through improved infrastructure. The BRI is a development-oriented vision with a special emphasis put on the economic sphere, which sets it apart from the Russian Eurasianism. The latter was less oriented toward economic development, connectivity, and integration, so is the West's vision—Atlanticism—of Eurasia. Both are security-oriented concepts as against China's Eurasian developmentalism (Yilmaz & Chingming, 2018). China's developmental strategy, in contrast with its competitors, is more appealing as it provides no significant, if at all, preconditions for participation.

The nascent Chinese Eurasianism is a continuation of previous attempts to create a pan-Eurasian trade empire. The Achaemenids, Sasanians, Kushans, and the Arabs worked hard to succeed. Each lacked Mongols were most successful in building a pan-Eurasian trade empire by quickly realizing the advantages of serving as a bridgehead between the gold-rich Europe and the biggest markets of India, Central Asia, and most of all China. The Mongols invaded and often destroyed entire cities and provinces, but they also reshaped trade routes and in some cases reinvigorated older roads thus adding momentum to the trans-Eurasian connectivity whether on land or at sea (Avdaliani, 2019; Weatherford, 2004).

Silk trade routes were not invented by the Mongols. They merely made their operation easier by enabling more free circulation of products throughout the majority of the Eurasian continent. Long-distance commerce was frequently free from high tax rates, and the highways

were well-maintained. With the continent's two largest trading hubs, the Mediterranean Sea/Europe and China/India, united for the first time in history, European merchants were given the chance to go directly to China, boosting commerce and knowledge transfer in general. To use current language, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were no less a globalization phenomenon as the joining of the West and East as a result of Alexander the Great's voyages or the post-Cold War era of rapid interdependence.

The Mongols relied heavily on China in the building of their Eurasian commercial empire. With the help of the nomads, Chinese commodities were able to freely flow over the Eurasian continent, a job that had previously been impossible to perform. When the Ming dynasty, which succeeded the Yuan Dynasty, restricted commerce with the outside world, the Mongol–Chinese symbiosis came to a close. The Mongols' contribution to the growth of commerce was not restricted to China. European and Arab commerce were also reliant on the Mongols' ability to construct and protect highways across vast distances.

The foundations for the construction of numerous significant commerce channels were built during the initial stage of the Mongol invasions. The first route took us over the Eurasian steppes. The second route takes you via the Middle East, from the Black Sea to Iran and Central Asia, passing through the Mediterranean area briefly. A third significant route crossed the Indian Ocean, connecting China's coasts with India and Africa's eastern regions.

As a result, the Mongols brought about a true revolution throughout the Eurasian landmass. Trans-Eurasian and trans-Oceanic trading lines were developed. The nomads also fostered increased economic expansion in Europe by opening new passageways. European merchants were able to develop direct connections with Central Asia, China, and Iran from the mid-thirteenth century onward, bypassing intermediaries such as Egypt and the rest of the Middle East.

The modern Chinese pan-Eurasian vision is an inadvertent successor to Mongol project. A closer look at the map actually reveals that the Chinese are now following the exact same corridors the Mongols helped to shape. One through Russia, another via Central Asia; with a third through the Indian Ocean. Historical perspective is thus important to keep in mind as we delve into what China-reshaped Eurasia's connectivity could mean in the coming decades.

In the long run the growing Chinese economic involvement in Eurasia is bound to cause a major reformulation of the country's foreign policy. Should armies follow the trade companies? The nomads defended their trade assets, the Russians and the Westerners also did where they could. Why would not the Chinese be doing the same—dependence on foreign powers' benevolence is a shaky geopolitical foundation.

Other Eurasian Powers

Eurasian states contest America's power and seek changes to the liberal order. I discussed how geopolitical revisionism is actively pursued by Moscow in eastern Europe and South Caucasus and how the Kremlin has consistently pushed for grand geopolitical bargains with Europe and the US. Revisionism is also a part of Chinese strategic thinking when it comes to the South China sea.

Similar ambitions are noted in the behavior of smaller, so-called middle powers. For instance, Iran pursues a larger status that does not fit into the present liberal order. Simulating the glorious Persian empires of the past, the modern Iran, though hard-pressed by Western economic sanctions, is nevertheless able to operate a vast network of semi-military groups across the Middle East and influence Iraq, the Gulf Region, and parts of Afghanistan—immediate lands it borders on. A near-complete overhaul of the international system and introduction of new concept of state-to-state relations is sought, but Iran lacks resources to unilaterally trail this line. Thence comes a growing reliance on asymmetric capabilities and increasingly Eurasian trend in its foreign policy when in order to balance its ties with the West, Iran looks toward Russia, China, Turkey, India, and other Eurasian states.

Multiple conflicts across the Middle East are continuously used by Tehran to promote its wide array of geopolitical interests. Some of them such as building a land corridor through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean are overly ambitious, but meticulously pursued with some apparent successes. Other imperatives include diluting the American power, deviating Washington's attention away from the region, or trying to bog it down when necessary through incremental heightening or decreasing of tensions across various conflict zones. The ultimate strategic aim is to seek leverage in negotiations over critical issues such as the nuclear program.

The US' partial shift of attention from West Asia to the Indo-Pacific region will benefit the Islamic Republic. It will be easier for Tehran

to blunt America's decreasing military power in the region and the willingness for decisive actions with the traditional use of asymmetric measures—finances and stealth warfare through its dispersed collection of allies. Another development Iran can use for solidifying its position is to balance the Western pressure by entertaining closer economic and political ties with China. The 25-year investment agreement Tehran signed with Beijing in 2021 serves this geopolitical aim. Thus, the Eurasianist trend gains momentum in Iran's thinking.

To the west of Iran, Turkey has been heavily involved in Syria and northern Iraq. It has also upped its engagement in the South Caucasus and eastern Mediterranean. These raise fears in the West that Ankara seeks to create its own sphere of influence along the country's virtually all borders, and eventually abandon its ties with the West. Though there are at times unrealistic geopolitical ambitions ascribed to the Turkish leadership by many in the West, Ankara has indeed been qualitatively more active in its neighborhood. Historical ambitions might be a reason, but a closer look at the map shows that Turkey could not have stood idle. The country borders on five geographic regions with varying geopolitical importance: the Black Sea, Balkans, Mediterranean, South Caucasus, and Syria-Iraq. What these regions have had in common over the past decade or so are crises of varying gravity that directly impact Turkey's borders. This simple geography and not overblown imperial agenda (as many think) has conditioned Ankara's active foreign policy in the Middle East from at least the early 2010s.

Other reasons too fuel Turkey's behavior. Eurasia nowadays presents a far greater number of opportunities for trade, military, and security cooperation and most of all for building a diversified foreign policy. Eurasian dimension helps Turkey and many other states to get rid of fixations in foreign policy. Discarding idée fixe however does not mean Ankara will be abandoning its place in the Western multilateral institutions such as NATO. The latter, as well as the ties with the Eurasian states are being increasingly viewed by Turkey as complementary and not mutually exclusive on its path to position itself as energy, economic, and generally geopolitical bridge between Europe and Asia.

In South Asia India fears China's rising power in Indo-Pacific region and is becoming increasingly willing to build its sphere of influence in South and South-Eastern Asia. This might not be an exclusive order for two reasons: exclusive orders are nearly impossible to build in a globalized world; secondly, the failure to be more proactive militarily and

economically might result in India losing a pivotal role bestowed upon it by geography and enormous human capital. Pressure from China along the mountainous frontier in the north as well as Beijing's drive to build a string of pearls around the Indian subcontinent, have been driving Delhi to seek balance. Stronger military cooperation with Japan, Australia, and the US could serve as a starting point. The four embarked upon intensive cooperation within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD, which though remains a loosely knit grouping, has nevertheless made extensive progress toward institutionalization.

The pivotal Eurasian states have one thing in common—their growing geopolitical activity throughout the past decade has been a result of crises of alternating magnitude along their respective frontiers coupled with the innate pursuit of historical grandeur. Crises result from thinning out of the liberal order and emerging alternatives such as Asia's economic and political growth headed by China. One of the failures of the US-led liberal order has been its decreasing ability to build momentum for economic development and greater security cooperation in the Middle East and other parts of Eurasia without causing discontent among local populations regarding an alleged liberal threat to their specific way of life. As a result, nationalism teamed up with the geopolitics are reincarnated in the activation of a more robust foreign policy when the Eurasian states are characterized by their non-democratic nature and sentiments against the liberal order.

For these Eurasian states the decline of the liberal system presents opportunities. Re-emergence of the notion of spheres of influence is one of the major outcomes. The above mentioned Eurasian states are also motivated by geography. Mostly continental powers—either deep inland states or partially bordering on sea—there is an inherent fear among the Eurasian states' political elites of potential land invasion, disruptions in trade routes and supply chains, and the spillover effect from along unstable neighboring border territories. Another unifying feature of the Eurasian powers is their reliance on Eurasianism as a realist concept allowing to balance, leverage the geographic position, and get rid of foreign policy fixations thus enabling them to find bigger space for maneuverability.

Each of the challenges posed by China, India, Iran, Russia, and Turkey varies in its impact on the existing global world order. What is characteristic of this contestation is the growing cooperation among most of

these states—expansive understanding to merge their actions into a coordinated approach of first constraining the US influence, systematically undermining it where possible, and eventually pushing back against it. This revives arms race, spheres of influence, and causes fractures in security architecture—these trends lead to great power competition, which could slowly turn into an open global rivalry with higher chances for military conflicts among middle powers with a potential involvement of great powers. As each of the revisionist states has managed to gain significant leeway in its actions over the past decade, it is also highly likely that they will be further emboldened by disruptions in the liberal order thus cementing the trend and increasing the likelihood for more intense great power competition.

Though the troubles liberal system presently experiences could be attributed to the internal problems, even crises, a gradual emergence of an authoritarian alternative (Kagan, 2008) molded into illiberal vision and posed as an ideological competitor could not be overstated. The spread of democracy has not only faltered—the attractiveness of illiberalism coupled with increasingly protectionist capitalism has grown as strongmen become popular and the idea of universality of liberalism is being actively punctured by aggressive propaganda (Brands & Edel, 2019).

Thus the emergence of an ideological alternative is tightly linked to geopolitical trends. Growth of illiberalism automatically means confronting not only the liberal internationalism, but the US-led world order at large (Brands & Edel, 2019). Erosion of democratic institutions invites or rather intersects with the growth of geopolitical power of Russia, China, and other illiberal states across Eurasia. Illiberalism is agile and is perfectly able to appropriate the liberal concepts on state and economy for advancing illiberal agenda (Cooley & Nexon, 2021).

Illiberal states are often autocratic or they are on the trajectory toward a full-blown authoritarianism. Democracies are now more vulnerable to authoritarian governments and their illiberal ideas than at any other point in the post-Cold War era. And the reason for this is that thanks to globalization, autocracies and liberal democracies have become tethered to each other in complicated ways that have harmful effects on democracies. The openness of democratic systems now represents a liability (Walker & Ludwig, 2021).

Though often denigrated as unstable and as a stage in the evolution toward the liberal-democratic system, illiberalism with authoritarian leanings and trappings of modern technologies is a more resilient and far bigger challenge than the crude communism. Failure to deliver on its promises killed the communist dream, failure to deliver in illiberalism might not bring down the order as quickly as some would think. It is essentially the rise of counter-Enlightenment (Ikenberry, 2020), return to the normalcy in human and state relations when primacy of state is essential, democratic bickering is more time-consuming.

The lack of universalist ideology is a serious obstacle for illiberalism to flourish. Though today's illiberal and authoritarian states indeed are without this advantage, the present challenge to the liberalism is nevertheless stronger and much more versatile than during the Cold War. In fact, the lack of a universalist ideology does not preclude illiberalism's efficiency. The less cruder illiberalism is the more attractive it will be. Illiberalism's power is in its ability to adjust to various forms of the governments and the regions. Crude ideological base will strip it of this edge.

The Future World Order—Different Pathways

Ordering is about violence. It is an inherent process within each such grand enterprise and the liberal internationalism as a missionary project is no exception. It has often turned to violent measures to spread and uphold its ideas (Porter, 2020). Nevertheless, liberal internationalism is a far benign order in comparison with its predecessors or present challenges portrayed as alternatives.

As argued at the beginning of this chapter, the liberal order faces a multi-layered challenge ranging from America's crisis of authority, to external dimensions, such as a result of unrestrained liberal expansion, to the Eurasianist pushback headed by China, Russia, and multiple other smaller states.

But as much as the crisis is real and markedly different in gravity in comparison with previous challenges, picturing the coming end to the liberal idea could be a hastily reached conclusion. Liberal internationalism is surprisingly resilient. It has been made and remade by various historical processes and adjustment to rising external and internal challenges served as a constant. Nowadays, as the global shifts accelerate, liberalism is likely again to be responding by adapting. Adaptation might be a long and

painful process filled with both successes and failures, but it nevertheless points to the idea's flexibility.

The liberal idea proved especially resilient and progressive in times of grave challenges such as the Nazi and communist menaces. Even now liberalism's elasticity and attractiveness are evidenced by a number of states of various sizes and in different regions becoming part of the order. True, some evolve into imperfect democracies (as in the case of eastern European and the South Caucasus states), but large parts of those countries' societies nevertheless embrace the liberal idea and strive for improvement in governance. Larger failures too happen. In case of China and Russia liberal attractiveness has not worked, and even produced radically opposite results as both states are building their institutions increasingly based on anti-liberal ideas. Liberalism, despite its internal contradictions, is nevertheless a more benign formula than any of its alternatives. The idea is also attractive as it aspires and successfully carries out a relatively even spread of economic benefits among its participants (Ikenberry, 2020).

Indeed, the elasticity of the liberal order was proved when Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The thinking in Moscow was evident: the liberal order is not only weak, but it actually experiences fundamental troubles and it is only a matter of time until it finally breaks down. Perhaps Putin thought he could even nudge it a bit in this direction and thus accelerate the demise of the liberal system.

The Kremlin-linked Russian analysts and politicians in Moscow have long gloated over the idea of the rise of Asia (an undeniable fact) and the simultaneous self-destruction of the West. What seemed unrealistic to their discourse was that the rise of Asia does not necessarily entail an automatic destruction of the West. Rather a redistribution of power is taking place when several major centers with relatively even potential are being formed.

Moscow also miscalculated on China's approach. Beijing supported the idea of indivisibility of European security whereby Russia's security concerns were legitimate, but overall China remained impartial. It avoided (at least initially and in the mid-term) siding with Moscow through more concrete measures. Reasons vary, but several of them stand out most for our discussion. Russia's campaign shattered one of China's most cherished principles: non-interference in another country's domestic affairs. Beijing therefore needs to reconcile this core "Westphalian principle" with its close ties to Russia.

China also saw that Russia's adventurism strengthened rather than weakened the collective West. With a stronger and more united attitude on Russia, a revived West may also take a more confrontational approach toward China. More crucially, this comes in the wake of China's falling prestige in Eastern Europe, as well as NATO and the EU openly seeing China as a concrete geopolitical threat.

Ultimately, Moscow's bullying of Ukraine placed Beijing in an uncomfortable spot. Generally Beijing does not want Russia to lose because that would boost the collective West, denigrate the autocracies and perhaps even reverse the process of illiberal rise globally. Beijing is also concerned about Russia's adventurism escalating into a larger global conflict, which China would be unable to avoid due to the possible security and economic consequences. In light of these factors, a long-term standoff between Russia and the West that does not devolve into a "hot war" would be most advantageous to China, giving it time to adjust to new geopolitical realities while the US concentrates on places other than the Indo-Pacific.

But perhaps the biggest failure was the expectation of the West failing to mount a concerted effort against Russia. Divisions within the trans-Atlantic community were seen as too fundamental, while Hungary and others were less pliable to common European interests. Moreover, the EU was seen as a defunct organization—an attitude seen well before 2022 when the Kremlin openly denigrated Brussels and did not see it fit for grand geopolitical bargains.

The reality proved totally different in the first months after the Russian invasion, the liberal system showed it can sustain itself and mount a definitive counter-attacks against the perpetrators. Russia was sanctioned with wide-ranging measures, which if not immediately then in the longer run were planned to cripple Russian economy.

Russian politicians and especially the Kremlin-linked analysts were at pains explaining what went wrong when the war deemed "operation" failed and the "decadent West" mustered resources to help Ukraine.

But the collective West should not think that the longevity of the liberal order is guaranteed and that the authoritarian menace will subside. Minding the limits of the liberal order and understanding the level of necessary adjustment, i.e. what world's major states are ready to sacrifice and contribute in (re)creating the order, is a key variable to picturing the emerging future world order with the liberal component playing an integral part in it.

In a way, it could be argued that now is an opportune time for liberalism to reconsider some of the aspects of its global endeavor. First, the West is still powerful and reforming would not be as much as forceful imposition upon itself, but rather a timely adaptation by the stronger to unfolding changes. Delay or purposeful unwillingness for the change could bring down the entire edifice of the order and undermine some critical aspects of the liberal idea itself.

Another motivator behind the change/adaptation could be the nature of the external challenge liberalism presently faces. As Kyle M. Lascurettes showed in his *Orders of Exclusion*, new orders are created and reshaped by dominant actors when a major threat to their position arises externally (Lascurettes, 2020). The rising illiberal threat could cause a major reshuffling in the liberal idea to better confront the challenge. Related to illiberalism is China which possesses an all-encompassing power to contest the US and its allies to invite them to re-invent the liberal system. Surely, adjusting solely to China and illiberalism would not solve all troubles as internal remaking is also necessary because the challenge to the order emanates from internal forces too.

Indeed the illiberal challenge in the form of China could serve as a necessary unifier of liberal democracies—a motivation lacking since the end of the Cold War and the global communist movement. Global terrorism was a consolidator behind America's and its allies' efforts in the 2000s, but the threat was not as long-lasting and overarching to serve as a necessary glue for the Western alliances (Ikenberry, 2010). In contrast, the emergence of China could actually be a necessary motivator for the US and its allies to act together in the face of a rising systemic challenge. China could dissipate worries which accompanied the US' unipolar position. China's and Russia's models of illiberal capitalism could make the minds in the West, intent on universalist drive of liberalism, take a sober view, and curtail global ambitions. After a near relentless liberal march in the 1990s–2000s, the illiberal pushback could help the Western powers sit back, solidify their gains, and mount an effective response.

As the Chinese challenge is increasingly viewed as a primary preoccupation by the US policy-makers, the push to readjust or even completely remake the liberal order to again benefit American interests, will become increasingly stronger. Perhaps Trump's presidency was more about laying the groundwork for remaking the existing order (Lascurettes, 2020). Under future presidents the efforts to remake will continue. Most likely those measures will become subtler, without causing radical changes, but

be extended over a long period of time by reassuring America's most vital allies on the need to follow Washington's lead.

Several paths are open for the liberal order to manage internal challenges, the illiberal threat and the rise of China. What follows cannot be an exhaustive list of possible future world orders and the fate of liberalism, but the below ideas or rather projections are based on historical examples and present geopolitical developments. Perhaps elements from each of the suggestions could be present in the future world order.

First scenario could be about curtailing the liberal drive to spread across the world. Some think if America could not impose a liberal order on the whole world even during its unipolar moment when it wielded a far more powerful array of instruments, it would be wise to scale back the liberal push nowadays when it is faced with formidable powers especially as the latter grow increasingly cooperative. There is also a more or less even spread of technologies which makes military solution much costlier. The world for no sole power to dominate gradually emerges (Porter, 2020).

This will require fundamental re-invention or the re-imagining of the present world order. Perhaps going back to the old ways—limiting Western universalism and containing it within the boundaries of what it used to be by the 1990s or early 2000s (Ikenberry, 2020) would be a possibility. Coexistence with rival ideological trends could be entertained, though not without intense competition. The idea of coexistence will pave the way for cooperation on major global issues among big players. But on the negative side, it could also lead to acknowledging specific states' geopolitical interests in certain region. Spheres of influence effectively kill the liberal internationalism. Spheres of influence will limit the effectiveness of the rules, treaties, and other organizing bargains which underwrite the present world order (Ikenberry, 2010). Tied to the spheres of influence is the concept of multipolarity, so much propagated by Russia and others. In a way the multipolarity is an evolution of the present world order and might not involve the emergence of a completely hostile and chaotic order, but it would nevertheless allow the emergence of competing security and economic blocs.

In fact there are already clear signs of emerging "techno-economic blocs" in Eurasia. Extension of control over digital space increases the control over vital users' information running through various platforms. The blocs based on competing technological platforms which have

been created by major US, Chinese, European, and Russian companies will be made up of cognitive, computing, data transmission, and encryption technologies and massive platforms such as search engines, instant messengers, social networks, supercomputers are now a part of a geopolitical competition across the Eurasian landmass (Avdaliani, 2020).

Each techno-economic bloc will strive to have its own distinct development model based on unique technological tools and scientific knowledge. The first such techno-economic bloc is taking shape around the US—Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. In close association with the US bloc is the European techno-economic one and small states dispersed across Eurasia which tend to trust the Western technology platforms.

Another techno-economic bloc is shaping up around China. Through its BRI Beijing exports major computing, data transmission, search engines to the countries in Indo-Pacific, South-East Asia, and Central Asia. The Chinese model is more autarkic and helps neighboring states to establish an effective control over the population.

The Russian platform is arguably the smallest and more vulnerable as the country lags in commercialization of innovation produced by the military-industrial complex and also lacks large population numbers. Russian platforms such as VK.com, Moi Mir, Taxify, Mail.ru, etc., are being transformed into the same tools of geopolitical influence as the existing dichotomy of American and Chinese companies: Facebook and WeChat, Amazon and Alibaba, Cisco and Huawei (Avdaliani, 2020).

We are only in the early stages of the formation of techno-economic blocks, but the competition will likely accelerate in the coming years. Russia's and China's interests will be more aligned as they face different Western technological standards and the resolve (though not always successful) on pushing against the illiberal use of technologies.

Back to future world order scenarios, another possibility would be a competition similar to what is taking place nowadays. As history shows, open, democratic powers possess bigger resilience than illiberal actors. Through solidifying the advantages liberalism currently still enjoys and waiting for it to re-emerge victorious as a result of its systemic superiority could be a possibility (Kroenig, 2020). Indeed, useful parallels could be even drawn with the rivalries in antiquity and Middle Ages, but perhaps the twentieth century is the starkest example when various bids for global domination by non-democratic states failed for the lack of wider appeal.

Ultimately the future world order is about what kind of a post-hegemonic system it will be. But as against the proposition of America

ceding its privileges to save the rules-based order, argued by some scholars (Ikenberry, 2010), the emerging order will inevitably be more chaotic than presently. In the post-American world the illiberal powers will be more at ease to act against what still remains strong of the US-led order. Though illiberal states preach the need for the Westphalian order, they are unlikely to follow those principles wholeheartedly. Smaller states bordering on larger ones will fare worse as their state sovereignty will be growingly dependent on Eurasian land powers such as China, Russia and others. This could involve military intervention when necessary, redrawing of the borders where possible for security reasons and wider geopolitical agenda.

Another scenario could be a renegotiated America-led world order where Washington retains the leadership in the liberal camp as *primus inter pares*, but also sees significantly diminished willingness from its allies and partners to follow its lead. A core group of allies (English-speaking countries plus several Asian and west European states) will nevertheless be retained. Indeed the end of the liberal order does not mean by default the end of the American power (Acharya, 2014). Those would work together to confront emerging challenges drawing parallels with the post-1945 order, but their capabilities will be significantly constrained. For this group of states the renegotiation of the order is about correcting the existing troubles of authority. It means that there are questions about how the liberal agenda is being exercised and not whether there should be alternatives. In other words, the pillars which have underpinned the order so far will remain intact; it is the behavior of separate states—primarily that of America and others in Europe—which should be reworked.

Imagining a more realistic future world order is also about abandoning the expectation of rapid world order change. Contrary to the previous instances when the world order changes (collapses) were caused by major military conflicts, the present situation is different for two reasons: unfolding of a major war is unlikely because of nuclear weapons; significant share of global power is still in the hands of the democratic powers (Ikenberry, 2010). This could mean that we deal here with the attempts for change within the system (renegotiation), and China's aims to achieve bigger place, or space for maneuverability within the present system (discussed below).

In the future world order, one of the pathways for America to remain powerful and essential to the global order is to limit the number of competitors. It cannot take on all at the same time, which makes it

important to choose a more real threat to deal with while trying to accommodate other less critical challenges and perhaps even make some unexpected compromises where necessary. America did it before, why not doing it again however unfaithful to the liberal world order it could seem to many. In this regard, some sort of a compromise with Russia seems more achievable than with the Chinese. Mitigating Russia's fears would diminish Moscow's willingness to move closer to China. Indeed a separate trend in the scholarly literature argues that loosening American commitments to far-flung territories deep inside the Eurasian landmass could alleviate the tensions with Moscow (Walt, 2018).

In the future world order, whatever the level of power America wields, its major competitor is bound to be China. Knowing Chinese weaknesses will also be a fundamental ingredient for building a powerful resistance to Beijing. America won the Cold War because of one simple input made by George Kennan. In his Long Telegram he foresaw the demise of the Soviet system because of its critical deficiencies and posited that for this very reason containment would suffice. The latter would not have been successful without knowing the former. Leaving the Soviets unchallenged would have enabled them to hide its weaknesses and failures behind some apparent successes. This serves as a good lesson on what and how should the unfolding competition with China be pursued. Knowing China's weaknesses is paramount (Kagan, 2018). It is only after that that specific policies should be adjusted to China when and if new containment model is pursued.

Trump's foreign policy was in many ways revolutionary. What he argued in his political statements might have seemed inflexible and ill-timed, but inherently it was a policy which went against America's squandering billions overseas, and a policy of constraining America's pursuit of liberal proselytism. Had he done it more carefully without abrupt foreign policy moves the US grand strategy would have remained in place (though heavily adjusted) along with freeing billions for overseas spending and spending them back home. In short, Trump failed to produce a coherent alternative to the liberal hegemony he sought to replace or renegotiate which would have corresponded to American geopolitical interests.

Nevertheless Trump's was a qualitatively different approach on China and the challenge it presents to American interests. Plans initiated under him will serve as a basis for shaping future American leaderships' policies toward China. For instance, under his presidency the 2019 Department of

Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report—first US document for the Pacific since 1998—was produced, which specifically points to the reorientation of America's defense strategy from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region (Auslin, 2020; Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, 2019). Asia Reassurance Initiative Act was yet another crucial document underlining the importance to preserve and strengthen US' alliance system in the Indo-Pacific region (Auslin, 2020). The shift of attention in the US policy from the Middle East and the parts of eastern Europe to the Indo-Pacific region does not mean total abandonment of American interests in the two regions. Even in extreme cases of isolationism American political elites has been always sympathetic to the spread of democracy and liberalism overseas. US will continue to play an active, albeit much more curtailed role in the regions and will base its approach more on real political calculations than on unconstrained spread of its geopolitical interests through economic and military means.

Alliance logic will continue driving the US' foreign policy. If anything, threats to the US in Eurasia will increase. So does the argumentation of preserving the alliance, though they would need recalibration, increase or withdrawal of American support in some cases (Rapp-Hooper, 2020). For instance, as one of the responses to the China challenge the progress in merging the interests of various regional states under one umbrella is slowly taking place. QUAD is the brightest example when a push from unofficial state to institutionalization is taking place.

Liberalism will feature extensively in the future world order. True that liberal hegemony brought numerous troubles to the US and the general geopolitical situation in Eurasia, but it is uncertain what the abandonment of liberalism would bring to America's vital interests and its allies.

Imagining America's future foreign policy is a difficult task. Since the 1990s it can be characterized by instability: there have often been extremes ranging from unilateralism and proselytizing to attempts to close off (partial isolation). For America's European allies this has been a disturbing state of affairs. They are still reeling from the fear that America's foreign policy will be shifting from agreed-upon multilateralism to unbridled unilateralism of the George W. Bush period or even chaotic presidency of Trump (Niblett & Vinjamuri, 2021). In a way, seen from a decades-long perspective, America's foreign policy has only started to adjust to post-unipolar order following the Bush doctrine, but began to face the Chinese challenge. This brought yet another round of adjustment and one can argue that we still live through it. The 2020s are decisive not

so much as which side—America or China—will prevail, but as setting the long-term US strategy toward China and vice versa.

As mentioned above the US is also reeling from the crisis of authority and fractures in its prestige. Unilateralism caused it and widespread discussions on American imperialism (Ferguson, 2004), often called informal, supported the fears of smaller countries. That America was an informal empire was more or less clear, but from the early 2000s a shift toward more practical imperial policies took place. This undermined US' prestige and the country still is experiencing the shocks from it. Withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan could restore some level of trust, so could Washington's push for building a closely knit league of democracies. To stabilize the fragile liberal order the US should focus on the core of democratic states and those states which joined the liberal order since the end of the Soviet Union. By limiting its deep engagement with these states which are mostly clustered in Europe and along Russia's western and partly south borders, the US will be able to stabilize the liberal realm.

Retrenchment however will not mean the return to the golden age of liberal world order. Furthermore, it might not even be able to reverse the illiberal trends, but America and its allies and partners surely could still influence the evolving global order and shape it in a way it harms their interests less.

As another possibility for the future world order, the liberal order is unlikely to collapse, but the illiberal challenge will not abide either. It will be a mixture of both (Cooley & Nexon, 2021)—scenario especially probable as liberal and illiberal elements often coexisted in various world orders of the past. The empires of the nineteenth century were liberal at home, but often despotic overseas. Even America which professed the economic and political liberalism at home and abroad, but often did introduce policies in the contravention of those same policies. This is to indicate that the liberal order is constantly evolving, it can even mutate. In the Cold War era, both liberal and illiberal worldviews coexisted and intermittently cooperated too.

The likely persistence of the fundamentals of the liberal order is also related to the discussion on how much America is failing in reality. Its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan did not produce expected results and brought about expenses in trillions of US dollars. But seen from a long-term perspective, America's geography and military might allow it to falter without great repercussions. Indeed, a superpower could lose a war, but it has not yet evolved into a trend despite resistance from

within its alliance structures and Eurasian competitors. For the moment American pre-eminence is preserved at least in critical areas, which causes frictions with and balancing by other powers. But what is vital here is that the scholarly trends of describing America's power as decidedly declining could be as incorrect as stating unchanged continuity of Washington's geopolitical stature (Kagan, 2008).

The US' power is resilient and in many ways exceptional. Blessed with a variety of fortuitous geopolitical developments and basic geographic factors, it has even been suggested that the US unipolarity is not going anywhere (Beckley, 2018). Much remains the same. The US will continue to need a full hemispheric defense (Auslin, 2020), which means that without exercising control over the island chains in eastern Asia and without having strong allied foothold in Europe, its position, its defenses will be extremely vulnerable in the era when modern weaponry neutralized the ocean defense shield. Much depends on the US' ability to regain legitimacy in the eyes of the world—the concept of consent must be brought back (Kennedy, 2008).

In addition to the enviable geography and legitimacy, the sources of American exceptionalism lie in the Enlightenment from which liberal values stem. Another source is a religious element of being worshippers of god in a purer, Puritan way. It is also accompanied by religious guilt—efforts to live up to the higher, purer religious standards (Nye, 2020).

Liberalism is also characterized by vagueness which saves it from ideological crudeness. Unlike communism or other ideologies of the past there is a constant search and room for improvement within liberalism. But by promotion of democracy by forceful methods—the era of America's multilateralism of the 1990s and early 2000s—liberalism risked turning into a hard ideological concept, which would have inevitably faced a pushback from non-democratic states (Nye, 2020).

Yet another suggestion for the future world order could be a "milieu" strategy where great powers would be able to build a new order by structuring their general international environment in ways that are congenial for a long-term security. The US pursued this vision in its unipolar moment, but history shows that a "milieu" strategy could be pursued by several states and even opposing parties. What the big three, US, USSR, and the Great Britain, did following World War II is in many ways exemplary. General architecture was built for a safer world and cooperation on fundamental issues. Much of it might not have worked because of

the ensuing Cold War, but the general vision remained intact to these days—the operation of the United Nations.

In the future this might entail building the infrastructure for international cooperation, promoting trade, establishing partnerships that might be useful for various contingencies. A milieu-based grand strategy helps to shape the international environment to be better prepared for rising threats (Ikenberry, 2008).

One of the alternatives to liberal world order, but related to the concept of spheres of influence, might be the US pursuing the balancing game. It would absolve it from making foreign policy choices based on the vehement pursuit of liberalism, but would help to focus on trying to prevent separate powers from gaining outsize influence (Walt, 2018). Other powers would do the same ushering in the age of heightened competition and occasional cooperation.

Balancing would mean that the US concentrates on only some of the critical regions—eastern Europe, parts of East Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Each region would require a coherent policy of maintaining the balance lest a regional power rises to dominance to be able to outspend America and eventually pose a threat to its global position. It will allow America to eschew large-scale democracy building projects in foreign and hostile lands.

Though great power tensions in Eurasia are to rise further in the coming years, Washington still possesses enough foreign policy tools to limit the Eurasian actors' expansion of spheres of influence. Partners or even allies could be found among those very states which challenge the liberal system. A primary example could be India which fears China increasing its influence in Pakistan as well as extending its military power into the Indian Ocean. For India, which is bordered from the north and north-west by unstable Middle East and economically poor Central Asia, and the rich South-East Asia the competition with China represents the likeliest foreign policy direction in the coming decade(s). The US foreign policy decision-makers could very much use India's ambitions against China to keep Beijing's ambitious BRI in check.

Another probability is to mend ties and build closer relations with Turkey by using Ankara's competitive relations with Moscow over the latter's military activities in Syria and the South Caucasus and the Black Sea. Fixation on America is what Turkey does not want to happen, but its leadership clearly sees the need to have the US' support in order to balance Russia more confidently.

Thus, it is China, Russia, and Iran where the US diplomacy will be mostly focusing on limiting these states' ambitions. All three are motivated to limit the US influence in Eurasia, which at times would drive them closer. But the three pivotal Eurasian states also share wide ranging differences which are bound to re-appear once the US ceases to be a priority in their foreign policy. One of the possibilities to soothe the Eurasian states' concerns could be for America to discard the notion of promoting the liberal agenda. Instead, upholding the notion of the general norms-based world order could be more acceptable to the US' competitors.

But this idea of a club of "greats" in the twenty-first century which involves calls for a new "concert" of nations in which Russia, China, the United States, Europe, and other great powers would operate under some kind of international condominium might not be an efficient tool. True that realism-based world orders usually last longer than the liberal system. The spread of the latter usually causes wide opposition among world powers. This explains why the order following the Congress of Vienna lasted for most of the nineteenth century, while the present liberal world order has stumbled into troubles by the early mid-2000s, some 15 years into its existence. But the Concert of Europe operated under the umbrella of common moral principles of government and specific geopolitical organization of the continent. It aimed not only at the preservation of a European peace but also, and more importantly, at the maintenance of a monarchical and aristocratic order against the liberal and radical challenges presented by the French and American revolutions and their echoes in Germany, Italy, and Poland. The Concert gradually broke down under the strains of popular nationalism, fueled in part by the rise of liberalism. Today there is little seen of shared morality and common political principle among the great powers. Suspicion, growing hostility, and the autocracies' ingrained worldview that the democracies, whatever they say, would welcome their overthrow are the order of the day. Any concert among them would be built on a shaky foundation likely to collapse at the first serious test (Kagan, 2008).

The US history of the last 100 years demonstrates that the country's politicians were always fighting against the creation of spheres of influence in Eurasia. This however does not mean that Washington was always successful. The Cold War era stands out as a good example when America essentially recognized the Soviet domination over vast territories in Europe and withheld from intervening when faced with rebellions in

Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Similar aloofness was even visible in 2008 when Russia invaded Georgia or in 2014—during the Ukraine crisis and Moscow's military moves in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

This dilemma underlines the burden America always bears in navigating between hard geopolitical reality on the ground and its exceptionalism in foreign policy. Often "*realpolitik*," though much despised by American political establishment, prevail and there will be no wonder that in the coming decades, facing the pursuit of Eurasian states to carve out their respective spheres of influence, the US will have to adjust to changing circumstances on the ground by essentially agreeing to exclusive geopolitical zones.

Thus all the above projections posit the future world order will revolve around two superpowers, China and the US and several other less influential states such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, and India. It is also much likely that despite their rivalry Washington and Beijing will coexist, albeit nervously. From time to time some kind of understanding will be achieved on critical issues of common interest—climate change, perhaps cyber security and the control of the outer space (Dong, 2021). Gray zones will remain where both will actively compete financially and perhaps even militarily via proxy actors (Tierney, 2021).

The Eurasian continent of the 2020s–2030s will be a space of re-emerging or newly emerging powers pursuing their grand historical ideas or simply responding to crises along their respective borders. It is likely that on the ground Washington will have to adjust itself to a certain level of emerging spheres of influence exacerbating the troublesome debate so characteristic to the US foreign policy decision-making: American idealism and the denial of spheres of influence as a remnant of the nineteenth and early twentieth century imperial politics poised against the haunting "*realpolitik*."

Essentially this is a debate between those who support the unfettered liberal order and those opposing it and suggesting a more nuanced approach based on scaling back of liberal proselytism and more robust application of real politics. Supporters for liberal internationalism are now fewer. The idea remains phenomenal in its ability to attract and reshape entire countries, but there is a growing trend toward a more reserved version of liberalism. Restraint could be a life-saver for the system which overextended itself.

China's Vision of Future World Order

What are Chinese views on the future of the world order? Will Beijing try to break the order to institutionalize its own vision—based on Confucianism and total rejection of Western-style democratic ideals? Or the present order is too dear to China's economic development?

China has vastly benefited from the US-led system. To try to break it completely will be unwise from Beijing, while making substantial adjustments so that its position is not threatened by the Western democracies is a more realistic approach. Forceful export of Confucianism is less likely, or it will be pursued when it is beneficial for China's geopolitical interests and circumstances on the ground will be congenial. At least this is how great powers behaved previously. Spread of democracy correlated with the US geopolitical interests, so was also the case with the Soviets. The Chinese will be no different, especially as Beijing does not have yet an established strategic vision of a new world order. It is still in work and much will depend on other actors, primarily America.

The Chinese are still trying to play nice by not revealing their true ambitions (if we assume they have them put in one secret document), though opposite arguments too can be put forth (Mayer, 2018; Miller, 2017). First, those ambitions are still blurry for the Chinese themselves. After all, the country historically was closed off from the rest of Eurasia geographically which fixed China's attention exclusively on the neighboring region. The lack of tradition of "global China" matters. The decision to operate throughout the world requires to collect sufficient knowledge to adjust to the way different parts of the world operate. This means that despite the claims often made in the Western media and analytical circles that China has a blueprint for global expansion and domination, the Chinese are still working on solidifying the internal strength both economically and technologically (Yew, 2013). Furthermore, whatever China's global ambitions are at this moment they will see numerous fundamental changes along the way because of a wide variety of revisions in the world order, emerging security threats, military competitions, and most of all evolution in the Chinese thinking itself.

China's rise renders it impossible to leave it out from evolving or future balance of power configurations. For the first time in the last two centuries a non-European (in a way, the Soviets and communism were part of the European Enlightenment) and non-liberal power will have a significant share in the decision-making process on global issues.

Whether we see a partial or total decoupling between China and the US (or collective West), establishment of respective spheres of influence or even more chaotic world order, China's share in it will be nearly as big (if not bigger) as the West's. A clever Chinese approach to the US perhaps will be less about confronting it directly, but rather stealthily working to dilute America's power (Jones, 2020). Sun Tzu's maxims on war and the need to avoid fighting to win a long war, could be instructive here. A less prudent Chinese foreign policy will run the risk of reinvigorating coalitions along its borders (Allison, 2017). India, Japan, Malaysia, Australia, and Indonesia—the countries which experience troubled relations with Beijing, if put together, are stronger militarily and economically than China. US' policy of using these states' grievances against China could turn into a veritable blockage for Beijing in its ambitions to attain primacy in its immediate neighborhood (Medcalf, 2020).

Perhaps one major feature regarding China's vision of the future world order will be fewer or no attempts at all to have institutionalized norms on membership within the new world system. No preconditions will be made on internal political and economic models. Some non-written rules—norms—will exist, but China will essentially make it clear that it does not differentiate between democracies and non-democracies. All will depend on the freedom of members to choose their own political system. Economic cooperation, bargaining, and transaction-based ties will be the order of the day. In a way, these elements of the Chinese vision will resemble the core concepts of the Westphalian order (Lascurettes, 2020). Non-aggression and non-interferences are widely articulated through Chinese media outlets and the idea is to juxtapose these notions (though not explicitly) with the liberal world order where the Westphalian concept is not always upheld (Dukalskis, 2021). However, there are also hints that China is gradually relying less on the concept of "non-interference" into internal affairs of foreign states. Though Beijing will remain reluctant to get rid of the concept outright, the usage of the concept could indeed become more rhetorical than anything (Markey, 2020).

A more radical scenario too could unfold when China with like-minded states grows increasingly interested in promoting an alternative worldview by influencing the international norms such as state-to-state relations and other crucial components navigating day-to-day behavior in order to make an external environment friendlier to itself. This could involve making the public in foreign lands amenable to the Chinese political culture to burnish its own image.

China and its partners could also be both reactive and proactive with robust attempts to prevent the spread of democracy to geopolitically important countries. These attempts can range from purposeful stabilization of autocratic regimes to containing and eventually destroying the democracy. Prevention of democracy could thus serve as an ideational driver for China. Even if an autocracy does not have a proselytizing rigor as an idea, there are still reasons an authoritarian state would want to spread its ideas whether for domestic audience or purely security reasons since democratic processes undermine the very fabric of the personalized or simply authoritarian rule (Dukalskis, 2021).

Within the future Sino-American world order (which again does not mean that other powers will not be important. It is just to underline the sheer size of China and America, and the inevitability of them playing a decisive role) instead of imagining China as a power which consciously works toward undermining the US-led liberal order, it is also possible to think about China working from within the system itself to carve out a bigger role, even change some elements of the system to better influence its overall operation. For instance, China's communist leadership is now increasingly positioning itself as a leading founder of the present international order touting its role in the foundation of the United Nations and casting off the idea that it was in fact mostly the Nationalists which made up the delegation. China is re-imagining itself where some elements of the present world order are and will remain dear to Beijing (Mitter, 2021).

This Chinese behavior is motivated by the fact that, though increasingly illiberal, the country nevertheless has benefited from the liberal world order by actively participating in it. But Beijing also sees that those same multilateral norms are gradually breaking up and they need to be reconfigured, preferably along the Chinese ideas and interests. Therefore, China does not wish quick dislodging of the US power. It will destroy those benefits Beijing still collects. Rather, a phased change, or renegotiation to the system is what Beijing would favor more. This pragmatic approach will involve underwriting some aspects such as global economy, environment, but staying neutral to the questions of internal political system of countries around the globe. Multilateralism is likely to continue its existence, but it could be at least partially under Chinese command (Chu, 2021). In a way this could be a boon for America—strong, perhaps even biggest power, China, which does not have ideological impulses, but is deeply enmeshed in multilateral norms. The world could be safer if

Washington and Beijing navigate the relationship properly (Mahbubani, 2021).

China-US competition will be also about strategic messaging, i.e. offering and upholding alternative narratives, ideas, and perhaps even global ideology (Ratner et al., 2019). Shaping attitudes and narratives among populations and decision-makers will become an inseparable element of the competition. Differing narratives will serve as pillars behind constructing opposing Sino-American worldviews. Soft power too is part of the opposing narratives. For instance, one of the stories which could be successfully developed and deployed by China against the Western vision is how the country manages modernity. Harnessing the latter, adjusting to evolving global needs have been the liberal internationalism's biggest advantages. Liberalism signified modernity and progress. The terms could have even been used interchangeably. But China has been increasingly able to do the same despite its illiberal record. This constitutes a major break—progress is no longer solely characteristic to the Western democracies. Used correctly this and similar narratives could be defining in the future battle of ideas between the two opposing worldviews. This is especially true since China has a tradition of playing with global ideas. Xi's "Community of Shared Destiny for Mankind" was preceded by Hu Jintao's "Harmonious World" idea.

As a part of the battle of narratives, China might also more actively engage in the debate on which state-building ideas are more efficient. Since the spread of democracy is dangerous to China, a considerable effort will be put in extolling the Chinese developmental way (Dukalskis, 2021). To substantiate the claim the country's economic success will be used to fortify the appeal for authoritarian way of thinking. Stronger rule will mean better chances for solid economic development, plus China's ability to lend large sums of money. These create positive trends for brandishing the Chinese way of state-building.

The future world order will also involve a battle going on over who will control existing major or emerging connectivity routes across Eurasia. The BRI is a good representation of emerging contest for the transcontinental links. The project will feature high on Chinese agenda—in fact, it has been transformed into such an integral part of the Chinese political thinking that its failure will not be tolerated politically inside the country. Future Chinese world order vision might revolve around the BRI as the initiative has some loose operational principles—connectivity, disinterest in internal political institutions of the participating states, etc. Related

to it are China's increasing overseas interests which represent now an intrinsic part of China's emerging strategy (RAND Corporation, 2020). There are two reasons why China looks increasingly outward to Eurasian heartland, Africa, and the Indian Ocean: development of its relatively poor western provinces; US' and its allies' pushback in the South China Sea against China's military resurgence. To rebalance, China moved westward (RAND Corporation, 2020). In all these initiatives the BRI plays a central role. Increasingly, similar to how liberal order and the US geopolitical power are interrelated and how a defeat of one of them will kill the other, the operation of the BRI and China's rise are increasingly interlinked.

The future Chinese world order will primarily be shaping up in the heart of Eurasia. Indeed, the US is less antagonistic to China going westward than looking toward the South China Sea and island chains. In Central Asia, the US has little capabilities to influence the region which is geographically closed off and largely insecure. So are Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and other countries where America's influence is minimal or non-existent. It is here where Chinese order will be slowly emerging and become potentially fully operational. This geographic direction fits Chinese interests since constructing a new order to the east will be much more difficult because of Washington's and its allies' fears regarding Beijing's ambitions to gain control over chain of islands—first step toward larger domination of waters (Markey, 2020).

In the future world order where China and the US enjoy similar economic capabilities a sort of loose global co-rulership, though filled with competition and distrust, could emerge. In comparison with the Cold War it will be a far less rigid, but nevertheless a bifurcated world order. Countries could be siding with one power or another depending on the sensitivity of an issue. Constant balancing will be the order of the day. The two imagined orders each dominated by the US and China will not be as separate as it was during the Cold War. Trade contacts will not allow full decoupling. This means that competition between two loose blocs will be taking place similarly to the pre-WWI period when both trade and geopolitical rivalry went hand in hand.

Furthermore, major states can be diametrically opposed to each other, but it does not mean they would not be able to cooperate. In fact, they are likely to agree on larger trends as a basis for cooperation on global issues. This "meta-regime," as suggested, could serve as a loose and broad framework around which elements of the future world order will be built (Rodrik & Walt, 2021).

A radical vision would be if China drastically pursues overturning the US-led world order and tries to install its own order by forcefully spreading its political and economic system worldwide. A more peaceful coexistence is that where China gains economic prominence but stops short of undermining the wider US geopolitical interests, though this scenario seems increasingly unlikely. And as an echo to the Cold War period, both parties could look into establishing privileged spheres of influence.

Yet another way China sees the post-US world order or rather the re-organized world governance is the anarchical nature of the world affairs where balancing, competition, and bargaining are prevalent. Chinese *Tianxia*, "(all) under Heaven," could encompass the countries through close economic and historical ties. Potentially this concept could compete with the Western Enlightenment. But *Tianxia* is also about introducing a new, Eurasian, type of state-to-state relations. Xi Jinping in his 2017 address to the party and the nation said that "major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics aims to foster a new type of international relations and build a community with a shared future for mankind" (Jinping, 2017). This could mean that the trend of finding common ground without formal obligations will become characteristic of the future world order. Formal alliances would only undermine benevolent intentions countries would have toward one another. In the new era, Eurasian states would prefer maneuverability to the shackles of formal obligations (Avdaliani, 2021a, 2021b).

Balancing, competition, and bargaining will require a military component. Without the latter, Beijing's position, though powerful economically, might not be as influential. The expansion of BRI infrastructure, beyond the benefits it produces, creates fiercer competition such as willingness of foreign state or non-state actors to intervene. Consequently, it invites a military element, namely, the wish to secure your possessions via military presence (Hillman, 2020). Indeed, there is an emerging trend signaling China's growing willingness to defend its overseas economic interests—investments, human capital, etc. (Markey, 2020)—through opening officially non-military bases abroad or private contractor companies thus blurring the lines between openly military and non-military nature of its overseas presence (Ghiselli, 2021).

Thinking about the future world order, China's economic rise is important, but this cannot be the single most decisive factor in tilting the balance of power in Beijing's favor. Other important pillars such

as soft power, political prestige, alliances, military power, and the edge in the technological area are no less essential. In comparison with the US, Chinese leadership clearly sees the need to invigorate the country's internal capabilities, whether it is economic, ideological, or other components essential for great power posturing. Though much of the talk given by Xi Jinping in his party address in 2017 might be regarded as window dressing by Western observers, it nevertheless shows the long-term strategic intent from the Chinese side. True that China made significant steps forward in nearly all the components, but overall it is still far behind the US in terms of overall prestige. Furthermore, hefty bureaucratic mechanisms as well as ideological motives which inform the Chinese strategy also mean that Chinese response to the global events might not always be as smooth as one could expect. A highly centralized process of policy formulation is only a part of the process. No less important is its implementation and this is where regional authorities might easily mismanage the entire process related to the grand strategic visions including the BRI (Heath et al., 2021).

Ultimately it should be also noted that changes to the world order always take place not only with a challenge from a rising contender, but also because the contender manages to use widening divisions among established powers and facilitates emerging weaknesses in an existing system.

For the purpose of this discussion on how China sees the emergence of a new world order, the second Russia–Ukraine war might be offering a good glimpse into Beijing's thinking. From a broader historical perspective, for China the conflict is about Western states fighting each other. It allows Beijing to watch, learn, and predict what the potential China–West open rivalry might mean. Despite the re-invigorated Western unity, China nevertheless sees the Russia–Ukraine war as a further sign of the world order change. A more nuanced reading of history of the rise and fall of global orders shows that change of guards does not take place simply because a rising power successfully challenges the existing hegemon. On the contrary, a military challenge was often defeated, however demanding that might have been. Take Germany in the First and Second World Wars or Napoleon in the early nineteenth century.

Instead, a new hegemon appears when its rivals are weakened either by war or disagreements. It does not negate the fact that an emerging leader needs to be militarily powerful. The US could hardly rise up to global primacy by 1945. But America would not have been able to do solely by

military means either. The European continent, the world's economic and industrial powerhouse and the center where all geopolitical games played out, decimated its power in two world wars. It left the vacuum a powerful America easily filled.

The Chinese might be looking at the Russia–West confrontation and the Russia–Ukraine war more specifically as the internal war diluting the West's economic and military power. It is not so much China's economic rise, but the weak West that is likely to lead to the new global order.

Therefore, a correct emphasis should be always made while discussing the nature of the present world order, its fluidity and changeability. China's rise is not so pre-ordained. Beijing's successes produce multiple contradictions within China and often undermine its position in the global arena (Economy, 2018). The success will require more than just Beijing's economic rise and the implementation of the BRI. Divisions and troubles among its Western competitors too should be broad and self-destructive. Moreover, for China to assume the global position it means to submit its own interests for the benefit of others. Global leadership is also about being challenged by others, but nevertheless finding consensus on some of the most difficult questions (Economy, 2018).

Final Thoughts

What kind of a new world order will be emerging and whether the world's biggest states will be working together in shaping it? Before delving into final thoughts on the future world order, it should be mentioned that beyond large states and global corporations which will be working toward the future order, a factor of human agency too is important, though often impossible to determine. Personalities and their ideas will matter. And this once again indicates that the future world order building will be a difficult and competitive process foretelling the details of which with some precision is impossible (Rodrik & Walt, 2021).

Signs of erosion of the post-Cold War world order are unmistakable. The changes in the present global balance of power are twofold. First is horizontal which involves the rise or rather return to normalcy—economic and political strength—of the Asian states headed by China. Second is a vertical shift caused by liberal overextension as well as multiple changes such as, for instance, in technology, which enables non-state actors to become geopolitically disruptive (Nye, 2020).

Though the disappearance of Soviet rival power ideally should have propelled to the long-term uncontested US-led world order, in reality America's unipolarity overextended liberal order and ultimately undermined the US power. America's unrivaled economic and military prestige which freed her from operating exclusively within the agreed-upon norms it established, has turned against her. Its long-time allies and partners no longer saw the necessity in strictly abiding the Washington's rules. Thence come vacillations within US alliances, turbulences on world stage challenging the very premises of the US power and the liberal idea.

Thus the emergence of a new world order is inevitable. The coming system is going to be less US-driven and more chaotic. But having an imperfect world order is still more effective than having no order at all. Even a troubled order could still be worked on and perfected over time with efforts backed by sufficient military power. The construction of a new order will follow the logic of previous orders. It will reflect the then existing balance of power. Great powers generally build an order which fits into their interests and aspirations. But often not all great powers agree upon a set of rules. Those who oppose will tend to create an alternative vision. This means that orders are also inherently incomplete. There are always loopholes which cause divergencies from an established set of rules. Incompleteness brings about debates on the need to re-invent or renegotiate the principles of the system. In a way, the world order cannot be static in itself. Its unchanging nature would doom its operation. This also means that the present evolution toward a new world order is a natural, evolutionary move.

What is more or less established is that though there might be a disagreement on which power, China or the US, will be sufficiently stronger to claim primacy on the world stage, a broader agreement exists among scholars that the future world order will revolve around these two powers. This does not rule out the emergence of multipolarity, but the latter could be an extremely uneven one where Russia, India and others will serve as geopolitical poles, but with significantly limited capabilities in comparison with China or America. The regional orders Moscow, Delhi, and others will be building will, to a certain extent, have to reflect Beijing's or Washington's geopolitical interests (Rodrik & Walt, 2021).

One of the features of the new global order will be the Eurasia-wide efforts by various states to resuscitate the concept of privileged spheres of influence. Chinese efforts stand out. They bite at the US influence on all fronts. Beijing pursued the policy of extending its influence over the

near waters such as South China Sea. It has also successfully managed to undercut the effectiveness of those international groupings, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), created to anchor the Indo-Pacific region onto the US and limit potential challenges posed by China. Through these measures Beijing is seeking to build a China-centric regional order.

Balance, command, or consent used by the US to keep the world order operational (Ikenberry, 2010) will no longer be the mechanisms used by emerging and revisionist powers in the new global system. Those are likely to take a more pragmatic approach to the elements of the multilateralism which will remain from the liberal order (Loftus & Kanet, 2019).

Nevertheless, the US power, however diluted it will be and heavily blunted by various actors, is likely to remain fundamental over the next decades. There is a growing likelihood of America trying to limit its commitments in various far-flung lands and instead recalibrate its foreign policy toward the challenge represented by China in the wider Indo-Pacific region. This will go hand in hand with a growing emphasis on a major advantage the US still has—a string of trusted allies. Despite vacillations, the connections are strongly underpinned by liberal-democratic solidarity. This is a weapon which cannot be outperformed by however powerful rival is China.

Connected to the likely re-emergence of spheres of influence is the return of great power competition, resurgence of authoritarianism which now molds into illiberal challenge undergirded by capitalism—the weapon usually associated with liberalism. The great power competition also means that in the future world order the collective West will no longer face a singular threat, but rather a set of interlinked global challenges. Mounting a resolute response will be doubly challenging.

Chinese–Russian burgeoning ties will constitute a major challenge to the US. Often thought as heading toward an official alliance or likely confrontation, Moscow–Beijing partnership is more nuanced as both work toward building a new, Eurasian type of state-to-state relations. Motivated by the resistance to America, neither power could afford losing the other. This also means that as long as the US factor persists, Moscow and Beijing are unlikely to clash in such critical regions as Central Asia. China is wary of fluid security situation in the region and the potential threat its economic assets could face. Therefore, Russia's military presence in the region, its diplomatic clout could serve as a viable security guarantee (Lukyanov, 2020).

But the two powers are also unlikely to form an alliance. In the Eurasian type of bilateral relations a multi-vector foreign policy will be the order of the day. Alliances shackle member states to fixate their foreign policy on one region, or actor. Seen as a relic of the Cold War era, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and others will be increasingly watchful for opportunities to diversify their foreign relations portfolio. It will provide greater space for maneuverability and help increase the countries' agility in responding to challenges of various caliber.

The future chaotic world order will be increasingly about the control over land and sea routes. Here China's BRI stands out. The result of a grand debate on China's foreign policy—either going westward or southward—the initiative covers these two strands of visions. The initiative has a potential to serve as a foundation for China's worldview in large of Asia. The success of the BRI will be tantamount to China's triumph in re-imagining the present world order along the lines conducive to the communist regime's aspirations and security concerns.

The future disorderly global system also means that there will be a bigger chance of outright military confrontations. Larger powers might still abstain from war because of the nuclear weapons serving as deterrent, but proxy wars might be commonplace. Unlike in the post-Cold War period, when all large powers were fully democratic or aspiring democracies and this limited the possibility of war, in the emerging world order there will be non-liberal states too as major powers. This is bound to decrease global cooperation and increase tensions. Only large globe-wide issues such as climate change, impacting all players simultaneously, will be deemed as critical enough to bring about cooperation.

Growing rivalry, however, does not preclude a relatively seamless process of transition. Though at times it could turn out tense and competitive, peaceful renegotiation (Ikenberry, 2010) of the present world order by Eurasian powers would allow the US to retain a significant portion of power. A loosely knit US-led liberal-democratic world will remain powerful, but it will have to coexist with the illiberal camp likely headed by China and possibly its minor partner Russia. Both will advance an alternative world vision mostly based on strong sovereign rights. And most of all, this alternative to the liberal camp will allow multiple states to dent at the US influence. Both sides will have a collection of bigger

and smaller like-minded states. The US will have official allies and partners. China will evade forming official alliances as per the Eurasian model where multi-vectorism will reign supreme.

The US will be pursuant of the liberal notions within the grouping it will be heading. It will retain hegemony and perhaps some alliance spirit similar to post-World War II period will be entertained. The Chinese, on the contrary, will likely be agnostic, which means the communist regime will be more pragmatic in its relations with the outside world. No stern rules will be imposed on which internal political system is chosen by a state (Mearsheimer, 2019). Alliances will be eschewed and Westphalian concepts of state sovereignty strongly supported.

It will be around these two large but loose poles that all other players will be building their foreign policy visions. It does not mean that other poles would not be attractive. In fact, to avoid being devoured by Chinese or American groupings, Eurasian states will seek balancing with other players such as Russia and India, though these two too will be loosely associated with either liberal or illiberal camps.

Even Russia, which will complete the shift in its foreign policy from Greater Europe to Greater Eurasia, will be balancing Europe against Asia and vice versa, thus taking advantage of multiple economic and geopolitical trends in Asia (Lukin, 2020), the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. Balancing will require developing its own industrial base and build an attractive political system. How far Russia would be able to go in this direction remains to be seen.

Then come smaller states such as Turkey and Iran, which will maneuver among China, Russia, and the US. Both will strive to build a regional order with Russia whether it is in the South Caucasus or the Middle East. Then come even smaller players (for example the countries of the South Caucasus) which will be balancing among Iran, Turkey, Russia, China, and the US.

Thus the coming global order, which I would call the Eurasian order, will be increasingly characterized by a higher pace of maneuvering of middle and regional powers to build up their power in the context of the China–US rivalry. Each major continental state will strive to build a specific order in its neighborhood. But since globalization is unlikely to abate, building exclusive regional order will be extremely difficult. More likely, two or three regional states will be monopolizing

a region's economic and infrastructure potential. This does not mean that small states will be cut off from the rest of the world, but increasingly their geopolitical aspirations will be curtailed and adjusted to larger neighboring powers' interests.

South Caucasus is one of such spaces which could be regarded as a case study for deciphering the future world order and what it will mean on a regional level. Surrounded by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, three Eurasian powers, the South Caucasus is one of those territories which sees firsthand how an order of exclusion is being constructed—a subject I turn to in the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 3

Multipolar World and the Return of Great Power Competition to the South Caucasus

The South Caucasus has entered the age of great power competition. Though applied to different regions of Eurasia where continental powers vie for energy resources and the control of strategic swathes of lands, the application of the concept to the South Caucasus has not been made so far. The region is a good study case of the intensifying rivalry especially because three Eurasian powers—Iran, Russia, and Turkey—increasingly strive to build a new order and mode of behavior for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. In other words, the study of the Eurasian powers' behavior in the region sheds light on some critical elements of emerging world order.

To be sure, competition has always been present in the region. Even in the wake of the Soviet collapse and America's unipolar moment the rivalry in the South Caucasus was evident in the form of advancement of competing infrastructure projects, support for separatist regimes to limit the Western penetration, and a relatively high pace of militarization of the region. In the course of the last several years, the competition became more pronounced: all the trends indicated above are of a more intense character both among the players which surround the South Caucasus, and between the regional and external (mainly the collective West) powers. China, a relative newcomer to the region, still has to attain the knowledge of geopolitical intricacies and elevate its economic presence

E. Avdaliani, *New World Order and Small Regions*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4037-8_3

in the South Caucasus to play a greater role on a par with the regional powers.

The regional powers put a special emphasis on building new regional organizations aiming to cement their position. There is still a lack of agreement among the regional powers on which security cooperation and conflict-resolution mechanism will be acceptable to all the players. Yet the evolving process indicates to the growing ability of Iran, Turkey, and Russia not only to influence the region, but also to preclude external powers and ultimately construct a new order from the Black Sea to the Caspian basin. Russia's calculus on developing better relations with Turkey and Iran becomes clear with a look at the regional map. Common understanding with Ankara and Tehran allows Moscow to fortify its position not only in the South Caucasus but on the two spaces flanking the region. In the Black Sea, Russia wants to manage together with Turkey, in the Caspian basin with Iran. Other littoral states matter less, though when deemed necessary they can be consulted or forced into agreement. The critical element here however is the exclusion of non-regional powers from exercising the influence. For instance, the 2018 convention on the legal status of the Caspian Sea talks about the "non-presence in the Caspian Sea of armed forces not belonging to the Parties" (Kremlin, 2018).

The approach resuscitates the regional ownership concept when regional powers tend to squeeze out non-regional actors. Essentially, Iran, Turkey, and Russia tend to manage three interlinked spaces, which makes up the whole corridor from Central Asia to eastern Europe. The regional ownership says a great deal about the changing world order and its impact on the South Caucasus. The pursuit of exclusive geopolitical rights also signals the re-emergence of spheres of influence idea. Criticized in the West as a relic of the past, the notion creeps back to life as the liberal order finds itself increasingly hurdled by internal and external challenges. Russia has always been a staunch supporter of the concept as it would guarantee its special place in the South Caucasus affairs ever since the Soviet collapse. But Moscow has also been cautious not to overestimate its power, mindful of its limits, and willing to approach the regional and global geopolitical trends more realistically. The latter means seeing the South Caucasus not as an exclusive Russian sphere of influence, but rather as a space where it would have both to cooperate and compete with other regional powers. The difference is that Moscow now prefers to talk to Iran and more so Turkey to respond to rising challenges. Surely, here

too Russia seeks primacy, but it understands that in a highly globalized world managing the region similar to how the Russian Empire or later the Soviets did is impossible to achieve. Therefore working with Ankara and Tehran seems more suitable to Moscow's long-term interests.

From Moscow's perspective the new order in the South Caucasus must revolve around Russia. It will be a loosely built system not organized or regulated by strict rules peculiar to alliance logic. Perhaps partnership is a more appropriate word here. Iran, Turkey, and Russia will be cooperating more out of the need to confront (in the case of Iran and Russia) or constrain (in the case of Turkey) the collective West's ability to penetrate the region. Russia will also try to build a sort of a hierarchical system where it holds the foremost place, but also anticipates Turkey and Iran to occasionally challenge Russian decisions. The scope of the challenge, however, should not be undermining Moscow's set of core interests. In a way, this will be similar to "first among the equals" idea where the hegemon's prestige and military power are decisive and serve as an effective preventer of disagreements from spilling into an open rivalry.

Beyond the shared grievances against the collective West, the troika has similar understanding of a new type of bilateral relations. The era of alliances so much characteristic of the Cold War era has come to an end with the emergence of the multipolar world. The very idea of being attached exclusively to one geopolitical pole has shown significant deficiencies. Fixation could be harmful as it no longer responds to the unfolding changes—the shift of power away from the West to other parts of the world, mainly Asia. Multipolarity offers bigger opportunities which could be reaped only when autonomy and equidistance are achieved in foreign affairs.

The evolving and expected behavior from Iran, Russia, and Russia plus China, though to a smaller degree, signals at the growing importance of the South Caucasus. Its role in international relations since the end of the Soviet Union has been ambiguous at best. Serving as a shortest trade route between China and Europe as well as an effective energy and infrastructure corridor from the Caspian basin to the Black Sea, the region nevertheless has failed to attract enough of Western military and financial support. The West's lukewarm involvement also meant the lack of strategic thinking and willingness to defend the region from geopolitical adversaries. The South Caucasus thus failed to transform into a pivotal trade, security, and military corridor it hoped to achieve. Yet, with the

greater involvement of the powers surrounding the region, the importance of the South Caucasus has increased as it is now tightly linked to the policies of Iran, Russia, and Turkey in the Middle East (Second Nagorno-Karabakh War attests to this).

The creation of regional organizations covering the South Caucasus and serving as alternatives to the Western multilateralism is an ultimate goal for Iran, Turkey, and Russia. Regional groupings consisting of illiberal states generally tend to support each other and prolong the kind of rule which will not be contagious across the border with the ideas of democratic freedom and human rights protection (Debre, 2021). Increasingly, illiberal states aim at building the order which is less hostile to their type of governance. It might not involve a deliberate export of authoritarianism, but rather constructing the mechanisms which would strengthen and prolong their internal stability and help resist democratization. Loose regional cooperation is also likely to materialize because it would increase the level of coordination on security and other essential issues. It will also be a comfortable type of cooperation as there will not be any external interference in internal affairs. The new type of order will be based on superficial obligations lest the Westphalian principles are violated. Emphasis on sovereign rights will guarantee the looseness of regional cooperation among Iran, Turkey, Russia, and potentially China if it increases its economic interests in the South Caucasus. Defense of sovereignty thus serves as a driving force behind otherwise historical rivals, whose bilateral relations have always been marred by deep mistrust.

Iran, Russia, China, and to a very limited degree Turkey will be also opposing the spread of democracy and liberal values in the South Caucasus. Liberal internationalism is a threat to their understanding of a new type of Eurasian bilateral relations. Their coordination might even evolve into an officially stated policy on the need to defend sovereignty and territorial integrity—Westphalian concepts—against the expansive liberal agenda. In Syria both Iran and Russia framed their involvement and the support for Bashar al-Assad's regime by the need to defend the principle of state sovereignty, inviolability of state borders, and the idea of legitimately chosen government. These principles might well serve as sticking points for the Eurasian powers to build an order of exclusion in the South Caucasus. The recurrent theme of this book is that the construction of the order of exclusion is already actively pursued by the regional powers with China heeding their geopolitical sensitivities by avoiding active involvement in the South Caucasus.

Iran, Turkey, Russia, and to a limited extent China could also engage in a higher level of coordination. This might involve intelligence sharing, market access, but most importantly they might find a common ideational ground. Eurasianism could be a term which serves as an umbrella for the policies Iran, Turkey, Russia, and China have been pursuing lately. To spare the readers from confusion, the term Eurasianism here is used not in its classical form developed in Russia, but rather explaining the increasing engagement of the mentioned states with the Eurasian continent to mitigate the Western pressure. Therefore, Eurasianism here is a realist way of grasping the opportunities presented by the vastness of Eurasian continent and using them to advance own national interests. For instance, the realist Eurasianism helps Turkey and Russia shook off their geopolitical fixation on the West and build a foreign policy based on equidistance from major centers. Such policy involves, even requires constant balancing. Iran's and China's policies too fit into the realist Eurasianism. Tehran looks west as trade, criticism, sanctions, and military moves by the collective West are critical for the Islamic Republic and its geopolitical position. However, looking eastward is now even more beneficial. Iran sees in China's BRI plenty of economic and political opportunities for successful foreign policy balancing.

The South Caucasus is a fragile region security-wise. Cross-border terrorism, various sorts of extremism, drug trafficking have proved from time to time to be a region-wide problem. Iran and Russia might engage in higher level of cooperation on these and similar issues. This kind of cooperation however could also serve as a cover for cross-border repression of opposition leaders and movements. Sadly for the South Caucasus' fledgling democracies, increasing cooperation among the regional powers could also involve efforts to limit the effectiveness of democratic transitions.

The construction of an order of exclusion in the South Caucasus based on some loose understanding among regional powers means that the balance of power concept made its way back. Realism has prevailed against the liberal world order which seems increasingly threatened by growing external opposition, internal troubles, and the declining authority/prestige (the troubles a chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan left this country in is a good example). For Iran, Russia, Turkey, and China the balance of power idea is a concept which resonates well with each of these states' historical experiences. Each has always positioned itself as a civilization state as opposed to the Western concept

of nation state. The four have similar geographic dilemmas which over the course of the past several centuries informed their behavior and still continue to haunt the countries' political classes. Encirclement by enemies is a constant feature in the nationalist discourses. Balance of power for Iran, Russia, Turkey, and China is a safe refuge partly because it is what these civilizations always did, how they survived, grew, and evolved into a dominating force in their respective neighborhoods. Pursuit of dominance made them averse to the universal march of liberalism and the US influence. It continues to serve as the biggest single motivator behind their increasingly concerted efforts to limit the West's influence.

Thus the future of the South Caucasus will be shaped by geopolitical visions, immediate goals, and wider priorities of Iran, Turkey, Russia, and, to a certain degree, China. This process will be taking place within the context of the Western need to focus its attention simultaneously on the Indo-Pacific region and the war in Ukraine. The changes will reverberate across the South Caucasus which has never been a foreign policy priority for the US, but nevertheless was regarded as an important juncture between East and West. The diminution of America's interest or, as argued throughout this book, perhaps even influence will be proportionally substantiated by the growing position of the Eurasian powers in Western Asia and the South Caucasus in particular.

And it is not only about the alleged decline of America's power, but the collective West in general. It undermines the assertion that liberal democracy is the only model that can guarantee development and stability in the South Caucasus. Instead an illiberal model emerges, which has been often deemed as unstable and a mere transitory stage toward the liberal democracy. It has proven itself quite resilient. For instance, consecutive governments in Armenia and Georgia are manifesting the ability to appropriate the liberal concepts on state and economy to advance an illiberal agenda. Both hold elections, and are democracies to varying extents. But instead of ushering in an effective political plurality and peaceful changes of government, these provide fertile ground for ruling governments to employ state power to solidify their positions. Power politics remains a deeply ingrained feature of the political culture. Illiberal governance most of all is dangerous because of its hybridity, it is a classic case of authoritarian practices under the guise of officially proclaimed democracy. Stamping them out is possible, though hard work is needed. But sliding from illiberalism further back to a failed state is even easier. This is yet

another challenge the South Caucasus' aspiring democracies have been facing lately.

The region is and likely will continue to be plagued by the lack of coherence in the US and EU policies over governance and security issues. These are far more important than economic policies where Brussels and Washington more or less find some common ground. Both also agree on some basic elements of the South Caucasus' importance in the regional connectivity. But the stalling of EU's and NATO's eastward expansion brings about disillusionment among the political elites of the South Caucasus states (Georgia primarily). Shallowness of Western promises sets the scene for some long-term changes. If Azerbaijan has always been half-hearted about its Western aspirations and pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, troubles in the West, and growing reliance on Turkey's military support manifested in the results of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War effectively ends Baku's efforts to build an equidistant policy with large political actors. From now on a pro-Turkish vector will be predominant pushing Azerbaijan to balance exclusively between Turkey and Russia's potential military and economic blowback. The Nagorno-Karabakh war also undermined Armenia's efforts of building a multi-vector foreign policy. Dependence on Russia is set to reach even bigger levels amid Armenia's dashed hopes of Western support for Yerevan during the war and the post-war period.

Scholars might rightly state that both Armenia and Azerbaijan have always had little trust and hope in wider Western engagement in the region as a counter to the expanding Russian military and economic presence. However, the decline of the liberal order further entrenches these sentiments. A critical change might even be taking place in Georgia, the region's most pro-Western state. Though the pro-EU stance within the public remains fairly high, for the political elites it becomes increasingly clear that the membership prospects are bleak despite the European perspective granted to Georgia in 2022. Reasons range from troubles divisions in the West, rise of illiberalism, and America's shifts in foreign policy. As a reaction, Georgia's ruling political elites might be embracing a more balanced approach in foreign affairs. This involves building a more equidistant external ties with both regional actors and global powers. In this Tbilisi might be following what Ukraine, another long-time EU-hopeful, began doing when it was essentially shunned from the EU and NATO membership before 2022 war. To seek alternatives or rather to

increase its bargaining position, ability to leverage its geographic position and geopolitical weight, Kyiv turned to Ankara and Beijing—a logical option considering China's willingness to build up its meager economic position in the wider Black Sea region. With the war in Ukraine and the Western support the sentiments in Kyiv will surely be changing. Pro-Western sentiments will now be on the rise again.

Georgia might be sharing a similar perspective finding itself in a tough spot. Increasingly fixation on the West does no longer provide expected results. Moreover, failure to attain EU/NATO membership coincides with Russia's growing military influence in and the return of Turkey to the South Caucasus after nearly 100 years. This however does not mean Georgia will be abandoning its pro-Western stance, rather Tbilisi will treat its Western orientation as complementary to other foreign policy opportunities. Balancing will be a guiding instrument, which would allow the country to leverage its strategic position, minimize risks related to Russian troops presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by engaging Moscow on some security issues and questions of deeper economic cooperation. Through balancing the negative effects from its inability to become an EU/NATO member will be reduced for Tbilisi. Beyond Ukraine, Georgia might be following the examples of other neighboring states such as Turkey and Iran. Georgia now sees that balancing in foreign policy is more conducive to unfolding uncertainties related to the world order.

The balancing strategy might even involve Georgia entertaining ideas on improvement of ties with Russia. Despite the history of troubled relations, Moscow also senses arising geopolitical possibilities and is highly perceptive to the needs of Georgia and the grievances Tbilisi might hold against the West. Offers of possible restoration of flights between Russian and Georgian cities and expressing the readiness to re-establish official bilateral relations are made at the time of internal crises in Georgia. Though officially Tbilisi remains unenthusiastic about Russian proposals, Moscow's moves shows there is a widening space for Russian diplomacy trying to leverage the growing contention between Tbilisi and its Western partners.

Georgia is vital to Russia and its ideas and the choice of the means to dominate the South Caucasus. Even without an effective control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia still holds many cards which make it imperative for Moscow to try to push the small nation into the Russian orbit. Though it is highly debatable whether the Kremlin pursues the regime change strategy in Georgia, the government in Tbilisi which is

neutral to Russia and less bent on pursuing NATO–EU membership goals would be an ideal scenario for Moscow.

The South Caucasus is also an increasingly fractured region. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia now have more divergent foreign policy paths than before. Some interests surely coincide, but they are tactical, more immediate in nature than long-term. Divergent foreign policy views led to radicalization of partnerships into alliances and dependencies. The process has long been in the making, but was finalized with the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Turkey and Russia positioned themselves as higher-status powers, while Armenia and Azerbaijan are increasingly reliant on them. Fracturing of the region is also helped by extreme securitization when the region's states are primarily concerned with border defense, foreign troops' presence, and rival alliances possible to harm their interests. The process is accelerating and is unlikely to subside in the near future. Securitization has also driven Georgia's foreign policy thinking, but the country's close ties with the EU/NATO and the US are not as cohesive as in the case of Armenia's and Azerbaijan's relations with their allies.

This growing fragmentation is challenging the general security and the development of infrastructure in the region. Improvement of connectivity happens only if it is supported by one of the major powers. Even then it faces significant roadblocks as is the case with the Russian proposal made in 2020 on Soviet-era railway revival between from Armenia to Russia via Azerbaijan. Fragmentation also means that holistic approaches to the South Caucasus do not work. The EU's vision of the South Caucasus as a clear-cut region with developing infrastructure leading to integration, brought little result. In the Balkans the EU's integrative concept worked with all countries now aiming at eventual EU membership and regional cooperation starting off. With the South Caucasus the situation is markedly different (Boonstra & Delcour, 2015). Exacerbation of great power competition limits the EU's potential. True that Russia, Turkey, Iran, and, to a certain extent, China are competitors, but all (perhaps with the exception of Turkey) see the EU's economic expansion as an unwelcome development. Brussels has to become more geopolitical and even opportunistic in its approach to the region. A specific emphasis will have to be made on resolution of territorial conflicts which hinder intra-regional mobility as a precursor to regional security and integration in the South Caucasus.

The collective West's failures in the South Caucasus reflect the troubles the multilateralism is facing nowadays. Regional cooperation fails in

the Black Sea—the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Black Sea Naval Force have seen gradual erosion (Machitidze, 2021). But perhaps the clearest example is the operational failure of the Minsk Group, the grouping created in 1992 by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, to resolve the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict. The grouping was created in the unipolar age and bore the elements of Western diplomacy. Russia was dominant and has remained pivotal to the conflict-resolution process, but the Western actors were also involved. Over the years, however, the body atrophied. Its effectiveness declined and it coincided with and was influenced by the emergence of the multipolar world (Broers, 2021). Multipolarity means a shift from Western-led multilateralism to reshaped or altogether alternative conflict-resolution paradigms. Illiberal methods of managing interstate conflicts gradually triumphed culminating in the Russian-led efforts to settle the conflict following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. The triumph of illiberal methods signified the heavy use of geopolitical thinking in formulating a major peace effort. Russian intentions during and after the 2020 war are motivated less by finding a long-term solution to the conflict and more by keeping the Armenia–Azerbaijan relations fluid. In this way Moscow will be able to quickly adjust to changing circumstances on the ground and in many ways shape them. Fluidity allows Russia to maneuver as too much of support for Armenia will drive Azerbaijan ever closer to Turkey, which brings us to yet another critical change. The global shift to multipolarity also meant that the composition of the Minsk grouping could no longer be kept intact, dominated by Western countries. Non-Western powers were set to seek bigger role in the conflict-resolution process. Turkey's activism is a reflection of changing times when Ankara has moved from being a part of the Western multilateralism to a power seeking higher geopolitical status and embracing the multipolar world order.

Thus in Nagorno-Karabakh, a liberal agenda for peace-building has been undermined, if not entirely sidelined. An alternative, illiberal, mostly Russia-led vision is now dominating the conflict-resolution process. The illiberal methods imply that Moscow's intentions are far from benevolent as shown by various crises whether on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan or postponement of railway revival projects (Ohanyan, 2021). It is also increasingly clear that Moscow's military and geo-economic calculations often trump genuine regional security needs. This further dims an ever low level of trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan and projects a more chaotic security environment in the South Caucasus.

The failure to produce a long-term peace is also a result of deep skepticism Armenia and Azerbaijan hold over Russian intentions. It underlines the fact that constructing a long-term peace requires real political willingness and prestige, both elements which Russia lacks as it increasingly relies on the military component. Both Baku and Yerevan recognize that while the tensions persist, a real winner is Russia which extracts additional benefits from both sides such as a potential expansion of military presence and the willingness to remain on Azerbaijani soil beyond 2025—the end date of Russian peacekeepers' mandate in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Thus since the end of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus has turned into an increasingly dynamic space. Viewing the region as a subject to Russia's exclusive influence is no longer a tenable argument (Stronsky, 2021). Seeing the region solely in terms Russia–West competition, a still dominating theme in the scholarly and everyday discussions, also is a deep misrepresentation of a much more nuanced reality on the ground. Local actors have their strategic interests, which they relentlessly pursue and at times even succeed at (Sadiyev et al., 2021). They seek diversification of their foreign ties and build viable national institutions to withstand foreign pressure. In the increasingly multipolar world order, the geopolitics of the South Caucasus also evolves with the emerging interests of a significantly greater number of foreign powers than just Russia and the collective West. The region has turned into an increasingly crowded space. But the multiplication of foreign actors also means that the region faces risks of being further fractured by regional powers' policies and divergent alliances and partnerships. The South Caucasus has now entered the age of great power competition where Iran, Russia, Turkey and to a smaller degree China, both cooperate and compete causing long-term instability. This phenomenon of the broken South Caucasus is caused by global shifts such as an accelerating erosion of Western-led multilateralism and the increasing interconnection between the region itself and the wider Middle East (Cornell, 2020). We now turn to the discussion on how each big actor perceives the South Caucasus and formulates its policies toward the region within the context of unfolding changes.

Another element of Iran, Russia, and Turkey in the South Caucasus is that their approach toward the region is shaped by their respective historical experiences. The three are former imperial powers and the changing global order resuscitates elements of imperial thinking (Mankoff, 2022). China's foreign policy too has been developing in the same manner, but

since the country has never contended over the South Caucasus we would limit our discussion to Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

The word "empire" has often been ridiculed, but it is arguably one of the most enduring sentiments the Eurasian powers have. Autocracies still prefer to avoid its use, while in the West it is usually considered as a relic, but imperial legacies do indeed have a critical bearing on the modern international relations. It is indicative that the re-emergence of this thinking is taking place at the very moment the international system undergoes structural changes.

The three powers have dominated in one form or the other over parts or the entirety of the South Caucasus. Most explicit is Russia arguing that the space is a buffer zone against potential instability. Turkey and Iran are more modest, but they too see the space as a part of their traditional zone of influence. Imperial thinking does not necessarily involve direct military control (though in Russia's case it is indeed so), but rather in the twenty-first century it is of a more nuanced approach. The three's pursuit of regionalism is nothing, but a former imperial thinking re-adjusted to the present age of geopolitical diversification. The admittance of inability of imposing an exclusive control is one of the features of the present age, but this pushes two or more states to create various regional orders based on their historical experiences.

As Iran, Russia, and Turkey have dominated the South Caucasus for centuries, it is not surprising that the three are more careful not to over-react when dealing with each other, and more eager to acknowledge each other's red lines. Resurgent imperial thinking actually helps Iran, Russia, and Turkey to better articulate what they want. To be sure, competition is never absent from this kind of order-building, but the still prevalent Western understanding that the former imperial rivals cannot coexist is a total misreading of the historical and present nuances behind Iranian, Turkish, and Russian thinking. In Eurasia the empires rarely formed official alliances. They rather built bilateral relations on mutual respect and were mostly motivated by the politics of balance of power. They also were religious about their respective zone of influence. This framing could actually be more helpful in revealing the present worldview of Eurasian powers. And it is also helpful in understanding the Chinese approach when it comes to Russia–West rivalry. For China too, another former imperial power, the Russian zone of influence is a sacred right where Western security and economic penetration should be met with military response.

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CHAPTER 4

Turkey's Evolving Approach to the Black Sea and the South Caucasus Region

The Black Sea and the South Caucasus are two geographically interconnected regions. Oil, gas, and freight traffic from the Caspian reach either the Black Sea shore or the Georgian–Turkish border to proceed further to the European market. Therefore, this chapter looks at Turkey's foreign policy in the South Caucasus from a larger perspective which includes the country's evolving position in the Black Sea. Indeed, since Russia–West standoff around Ukraine in 2014 Turkey's foreign policy toward these two regions has seen structural changes. Though Ankara continues to avoid direct military entanglements with Moscow, it nevertheless carefully seeks niches where it could pursue assertive foreign policy to increase its geopolitical clout. Military and economic cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia, and the multifaceted support for Azerbaijan during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War signals the emergence of a new Turkish foreign policy approach to Ukraine, Georgia's transit capabilities and the alliance with Azerbaijan. Ankara might be pushing for creating a veritable arc of geopolitical influence along Russia's southern borders from the Black Sea to the Caspian basin.

Turkey's position in the Black Sea has seen deep structural changes since the early 2010s. Traditional Turkish policy since the end of the Soviet Union was based on defending the status quo, opposing interference by outside (non-littoral) powers, and thus enabling a de-facto Turkish-Russian condominium in the region. A pillar of this Turkish

E. Avdaliani, *New World Order and Small Regions*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4037-8_4

policy was a strict adherence to the Montreux Convention of 1936, which still regulates the passage of naval warships from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits (Devlen, 2014).

As a practical adherence to the condominium notion, from 2001 onward Turkey and Russia promoted Black Sea Harmony (Özbay, 2011) and the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (Blackseafor) (Tol, 2019). The latter involved organizing humanitarian missions, providing relief to disaster victims, locating mines, fighting terrorism, illegal trade, and migration. Warships, guard ships, patrol boats, minesweepers, amphibious assault ships, and support ships could participate in the exercises that were taking place within the framework of the project. Command transferred from country to country on a rotational basis (Vasiliev, 2010). Beyond pursuing practical results, these maritime security initiatives also sought to reduce risks for potential Russian–Turkish naval confrontation and enabled the development of unified vision for the sea (Kınıklıoğlu & Morkva, 2007).

This brought results. For example, in 2006 Turkey and Russia opposed the extension of NATO's Operation Active Endeavour from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. Contrary to other Black Sea states (Georgia and Romania) Turkey considered active US involvement as a source for potential destabilization in the region as it would cause heightened tensions with Russia (Gaber, 2020). During the Georgia–Russia war of 2008 Turkey even barred two US hospital vessels from entering the Black Sea.

The 2008 war worried the Turks as Russian military influence grew in the South Caucasus. Sensitive to its own interests in Georgia and over the South Caucasus energy and transport corridor, nevertheless Russian moves in Abkhazia and South Ossetia did not cause any major re-appraisal of Turkish Black Sea strategy. Strict adherence to the Montreux Convention and condominium cooperation with Russia remained unchanged (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018). In short, for Turkey working with Russia was seen as a key to maintaining stability and Turkish military influence in the Black Sea.

Ukraine—Rupture Point for Turkey's Black Sea Vision

As a result of the revolution in Ukraine, Russia annexed Crimea and instigated separatist movement in eastern Ukraine in 2014. The annexation into Russia's Southern Military District increased Russia's de-facto

coastline to 25 percent of the Black Sea's total seashore or from 475 to 1200 km. This nearly equals Turkey's share, which is 1785 km or about 35 percent of the total coastline (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Turkey vocally opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea. It even offered support to the Tatar minority (see below), most of whom prefer to remain part of Ukraine. Erdogan has been hesitant, however, to have Crimea or Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine to overshadow burgeoning economic ties with Russia: Ankara has not joined the Western sanctions against Moscow (International Crisis Group, 2018).

However, the Crimean annexation began to shift the existing military balance in the Black Sea (Wezeman & Kiumova, 2018). Moscow began an intensive military buildup in Crimea and the peninsula's geography enabled the Kremlin's power projection nearly all across the sea. Before 2014, Turkey had the edge: its navy had a combined tonnage of 97,000 as against 63,000 tons for Russia's Black Sea Fleet; the Turks had fourteen submarines to Russia's one, and overwhelming superiority in amphibious vessels (54 to seven) (International Crisis Group, 2018). The unilateral revocation of the 2010 Kharkiv Pact signed with Ukraine, allowed Moscow to plan adding fifteen to eighteen new vessels to its Black Sea Fleet by the end of 2020. It has advantages in the air thanks to its S-300 and S-400 SAMs deployed on the peninsula thus developing a strong anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capability (International Crisis Group, 2018).

These measures altered the balance. In the words of the Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov Russia was capable of striking the Bosphorus Straits and noted that "several years ago the capability of the [Russian] fleet was sharply contrasted, in particular, with the Turkish navy, when it was said that Turkey is virtually the master of the Black Sea. Now everything is different" (Kucera, 2016). The radically altered strategic balance in the region (Flanagan et al., 2020) was even openly acknowledged by the Turkish president Erdogan, who demanded only a few weeks before 2016 NATO's Warsaw Summit to introduce counter measures against Moscow which turned the Black Sea into a "Russian lake" (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018). As an evidence for the changed balance of power, the Russian navy began harassing the remaining Ukrainian fleet and in 2018 even blocking the Kerch Strait choke point (BBC, 2018) thus gradually transforming the Azov Sea into an exclusive sphere of Russian influence.

As a result, a gradual re-appraisal of Turkey's position in the region began, which led Ankara to break with its policy of minimum engagement with NATO in the Black Sea and actually increase cooperation with the alliance (International Crisis Group, 2018). NATO with Turkey's agreement has become more active in the Black Sea. Containing the Russian expansionism was recognized as a top priority particularly given the concerns of the alliance's other littoral members—Romania and Bulgaria. In 2014 alone, as part of NATO's Atlantic Resolve operation, US warships spent a total of 207 days in the Black Sea, compared to two short visits in 2013.

At NATO summits in Wales in September 2014 and Warsaw in July 2016, the alliance pledged to Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey that it would maintain a "Tailored Forward Presence" in the Black Sea. This presence rests on frequent exercises and visits by US and other allies' naval ships from outside the region, and the deployment of a multinational brigade in Romania (Vorotnyuk, 2020).

NATO members began to make a coordinated push to strengthen the alliance institutionally in the Black Sea, a policy Turkey has supported. In February 2016, Romania proposed the establishment of a joint permanent naval task force by Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria, with German, Italian, and US logistical and military support. Though Bulgaria vetoed the plan before the July 2016 Warsaw summit, Turkey was in favor, which once again signaled its shifting attitude. On 16 February 2017, NATO defense ministers endorsed an enhanced presence on land, at sea, and in the air, and authorized the Standing Naval Forces, the allied immediate response unit, to deepen links with allies in the Black Sea (International Crisis Group, 2018).

But from the Turkish perspective, growing reliance on NATO risks evolving into overreliance, which will be harmful to Ankara's geopolitical stance in the Black Sea. Seeking the balance in every region and every relationship is crucial. One of the ways to counter Russia's growing military presence is through strengthening domestic naval force developments. A project called MILGEM (in Turkish *milli gemi*), was launched to design and construct naval vessels such as ADA class corvettes. Related, Turkey has also pushed for the development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities to counter Russia's growing A2/AD assets (Tol & Işık, 2021).

Thus, NATO from nearly passive watcher of Black Sea matters turned into an active player. Russian expansionism was a primary cause behind

this shift, but Turkey's willingness to reconsider its stance and the unfavorable military balance of power was instrumental in inviting NATO's engagement. But policy reversal particularly visible in the 2015–2016 crisis in relations with Russia did not entail drastic anti-Russian stance. In 2017 Russia and Turkey held a joint Black Sea naval exercise and both even made an extensive S-400 arms deal. Turkey risked its relations with the West while experiencing Russia's resurgent military presence in the Black Sea or Syria. While Turkey's foreign policy is often seen as a definitive search for alternatives to traditional relations with NATO and the US, what Ankara pursues neatly fits into or rather is a reaction to the context of increased volatility in the Black Sea and the growing need to be more proactive. Perhaps, it explains Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's argument that Turkey's relationship with Russia is not an alternative to the relationship with the US or the EU, and that Turkey is able to "perfectly balance" its foreign ties reflects the reality on the ground (Flanagan et al., 2020). Even Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine did not change this basic Turkish thinking.

What might seem to be a tactical game on Turkey's part, is in fact an expression of far bigger and more intricate Turkish worldview developed over centuries of warfare with the Russians. Though the post-Soviet period idea of the Turkish–Russian condominium might sound surprising because of historical enmity, the history of Turkish–Russian relations shows that both countries at times could perfectly cooperate. As in the case of the mutual grievances Ankara and Moscow have nowadays because of Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, past paradigms of animosity and intense rivalry do not often define their bilateral relations. In 1832–1833, when Egypt's Mehmed Ali advanced on Anatolia, Russian soldiers were allowed to be deployed near Constantinople. Even on the eve of World War I, the idea of forging an alliance with the Russians was not alien to the Ottomans (Reynolds, 2019).

Another interesting example is from the Turkish war of national independence (1919–1922), when the Russians provided critical financial and military aid to the Turks. Even before his rise, Mustafa Kemal entertained close contacts with the Bolsheviks and later even stroke an alliance with Vladimir Lenin (Reynolds, 2019). The Turkish–Soviet alliance served the Kemalists as it allowed the emerging state to shake off a devastating 1920 Treaty of Sèvres and lay foundation for a more independent foreign policy and geopolitical space for maneuvering. In 1921 the two countries signed the Soviet–Turkish Treaty. This showed that when both are pressured by

or simply dissatisfied with the West, Ankara and Moscow tend to reach a rapprochement (Gokay, 2006).

Similar to the post-Soviet period, then too, the Turks were more in favor of a condominium vision with the Russians than seeing Western military presence in the Black Sea. Moscow too preferred to work with Ankara without third powers.

Acutely sensitive to signs of changing balance of power, the Turks changed their attitude toward the Soviet Union once the latter emerged victorious and preponderant following World War II and the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin made territorial and other demands on Turkey. In fact, the threat caused Turkey to tilt toward the West.

Ankara drifted toward the West by joining NATO in 1952. This reversal is indicative of how Turkey approaches the issue of the balance of power in the Black Sea and why Ankara has been more open to NATO presence in the Black Sea following the Ukraine crisis and annexation of Crimea by Russia.

In many ways the Soviet–Turkish relations during the Cold War are indicative of what motivates the Turkish in present times when it comes to the ties with Russia. During the bipolar epoch, Turkey and the Soviet Union often cooperated. Similar to present trends in bilateral relations, it usually took a form of the Soviets taking advantage of disagreements between Turkey and the West over such divisive questions as the 1974 invasion of Cyprus by Turkey. The latter even was the largest recipient of Soviet assistance among developing countries (Hamilton & Mikulska, 2021). From Turkish perspective closer ties with the Soviets were an effective tool to gain concessions from the West. It was almost a part of the balancing strategy which nevertheless was heavily constrained because of Ankara's still powerful fixation on the West. The trick worked. Fearing an excessive Turkish leaning on the Soviets, Washington lifted the sanctions imposed in 1974. The rigor of the Soviet–Turkish relations dwindled from the early 1980s, which showed that both states could work and indeed pursue some large economic benefits, but long-term geopolitical goals remained elusive (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2015). The bipolarity and mutual distrust precluded the Soviets from pulling Turkey away from the West.

The collective West was the single biggest motivator for Ankara and Moscow to talk and cooperate. But Turkey had a more nuanced stance—it needed the Soviets mainly within the balancing game it pursued from time to time when facing disagreements with the West. Once tensions evaporated, so did the basis of the Soviet-Turkish cooperation. The present

Russian–Turkish cooperation is however qualitatively different. If in the past the ties with Moscow could have been sacrificed by Ankara in favor of the West, Turkey's present tilt to Russia is more profound and goes much beyond being a result of disagreements with the West. It fits into Turkey's shift of geopolitical attention toward Asia overall. With Asia's ascendance it was quite logical to expect Ankara's growing Eurasianist leaning. The evolving world order pushes Turkey to have an equidistant foreign policy toward large powers. Though often considered as a more recent development, Turkey's Eurasianist tilt follows the end of the Cold War and represents an ongoing adjustment to the emerging world order. Modern Turkey's close ties with Russia should thus be seen within the framework of the country's Eurasianist tilt.

Though Turkey managed to normalize its relations with Russia following the downing of the Russian military jet over Syria in 2015, Moscow's growing interests in the Black Sea are increasingly difficult for Ankara to accommodate (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018). Turkey lost its naval superiority in the sea, while the delicate Montreux balance pursued by Ankara has been also greatly challenged by Russia's military buildup. This made Turkey revise its position in the Black Sea and a number of flashpoints along Russia's borders offered Turkey a room for maneuver to offset Russian preponderance (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018). As will be shown, one of solutions was to build closer military and security ties with Ukraine, Georgia and further east with Azerbaijan. This is a geopolitical arc where political elites and general public sentiment is averse to Russian influence and are seeking to hedge their vulnerability to Russia with building closer ties with other regional powers.

Political and military developments in the Black Sea also reflect the changes within the global order. Decline of multilateral efforts such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Black Sea Naval Force, the Black Sea Synergy has been evident for quite some time (Machitidze, 2021). With Russia's military moves the trend accelerates and fits into general decline of multilateralism across the globe, growing efforts of rising or revanchist powers to renegotiate or altogether upend the rules of the post-Cold War order. This paves the way for growing militarization of geopolitically critical regions and the Black Sea basin is no exception. Militarization minimizes the role of diplomacy and economic cooperation. Realist approach is gradually emerging as triumphant with competition being an order of the day. Occasional cooperation might take place, but it will be rare and largely confined to issues of not primary importance.

It is essentially the emergence of the great power competition in the Black Sea, which would increasingly treat the sea as a Russian–Turkish condominium. Western influence in the Black Sea region will continue to remain insufficient (Hodges, 2021). Salvaging the situation will require a meaningful improvement of ties Turkish–Western relations.

Turkey's Ukraine Policy

A crucial component of Turkey's post-2014 approach toward the Black Sea has been an increasing level of cooperation with Ukraine. The latter being at war with Russia has been especially keen to enlist as many foreign powers as possible to balance Moscow's ambitions. Hence, the mutual understanding in Kyiv and Ankara to build closer relations.

Several levers of this Turkish policy could be discerned. First is the commitment to the Tatars and their suffering since the annexation of Crimea. Before the March 2014 referendum, Erdogan asked Putin to provide assurances on safety of the Tatars who overwhelmingly boycotted the vote, considering their fear of joining Russia after harsh treatment they received during the Soviet times. Erdogan's support for the Tatars was announced on numerous occasions in public speeches he gave across Turkey. This development fit into the emerging concept of Turkish foreign policy—"kinship aspect" (Kasapoğlu & Ergun, 2014) whereby Ankara reaches out to brethren scattered near its borders. One example of this novel foreign policy approach is that the Tatar issue was never raised by the Turks during the Soviet period, but became a subject for debate right after the Soviet demise.

Turkish officials (former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu) even met with Mustafa Jemilev, former Chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, pledging support for the Tatar cause. In October 2014, TIKA, Turkey's foreign development agency, funded the establishment of a Tatar Centre in Kyiv. During the 2015–2016 crisis over the downed Russian jet Ankara's support for the Tatars increased (International Crisis Group, 2018). In his February 2020 visit to Kyiv Erdogan promised Turkey would build housing for nearly 500 Crimean Tatar families that were forced to move to mainland Ukraine from Crimea after the Russian annexation (Miller, 2020).

Pressure on Russia worked in some cases, though personal Erdogan-Putin relations too might be in play when in October 2017, two Crimean Tatar leaders, Akhtem Chiygoz and Ilmi Umerov, imprisoned in Russia

for their opposition to the Crimean annexation, were sent to Turkey, then released (RFERL, 2018). Overall though, Moscow also has been largely ignoring Turkish concerns over Crimea and the Tatars. For example, in 2014, despite their relationship with Erdogan, the Russian authorities banned the Tatar leaders Dzhemilev and Chubarov from entering Crimea (RFERL, 2014).

In April 2015 Turkey even sent an unofficial monitoring mission to the peninsula, which revealed violations of Tatars' rights to free speech, property, and access to native-language education. The 21-page report which Erdogan reportedly gave to Putin, brought no results. In April 2016 Russia even branded the Mejlis an "extremist organization" for its alleged links to Turkish ultra-nationalist groups such as the Grey Wolves as well as the pan-Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Still, the Crimean issue and the fate of the Tatars so far have not overshadowed Turkey–Russia relations. The salience of the question gains prominence when the Ankara-Moscow relations experience troubles such as during 2015–2016.

Yet another reasons behind the rare insistence on the Tatars' issue by Turkey is a limited domestic appeal the issue has in Turkey. With the partial exception of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which has traditionally focused on Turkic communities abroad, no major actor has paid the matter much attention (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Overall, Turkey has been largely hesitant to involve itself in Russia-Ukraine spat over Donbas, Crimea and the Tatars' problem (Ereker & Özer, 2018). Indeed, except for a short jet crisis, from late 2016 relations between Moscow and Ankara went on an upward trajectory. A burgeoning cooperation on a number of key issues such as de-conflicting efforts in Syria, purchase of S-400 air defense systems, TurkStream gas pipeline, and the construction of NPP Akkuyu followed (Gaber, 2020). Too many interwoven economic and security issues that connect Turkey to Russia, and which are of more geopolitical value to Ankara than what could be achieved by severing the Russian connections because of Crimea and the Tatars.

But to gauge the shift in Turkish policy, other aspects apart from the Tatar issue, should be examined. The change is seen in the military cooperation with Ukraine which has increased since 2014 and Russia's military involvement in Syria in 2015. The map would show how encircled the

Turks feel with the Russians expanding their military footprint to the north and south of Turkey.

In February 2016, Ukrainian and Turkish officials agreed to cooperate in designing and manufacturing aircraft engines, radar units, military communication, and navigation systems. Advanced technology projects, such as phased space rockets, ballistic missile systems, and even cruise missiles, are also under discussion. The Ukrainian navy, greatly diminished after the Russian seizure of Crimea, has been training with its Turkish counterpart, most recently in an air defense exercise at Odessa in April 2017. Kyiv also shows an interest in Turkey's defense industrial projects. In March 2017, Ukraine's Prime Minister, Vladimir Groysman, signed a preliminary memorandum of understanding over the supply of engines for Turkey's Altay battle tank (Frahm et al., 2018).

In 2019 Baykar Makina, a privately owned Turkish drone maker, won a $69 million contract to sell six Bayraktar TB2 UAVs to Ukraine. In February 2020 during his visit to Ukraine Erdogan announced $36 million military aid for Ukraine (Peterson, 2020). A framework agreement on cooperation in the defense sector was also signed, which aims to facilitate cooperation between the countries in the defense sphere on the basis of reciprocity (UNIAN, 2020). Again in February Turkish and Ukrainian military delegations discussed the possibility of enhancing bilateral security cooperation in the Black Sea region, which would involve potential participation in joint exercises and intensification of dialogue between Turkish and Ukrainian naval forces (Avdaliani, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The bilateral cooperation also involved S-125 (Goa-3) surface-to-air systems, which Turkey bought from Ukraine. The Turkish defense giant Aselsan's secured a contract in Ukraine for high-end military communications systems and even started a local production facility in Kyiv for the deliveries (Kapasoglu, 2020).

In October 2020 contracts were signed between a Ukrainian engine developer, Ivchenko-Progress, and several suppliers for parts of the AI-35 engines for the use in Turkey's new cruise missile (Daily Sabah, 2020) and unmanned aerial systems (UAS). Turkey's Akinci combat drone was in the initial stage powered by Ukraine's Ivachenko-Progress AI-450 T turboprop engines. Produced by Baykar Company—producer of Bayraktar TB2—the Akinci drone is a new word in the Turkish military technological development (Kapasoglu, 2020).

As the military cooperation with Ukraine grows, Turkey-produced high-tech weapons can be used by the Ukrainian army in the conflict

zone in eastern Ukraine where Russian troops are heavily involved or in the Black Sea waters where Russia pressures Ukraine around Crimea. Turkish drones could make a difference in everyday fighting. And as the examples of Turkish military arsenal against Russian weapons in Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh showed, Turkish arms have some significant advantages. Turkish drones could inflict irreparable damage to defensive potential of the separatist forces. Turkey also aims at enhancing the interoperability of the Ukrainian and NATO forces through military exercises. Ultimately it is all about the overhauled and reequipped Ukrainian army, which is feared by Russia as it will require far larger resources from Moscow to retain superiority in eastern Ukraine. Ankara has also upped its political rhetoric in support of Ukraine's bid for NATO membership. When Russian forces were amassing along the border with Ukraine Erdogan pledged support and said that both countries launched a platform with their foreign and defense ministers to discuss defense industry cooperation, but added that this was "not in any way a move against third countries" (Reuters, 2021).

It seems that military cooperation between Turkey and Ukraine worried Russia more than before. Occasional statements signaled Moscow's displeasure. In one case, Russia's foreign minister warned Turkey against what he said were attempts to fuel "militaristic sentiment" in Ukraine after Ankara moved to boost cooperation with Kyiv (Reuters, 2021). When Russia invaded the whole of Ukraine in February 2022, Turkish drones were particularly deadly inflicting irreparable damage to Russian logistics lines.

The strategic logic of tighter Turkey–Ukraine ties is clear as each side sees the other as a potential counterbalancing element to Russia. It would not be correct to expect from Turkey to engage Ukraine as far as to cause direct military response from Moscow, but what Ankara has been doing since 2014 is a gradual re-appraisal of relations with Kyiv. Turkey is cleverly and carefully investing in pressure points to balance Russian pressure on other fronts. Purely military-industrial calculus too props up the cooperation. As Turkey's disagreements with Russia on Crimea, Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh are always possible to flare up rather than abate, Ukraine is a good source for Turkey to minimize its dependence on commercial defense cooperation with Russia (Gaber, 2020).

The Turkish–Ukraine military cooperation and the unfavorable balance of power in the wider Black Sea region before Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 indicated that Ankara and Kyiv are naturally inclined to

pursue further their increasingly aligning vision over the evolving regional geopolitics. For Ankara the pivot to Ukraine is also dictated by divisions among the Black Sea littoral states. Romania is a staunch supporter of NATO's enhanced presence in the region. Bucharest perceives Russian threat very seriously and advocates for a more active involvement of NATO, the US, and the EU in the region. Unlike Bucharest, Sofia is not an ardent supporter of NATO's and American naval presence in the region (Batoh, 2020). Both have disagreements with Turkey minimizing the ability of the littoral states to formulate a unified vision for the Black Sea.

The cooperation with Kyiv also signaled the emerging vision in Ankara's geopolitical thinking toward the north and north-east where along with Ukraine cooperation with other Black Sea and near-Black Sea countries would further enable Turkey to even the unfavorable balance with Russia. This is how Georgia and Azerbaijan begin to be viewed as yet other pressure points where Turkey could complicate Russian efforts or use them as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with Moscow.

Turkey's Growing Assertiveness in the South Caucasus

Since the end of the Soviet Union Turkey's South Caucasus policy has evolved around principle of respecting the independence and territorial integrity of the three South Caucasus countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (Hale, 2013). It allowed Turkey to hope for the return to the region (Çelikpala, 2007). Other general principles which determined Ankara's approach toward the region have been the establishment of high-level political dialogue with the three countries, promoting economic interdependence and development of regional policies with the actors in the region (Aleksanyan, 2017). To the detriment of connectivity in the region, these Turkish policies fell short of initiation of Turkey's relations with Armenia because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

A key part of Turkey's South Caucasus policy has been a geopolitical alliance with Azerbaijan. The backbone of these ties has been the energy component (Aydin, 2011). Projects like Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC), Baku-Tbilisi-Supsa, South Caucasus Pipeline Project, TANAP and investments of Turkish corporate giants like Koc-Ram Group and Turkcell illustrate that Azerbaijan is not only a political partner, but an economic and trade one as well (Çelikpala, 2007).

Another component of Turkey's South Caucasus strategy is Georgia. It serves as a buffer territory against Russia, especially since 2008 when Russian forces penetrated deep into Georgian lands and established heavily armed military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. 114 km Georgian border also provides the most direct and stable land route from Turkey to Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and the Central Asia region further afield. Thus Georgia, in light of the troubled Ankara's troubled relations with Yerevan, became a springboard for Turkey in terms of penetration to Turkic-speaking republics. Geography commands the Georgian–Turkish relations (Aleksanyan, 2017) and dictates Turkey's geopolitical rationale in the South Caucasus.

The Georgia–Russia war of 2008 became a watershed in Turkish policy toward Georgia and in a way toward the entire region. First, Ankara saw the limits to its policy of creating a stable South Caucasus. Second, Georgia and other small neighboring states saw how Turkey's approach to the region was subject to its relations with Russia. Ankara delicately distanced itself from taking sides. Turkey's foreign policy vision toward the South Caucasus by the early 2010s did not achieve a major geopolitical goal, namely, transforming the country into a major player in the South Caucasus. Moreover, the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Pact (CSCP) for the South Caucasus unveiled by Turkey following the Russian invasion also did not bring practical results (Erşen, 2013). Turkey continued to view Russia as a part of the solution to the region's troubles and saw the need to build its initiatives on condominium basis (Kirisci & Moffatt, 2015). The reality was that Russia remained a dominant power leaving Turkey only limited options.

For Turkey a weak and unstable Georgia would be tantamount to growing threat to the regional pipelines and other crucial infrastructure which connect Turkey to the Caspian Sea. To re-build its trust and geopolitical influence, Turkey gradually intensified its South Caucasus policy.

Post-2008 period a sharp increase in high-level official visits by Turkish officials to Georgia. Take, for instance, the official visits of the former Prime Minister (2003–2014) and the current president (since 2014) of Turkey Erdogan. From 2003 to 2007 the number of these visits were 2, in 2008–2011 period 4 visits were made. In the military sphere in 2009 Turkey provided Georgia with ammunition of $1 million. In 2010, the military trade turnover between the two countries amounted to more than $3.35 million (Aleksanyan, 2017). The military aid takes place on

yearly base. In December 2019, Turkey announced the allocation of 100 million Turkish liras ($12 million) to the Georgian Ministry of Defense to reform the country's military logistics (Machitidze, 2020). This follows a significant growth in the transfer of Turkish defense capabilities to Georgia throughout 2019. In the first 11 months of 2019, exports of Turkish defense products to Georgia amounted to $3.9 million, which represents an increase of nearly 38 percent compared to the same period of 2018 (Avdaliani, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

The 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia also pushed Turkey to further develop a vision of Georgia and Azerbaijan as one undividable corridor where a breach in one section would bring down the entire route harming supplies for Turkey's growing energy consumption. Growing threat from international terrorism and the possibility of foreign military intervention underscored a growing need for small but robust military protection for critical pipeline infrastructure. This is how the Turkey–Azerbaijan–Georgia trilateral relations acquired a military dimension.

The trilateral format still lacks a strong military component, but what started in May 2012, proved to be highly successful. The increase of defense and intelligence sharing ties along with numerous joint military exercises were the backbone of the nascent cooperation. This military partnership although not ambitious enough to cause anxiety in Moscow, along with railways and pipelines, glues sometime diverging geopolitical worldviews of the three countries (Garibov, 2018). The trilateral format consists of NATO member Turkey, EU/NATO-aspirant Georgia, and Azerbaijan, which has traditionally avoided joining any large economic or military alliances.

The durability of the strategic partnership takes precedence as the three countries need each other in facing a pretty much similar challenge—an increasingly aggressive Russia. The longevity of the format has proven itself as it remained unaffected by changes of governments and region-wide geopolitical transformations. This underlined the basis behind the trilateral format—geopolitical transformations in the region are driving the three to ground their cooperation in a more longer-term perspective (Tsereteli, 2013).

The role of the trilateral format was further emphasized in 2017 when the first train on the newly built 826-km Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) was launched. The project improves connectivity in the South Caucasus with further geopolitical ramifications for the landlocked Central Asian states. An additional layer of geopolitical importance is added to the project

when it is seen within the context of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) allowing the delivery of cargo between China and Europe in roughly two weeks.

Initially the trilateral format was less about the military cooperation, but rather economic and energy cooperation. This began changing in the recent years as the role of the military in the trilateral military cooperation grew. This has been reflected in the growth of annual exercises with the aim to defend oil and infrastructure (as was the case with Eternity 2017 trilateral military exercise held in Georgia) (Wezeman & Kiumova, 2018). The very nature of the exercises also underwent interesting changes. For instance, the 2018 trilateral military drills involved a hypothetical attack on the BTC oil pipeline. The trend reflected the situation on the ground. As was the case with April 2020 fighting in Azerbaijan's Tovuz between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces, the clashes could threaten the operation of major pipelines.

Turkey's emerging Black Sea–South Caucasus strategy (military support for Ukraine and Georgia and diplomatic support for their NATO aspirations) is mostly in line with the Western strategy toward Russia and what formerly was the Soviet Union. This creates a potential for cooperation between Turkey and the collective West. The latter like Ankara is interested in receiving Azerbaijani gas and oil and investing in the railway and pipeline infrastructure through Georgia (de Waal, 2010). Contrary to the narrative that dominated the analytical circles in the West on Ankara decidedly tilting toward Russia, Erdogan continues to consider NATO as an effective counterbalance to Moscow especially after the invasion of Ukraine (Çelikpala, 2007).

Assertive Turkey and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Another important component of Turkey's South Caucasus policy is Azerbaijan and the support it provided to Baku over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In recent years Ankara's support for Baku has grown exponentially. This includes active diplomacy, but most of all the dispatch of sophisticated weaponry. Growth of support for Azerbaijan has coincided with Turkey's more active foreign policy in the Middle East and the Mediterranean (Erşen, 2014) and is strikingly different from what Turkey–Azerbaijan relations of the 1990s and even early 2010s.

Turkey has always supported Azerbaijan. Common cultural and generally geopolitical aspirations helped to forge a military alliance between the two states. Yet back in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century Ankara occasionally backed efforts for diplomatic solution of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. As in the Black Sea region, Turkey's foreign policy in the South Caucasus was more in favor of a condominium strategy together with Russia. Both even cooperated on a diplomatic front to ease regional tensions. For instance, in 2007–2009, Russia supported Turkey's and Armenia's "football diplomacy," which culminated in a major effort to normalize ties by unblocking the Armenia–Turkey border closed since 1993.

The temporary thaw between Yerevan and Ankara led to the October 2009 signing of the two Zurich protocols, which envisaged the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries and the opening of the Turkey–Armenia border. The reversal however took place when in support of Baku, any progress on normalization of relations should have been linked to Armenia's return of Azerbaijani territories around Nagorno-Karabakh to Baku's control (Kirisci & Moffatt, 2015).

Some efforts by Russia to normalize Armenia–Turkey relations were also made in 2017 when the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov stated that the Kremlin "would most certainly welcome the opening of the Armenian-Turkish segment of the EEU's external border for free movement of people, goods and services." It would serve as a linkage point between the Moscow-led EEU and the EU–Turkey Customs Union. Positive signals were coming from Turkey too when an EU-funded demining operation along the border with Armenia was launched and Yerevan–Istanbul regular flights by Pegasus Airlines were established. Turkey even officially backed the so-called "Lavrov plan" for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, though Baku and Yerevan rejected it. Moreover, in 2018 Armenia revoked the Zurich protocols (Vasiliev, 2010) and has hardened its rhetoric (particularly since 2018) toward Turkey on the issue of the Armenian genocide of 1915.

Russia and Turkey had fundamentally divergent visions of the conflict making it hardly less likely to find a durable peace. Russia's quest for a long-term status quo where Azerbaijan potentially would have some parts of the territories currently under Armenian control went against Turkey's vision of total return of all the territories including that of Nagorno-Karabakh back under Baku's control.

However, as Turkey has become more assertive in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, its policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh also evolved culminating in the 2020 war. Prior to the conflict there has been a certain tilt in Ankara toward a more militarist rhetoric and a trend of extensive military aid to Azerbaijan. Several factors accelerated this policy. First is the energy flow. As Turkey's consumption market increases (Yermekbayev et al., 2020) Azerbaijan has gradually moved to become its major gas supplier by mid-2020 following the launch of TANAP in late 2019 (Avdaliani, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

Differences with Russia might be as palpable as they were in 2015–2016, but they did not disappear either. In this light Turkey seeking to reduce to its dependence on Russian gas is an expected move. The importance of the Caspian energy flows to Turkey was evident in July 2020 when following the fighting in Tovuz between Armenia and Azerbaijan threatened the operation of the regional pipelines. Ankara was unequivocal in its statements and policy moves—the country would help Azerbaijan militarily if the infrastructure is imperiled (Suleymanov & Babayev, 2020).

Other reasons too have motivated Ankara to pursue a more assertive role. Following Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution and the emergence of Nikol Pashinyan as a leading political figure brought mixed feelings in Turkey. For Ankara he was a significant break from the hardline Karabakh Armenian politicians who for nearly two decades dominated Armenian politics. Though the Karabakh politicians were staunch defenders of Armenia's military and generally were uncompromising, Pashinyan proved to be unpredictable. Initially he signaled an intent to resolve the conflict, but then called for the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia during his visit to Stepanakert (Khankendi). He also called eastern Turkey an "historic land of Armenia" and in 2020 officially marked the hundredth anniversary of the defunct Treaty of Sevres, which aimed to break up the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI. The treaty was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 and today in Turkey is associated with national trauma and constant mistrust toward the collective West. Amplifying this stance, Armenian Defense Minister Davit Tonoyan called for a "new war for new territories" during a meeting in New York with the Armenian diaspora. The Turkish security establishment read these statements as provocation and also as a sign of Armenia's unwillingness to compromise. This hardened Ankara's position

and pushed it toward providing bigger political and military support to Azerbaijan (Yavuz & Huseynov, 2020).

Thus increasingly it was becoming clear that the existing deadlock could have only been resolved through military means. When the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia broke out in late September 2020 the increased Turkish support for Azerbaijan was motivated no less by Armenian leadership's lack of maneuverability and Turkey's personal distrust toward Pashinyan. Armenia was cast as a threat to Turkey's security further laying the ground for Ankara's unprecedented military and diplomatic support for Baku's war effort (Coskun & Spicer, 2020).

For Turkey the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was a clear geopolitical opportunity because of a certain power vacuum. Big powers were occupied with the pandemic-related troubles, upcoming US elections, and most of all the absence of the liberal democracies. Ankara demanded radical changes to the long-held status quo around the conflict zone. For Turkey the liberal democracies had not done enough and that in fact, they dismally failed to address Baku's interests since the end of the first Nagorno-Karabakh war. No wonder that Erdogan was harsh in his criticism toward the Western leaders (Hurriyet Daily News, 2020; Markedonov, 2020a, 2020b).

Thus it should not have come as a total surprise to see that Turkey began regarding Russia, despite their critical differences over the settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh, as a viable partner with whom it could build a new order where Ankara's place would be guaranteed. The two countries have been successful in sidelining the collective West in Syria. Nagorno-Karabakh was set to become another case of this emerging Russian–Turkish condominium.

Nevertheless, the Turks were hesitant to make a major military move to disturb (Machitidze, 2020) Russia's top priority: the maintenance and defense of the existing regional status quo (Markedonov, 2012) in the South Caucasus. The Turkish involvement in the conflict showed that Moscow would no longer be able to keep the status quo between Armenia and Azerbaijan. First, militarily Azerbaijan was more preponderant through extensive decades-long growth of military budget. Second, Turkish military aid to Baku and general diplomatic support pulled the two states even closer. If Turkey was denied a negotiating role it could ramp up its military support for Azerbaijan which eventually could spark another military standoff calling for the urgency to include Ankara as a party. Moreover, perhaps Moscow's biggest fear was that efforts to

keep the same status quo would risk alienating Azerbaijan further away from Russia and moving it closer to its Turkic kin and perhaps the West in general (Markedonov, 2020a, 2020b).

The 2020 war ended with the seeming strengthening of the Russian position. The November 9 tripartite agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia envisioned the return of most the surrounding seven regions to Baku. Russian peacekeepers would guarantee the security of what remained of Nagorno-Karabakh still under Armenian control. Though it appeared in the beginning that the exclusion of Turkey from the November ceasefire agreement was a definite win for Russia, a closer look at the deal suggests that in many points Turkey lurks behind. Turkey and Azerbaijan secured a provision which allowed them to have a direct land corridor through the south of Armenia, potentially leading to the full unblocking of various rail and road routes through. This followed earlier announcements made by Turkey to build a railway (TRT World, 2020) and a gas pipeline to Nakhchivan (O'Byrne, 2020). Ankara also secured limited participation in the peacekeeping mission.

Thus Turkey's re-emergence questioned the very foundation of Russia's long-term position in the South Caucasus (Baev, 2021). To maintain its foremost position, Russia had to radicalize its foreign policy by increasing its reliance on the military component. Thence comes the dispatch of peacekeepers. Moscow had to accept the deployment of 60 Turkish personnel at the joint monitoring center near Agdam, which ensures observation of ceasefire by flying drones. The center was established in January 2021. And though it was authorized only by Azerbaijan and Russia, Ankara supported Baku and it is likely that Azerbaijan's military and diplomatic actions following the end of the war agreement are tightly coordinated with Turkey. However, it also seems that the center operates on consensus that involves disruptions in operation as the examples of other separatist conflicts show where consensus-based decision-making structures were often purposefully diluted by Russia (Rácz, 2021).

Yet another element in Turkey's attempts to bite at Russia's influence is Ankara's attempts to normalize relations with Armenia. The latter is also much interested in the possible rapprochement. The defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War deeply affected the Armenian public and the political leadership. More pragmatic and less demanding in its position with the neighbors, Yerevan is more receptive to the idea of re-starting the ties with its historical rival without preconditions.

Overtly Russia has been supportive of the normalization, but it is also worried that the process could lead to dilution of some elements of the Russian influence in Armenia. Surely, the Russian military base in Armenia will not go anywhere, but in the economic sphere some significant changes might take place. Economic reliance on Russia might no longer be seen as an inevitability. Large Turkish market for Armenian products as well as cheap Turkish merchandise can change the contents of Armenia's foreign trade.

Expanded trade is also likely to involve opening of new routes, connectivity patterns in the South Caucasus. This is set to affect Russia's position, which historically has been based on the relative or near total isolation of the region from the outside powers. Close links to the Russian mainland mainly secured through south–north infrastructure perpetuated Moscow's grip.

Now, however, these elements of the Russian influence are likely to undergo some fundamental changes. Turkey is doubling down on its efforts to penetrate the South Caucasus. In the first two decades following the Soviet collapse only one route via Georgia worked. Now Turkey is working toward establishing the second one. Expanded east–west connectivity patterns are now slowly reshaping the balance of power in the South Caucasus. Talks on an immutable Russian influence in the region are unfounded. In fact, Moscow's position is fluid, contingent upon numerous factors and one of them is the increasingly shifting geography of the South Caucasus. The latter is no longer under an exclusive influence of one power, but has rather a diversified portfolio of foreign ties. To be sure, Russian influence is not going anywhere, but its nature changes and has to take into account other powers' interests too. The era of great power competition, reflection of the changing world order, is thus returning to the South Caucasus.

In many ways the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War indicated broader erosion of a norms-based international system. Russia and Turkey, two states opposing liberal internationalism, have been actively pushing for excluding third, non-regional geopolitical players from the South Caucasus. The November agreement and the monitoring center indicate how determined the two states are. Those efforts fit into the overall global shifts such as renegotiation or complete overhaul of international organizations and groupings where the Western presence was essential or predominant. Instead, alternative security and conflict-resolution mechanisms are being put forward. The November ceasefire and the center in

Nagorno-Karabakh are just two examples. The way in which the ceasefire was established and monitoring organized highlighted the status of both Russia and Turkey as autonomous great powers managing the relations of their smaller neighbors without the involvement of any Western powers or institutions. Without great power consent smaller actors cannot achieve their national objectives (Cornell, 2020).

As argued above, Turkey has been especially vocal about the need to renegotiate the mechanisms for Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution. At one point Turkey has been pushing for a 2+2 formula—Russia and Armenia plus Azerbaijan and Turkey. Later a regional stability organization project, 3+3, including major regional powers—Turkey and Russia and Iran—and the three South Caucasus states was unveiled (Saari, 2021). What Erdogan's suggested was not however an entirely new platform. Turkey has long been a promoter of regional organizations which would serve as a basis for Turkish power in the region. Inherently they aimed at overhauling regional security and cooperation patterns where Turkish power was underrepresented. Süleyman Demirel, former Turkish president and PM talked about a Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform, which aimed at promoting regional peace and economic development. Similar to Erdogan's post-2008 Georgia–Russia war and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War initiatives, Demirel's plan was meant to include Turkey, Russia as main arbiters and the three South Caucasus countries. The initiative notably did not leave space for Western powers.

Initially Russia's attitude toward the 3+3 initiative was hard to discern. Willingness to participate was hardly openly stated, though the idea fits into the Russian understanding on the need to re-organize the region without Western influence. Yet wholeheartedly embracing the project would also constitute a risky decision, even a danger to Russia's strategic interests in the South Caucasus (Tsereteli, 2021a, 2021b). Support for the initiative would institutionalize Turkey's growing influence in the South Caucasus. Similar logic drives Russian attitudes toward Iranian initiatives. But openly opposing them is also a non-starter for Russia as it would antagonize Turkey and Iran. This is a development which would harm Moscow's efforts to build a different kind of geopolitical order in the South Caucasus, where "regional ownership" strategy involves cooperation with Ankara and Tehran. But Russia has to be careful not to allow the two Middle East states gain bigger stakes in the region's fate. In a way, what the Kremlin is pursuing in the South Caucasus is an order where Iran and Turkey are represented, but heed attention to Russian core interests

and geopolitical sensitivities. This will be an order where Russia wants to be a hegemon among regional powers as it understands that the era of exclusive ownership over the region is impossible to repeat.

Turkey's assertiveness in the South Caucasus also puts a definitive end to "zero problems with neighbors policy." The approach pursued from the early 2010s was long dead in other areas of Turkey's foreign policy, most notable in the Middle East, but in the South Caucasus Ankara's rhetoric remained milder and the policy was less militarized. Exhortations for a peace settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan were commonplace. But radicalization in Turkish approach began from early 2020 when irritated by the Armenian leadership's rhetoric Turkey increased its support for Azerbaijan and abandoned last vestiges of the conciliatory policy.

Turkey with its re-invented position in the South Caucasus also showcased its ability to harness the elements of "hybrid" tactics traditionally ascribed to Russia (Baev, 2021). Surely, the methods and ultimate goals differ, but Turkey has managed without officially complicating ties with Russia to actually subvert Moscow's position in the region by penetrating what otherwise was regarded a nearly exclusively Russia-dominated space. The Turkish hybrid tactics consisted of gradual increase of military and economic support for Azerbaijan, development of pipeline, road, and railway infrastructure rivaling the Russia-supported initiatives, establishment, and gradual maturing of trilateral military format with Azerbaijan and Georgia. This all was taking place simultaneously with maintaining and in fact enlarging bilateral ties with Russia and explicitly avoiding any radical moves which would have undermined Russian geopolitical interests.

Turkey's Assertiveness and Eurasianism

Though there were multiple immediate and mid-term reasons behind Turkey's unprecedented growth of geopolitical activity in the South Caucasus, the radicalization of Turkish foreign policy fits into a wider tilt toward Eurasia the Turkish political elites have been gradually embracing since the end of the Cold War and more eagerly from early 2010s (Tanrisever, 2018). Following the end of the Soviet Union numerous ideas were proposed on Turkey's future role. The concept of the Turkish World from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China was often brought up as was the model of the Turkish state-building serving as

a guiding example for the former Soviet states. Those designs failed to attract because of Turkey's paucity of economic resources and ultimately the lack of attractiveness of the Turkish model (Lin, 2016).

Initially the policy-makers in Ankara perceived the term Eurasia and the Eurasian space in nearly similar ways which corresponded with Western interests. Imagining Turkey as one of the centers of the supercontinent connecting various critical parts of Eurasia was at the heart of Turkish efforts to re-invent its role in the post-Cold War period (Lerna, 2019). Fixation on the West kept on, Turkey was a candidate for EU membership, while for the US the country was the critical link to a number of interlocking regions from the Black Sea to various parts of the Middle East. But the early 2000s also coincided with the most radicalized stage of America's unipolar moment, which caused significant geopolitical and nationalist pushback from Eurasian states. Turkey was among the disillusioned. Some ruptures appeared in Turkey's Western fixation, but not decisive enough. In the 2010s amid the Islamization of Turkey's foreign policy, the effect of the Arab Spring, internal political developments as well as tensions with the collective West, ideational re-think in Turkey's foreign policy took place—Turkish version of Eurasianism (*Avrasyacilik* in Turkish) began to play a more active role in the country's political thinking. It should be stressed from the beginning that Turkish Eurasianism or "Asia Anew" is not heavily ideologized as the Russian version. Turkish Eurasianism was more of a geopolitical, pragmatic reaction to internal processes and the developments in the neighborhood. But perhaps a single biggest factor in the Turkey's shifting calculus was China's rise and the opportunities it brings and the troubles it caused within the liberal world order.

Turkish Eurasianism differs from the Russian classical concept of the early twentieth century and its later slightly deformed version born from the ashes of the Soviet collapse. When analyzing the works and speeches of Turkey's self-declared Eurasianists one would not find a great deal in terms of serious Eurasianist content in their ideological and geopolitical constructions. There is a lack of the theoretical and ideological rigor and sophistication that is present in Russian Eurasianism (Lerna, 2019). Both versions are exclusive which puts them at odds with each other. However, what unites them is their "anti-liberal vision" poised as an alternative to the liberal internationalism (Torbakov, 2017).

Turkish Eurasianism, as a poorly defined concept, incorporates three strands of thinking which have appeared since the early twentieth century:

Pan-Turkist, Neo-Ottomanist, and the third one, often referred to as Kemalist Eurasianism.

Pan-Turkish (and the related pan-Turanian) strand of thinking stressed Turkey's tilt toward Turkic peoples of the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and ultimately the Ural-Altaic peoples (Tufekci, 2017). Though some elements of this thinking were present in the 1990s and could be still felt in the present Turkish policies, ultimately modern Turkish foreign policy is not so much about imagining Eurasia solely as an expansion into the Turkic world. Surely Turkey pays special attention to increasing its special position in the South Caucasus and Central Asia (Frappi, 2013). Yet it does so not because of narrow sentiments pertaining to the ethnic kinship, but because active foreign policy toward Azerbaijan and Central Asia corresponds to the geopolitical shifts in the regions.

Eurasianism in Turkey also began to be viewed as an alternative to Turkey's geopolitical fixation on the West. In this perspective, Eurasianism stands for an alliance with Eurasian powers such as Russia, Iran, and China (Akçali & Perinçek, 2009). Anti-Westernism is a defining feature which serves as the glue for these otherwise culturally and geopolitically disparate states. This strand of Turkish thinking is also called Kemalist Eurasianism rooted in the tradition of occasional Soviet–Turkish cooperation which began under Lenin and Ataturk or the Saadabad Pact signed in 1937 between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Anti-Westernism is caused by the shared sentiment of anti-Imperialist struggles each has gone through in the past. Eurasianism thus serves as a certain buffer or even bulwark against liberal internationalism.

However, to regard Turkish Eurasianist tilt as an alternative to the West much as the Dugin-influenced version of Eurasianism in Russia also misrepresents the reality as Turkey does not seek replacing its Western ties with the Eurasian. It rather pursues a balancing game between several geo-economic poles. The rise of Asia helps Turkey to diminish its dependence on the West, increase its importance in westerners' eyes and pursue a more independent foreign policy with Turkey's special interests in some areas long its borders. This explains Turkey's modern foreign policy toward Russia. Within the Eurasianist framework certain inclination to build closer ties with Moscow exists. Without enhanced relations Turkey's eastward push through the South Caucasus to the Caspian Sea and the Central Asian region would not bring anticipated results as Russia, major player there, could undermine Turkish efforts. Therefore, Turkey needs

Russia as much as Russia needs Turkey when it comes to operations in Syria and Libya. Competition does not exclude cooperation.

The third explanation of Turkish Eurasianism is that it seeks influence in the regions formerly held by the Ottoman Empire. In contrast with the Pan-Turkic idea, this line of thinking is based not on ethnicity, but shared Muslim identity and how Erdogan's AKP sees Eurasia as a Muslim geo-cultural realm (Erşen, 2017; Tüysüzoglu, 2014).

Though there is a definite trend in Turkey's foreign policy to look East, it is difficult to see which of the discussed Eurasianist variants Ankara embraces. None of the three definitions, while indeed are partially reflected in the Turkish foreign policy, explains the country's geopolitical orientation fully, but rather views it from a rather narrow perspective. What we in fact are witnessing nowadays is Turkey regarding Eurasia from a geopolitical and geo-economic perspective as a space which offers a pool of opportunities to strengthen the country's bargaining position in negotiations with world actors. Turkic ties or special relations with Russia matter, but they are not critical reasons for Ankara's Eurasian tilt. Rather they are one of the many tools for advancing Turkish interests, harnessing the economic and strategic opportunities laying in front of Ankara. For Turkey Eurasianism with the rise of China, scaling back of the Western influence in several critical parts of Eurasian landmass, gradual emergence of economic and geopolitical balance between the West and Asia, is however a much bigger development. It allows Turkey to remove its fixation on the West. This does not involve replacing one geopolitical orientation with another. Rather Eurasianism empowers Turkey to seek balance and autonomy in its foreign relations (Ersen & Kostem, 2021). Eurasianist shift is about recognizing unlimited opportunities rising with fast-developing Asia. It is not only about economy. Asia is increasingly attractive with its multilateral organizations which serve as a perfect balance to Turkey's failed attempts to become EU member.

Getting rid of its fixation on the West also fits into Turkey's historical experience. One of the reasons behind the Ottoman Empire's gradual disintegration throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was its inability to counter the West's preponderance with building counterbalancing alliances. Back then no power could rival the West on a par with the modern-day China. Thus for Turkey its Eurasianist leanings are more of correcting historical anomaly—becoming truly independent. Indeed, though often thought that Turkey belonged in the West, in reality it never was a part of the normative and strategic transatlantic

core constructed around cultural and strategic similarities. Enmity and loathing were always a big part of bilateral relations whether in the Cold War, following its end or more recently (Aybet, 2020).

For Turkey the Eurasianist concept is a mixture of historical-cultural ties with the South Caucasus and Central Asian regions and purely geopolitical calculus when looking East provides bigger room for maneuver and balancing foreign policy between several major world powers (Ersen, 2021). This means that in Turkey various Eurasianist ideas are intermingled and then streamlined into foreign policy actions as they fit immediate foreign policy moment. In other words, Eurasianism is used in Turkey rather pragmatically to advance the country's interests. It is often used by the politicians to balance the Western influence and is viewed as complementary to the ties Ankara has with the collective West.

Therefore, Turkey's realist Eurasianism does not exclude closer ties with the collective West. In fact, it is believed that despite existing disagreements, Turkey's geopolitical entanglements with Ukraine, South Caucasus, Caspian basin, and even Central Asia secures Western influence in the region (Tanrisever, 2018). Convergence of Turkish and Western interests is now subsumed in the Turkish Eurasianism.

The Turkish Eurasianism does not only markedly differ from the Russian concept, but it in fact clashes with the Russian Eurasianism. The latter leaves no place for the Western or any external involvement. The Turkish Eurasianism, on the other hand, does not seek exclusive dominance over its neighborhood or Central Asia, but rather more active engagement (Tanrisever, 2018). The realist Eurasianist approach is more beneficial geopolitically. It suits the emergence of the multipolar world where an absolute control is largely unfeasible and the engagement with competitors is unavoidable.

This perspective could explain Turkey's foreign policy toward Russia. There is a long-term inclination to build closer ties with Moscow, which belies the notion that both states enjoy a partnership of convenience. The reality is far more nuanced and even complicated to be explained by one notion. Without enhanced relations Turkey's eastward push through the South Caucasus to the Caspian Sea and the Central Asian region would not bring anticipated results as Russia, major player there, could easily undermine Turkish efforts. Therefore, Turkey needs Russia as much as Russia needs Turkey when it comes to operations in Syria and Libya. For both states cooperation and competition are both parts of one game. And Turkey can boast knowing Russian military operations firsthand. It is in

fact the only state within the Western military structures which directly fought Russia (Göksel, 2021).

Both Turkey and Russia share deep geographic insecurities. Both are at the periphery of Europe, deeply influenced by it, but always resisting it with armies and alternative ideologies/worldviews. Both fear potential encirclements, loath dependence on the West, and always seek alternatives (Frappi, 2018). This explains how dear the balance of power game is to both states. With the rise of China and the rest of Asia, Turkey and Russia now have historic opportunity to end their fixation on the West. Moreover, partnership with China does not entail demands of changing internal governance, concerns over human rights, etc. It is comfortable to work with Beijing. Thus the search for a multi-vector foreign policy is what unites Turkey and Russia (Frappi, 2018).

The end of their fixation on the West also makes Turkey and Russia more flexible when it comes to cooperating in the respective neighborhoods. The South Caucasus is one of them where the events of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict signaled the reliance on "regional ownership" principle (Frappi, 2018). Flexibility now emerges as an important unifier. Answering questions at the traditional meeting of the Valdai club in October 2020, Putin played down disagreements which were present at the time between the two states and emphasized that "No matter how tough President Erdogan's stance may look, I know that he is a flexible person, and finding a common language with him is possible" (Baev, 2021; Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club, 2020).

Turkey's increasingly active foreign policy in its neighborhood and the South Caucasus in particular is thus motivated by global trends. Troubles within the liberal order accompanied by fall in America's prestige, its inconsistent foreign policy over the last two decades, and the rise of illiberal states in Eurasia, these long-term trends pushed Turkey toward a more activist external stance. The shift from unipolar world order to multipolarity brings greater maneuverability to middle powers and this is yet another concept which can explain Turkey's behavior in the South Caucasus (Oğuzlu, 2020).

"Emerging middle power" concept involves attempts by a large state to serve as a role model for its neighbors, build long-term military and economic partnerships in its immediate neighborhoods. Middle power also involves having an acute understanding of the evolving balance of power, changing world order, and most of all, correct perception of its

capabilities. The South Caucasus is the region where Turkey has successfully deployed this strategic thinking (Öniş & Kutlay, 2017). But Turkey also manifested its willingness and in fact showed ability too to attain even larger status. Middle powers often tend to evince greater ambitions. But while remaining highly perceptive of their chances and potential blowback it might cause they are searching for a certain niche, or the region where they can successfully deploy their strategic calculus. This might take years or even decades of wait, but once presented with an opportunity the greater status seeker states can be quick in attaining their goals. In many ways the South Caucasus has served as such region for Turkey's both middle power and status seeking ambitions.

Turkey's position in the region has its limits too. Ankara has cleverly used its soft power, economy, and other elements to build an image of a benign and constructive player, but the Arab Spring changed the trend. It radicalized Ankara's policies and re-ignited aspects of neo-Ottomanism. In a way this also showed the limits a middle power can face (Altunışık, 2014). For the moment, its failure to build a framework suitable for the region could be a constraining factor for its ability to transition to more than a regional player.

Thus rather than explaining Turkey's activist foreign policy under either the neo-Ottoman, Islamist, pan-Turkic, or some other ideas, I suggest using Eurasianist approach which incorporates in itself elements of all the three strands of thinking and which most of all responds to shifting power dynamics in Eurasia and the world at large. Turkey always tried to play a more active role in its variegated neighborhoods since the end of WWII. Larger geopolitical situation was not congenial to Ankara's ambitions. It is the end of the bipolarity which presented the Turkish political elite with concrete opportunities. Unshackled Turkey diminished its fixation on the West. Close ties with the EU and the US continued but their intensity varied and ultimately were significantly scaled down by the mid-2010s. The end of the bipolarity freed several regions along Turkey's borders of direct Soviet military and economic influence. It would take some time for Turkey to re-invent itself as a regional leader, despite some failures in the 1990s. Re-invention of its position also went hand in hand with the changes inside the country when the rise of the AKP reconfigured Turkey's internal development. While the interconnection of the internal processes with the country's increasingly active foreign policy is a subject of debate and not entirely clear, some aspects of this linkage are nevertheless undeniable (Bank & Karadag, 2014).

Turkey is fundamentally realist when it comes to embracing Eurasianism. The latter provides economic and trade opportunities. It can also help Turkey strengthen its claim for a geopolitical and trade bridge between the west and wider Middle East, and the west and Central Asia and China (Tüysüzoglu, 2014).

Eurasianism is a pragmatic choice for Turkey. It helps balancing between the West, Russia, and China. This is reflected in the writings and statements of Turkish government officials for whom cooperation with any of the global actors is encouraged, but none of these should evolve into fixation. As the world order shifts toward a multipolar structure, Turkey will be increasingly averse to relying on any international institution, political, or military bloc which will constrain its ability to maneuver (Altunışık, 2020).

Final Thoughts

Turkey's active foreign policy toward the South Caucasus is a direct result of several interconnecting developments: Turkey's shift from neutrality in the Middle East, the gradual dilution of geopolitical fixation on the collective West, and the rise of Asia (Cagaptay, 2017). These give Turkey a growing scope of autonomy reflected in its efforts to portray itself increasingly not as a continuation of the Western influence, but rather as an independent player in the South Caucasus (Tsereteli, 2021a, 2021b). Though those efforts cannot be denied, but Ankara also understands that acting independently from the West is fraught with facing Russian ambitions alone—a scenario Turkey wants to avoid and which goes against the country's efforts to balance one power with another.

In fact the West fallibility could provide Turkey with far bigger opportunities. The country could be gradually turning into the West's veritable agent in those parts of the Eurasian continent where the West is otherwise unable to penetrate and influence the process. Criticism toward Turkey will remain, but for the West it is the only country which is actively engaged in limiting Russian activism in the Middle East and South Caucasus.

Similar to global trade routes, albeit on a smaller scale, the South Caucasus is an emerging trade and energy corridor, which allows Turkey to link to the Caspian Sea, partake in its oil and gas industry and reach out to the Central Asian states. Geography and energy supplies, propped up by close cultural connections, constitute Ankara's geopolitical power

in the South Caucasus. As connectivity improves in the South Caucasus–Central Asia, and the reliability of Russia and Iran as transport corridors is always a liability for third countries, the South Caucasus corridor is bound to grow.

The South Caucasus as a land bridge is far from the only route, but it is the safest and shortest means for Turkey to link to the Caspian Basin and Central Asia. For Turkey, which largely depends on external energy supplies (though major gas finds were announced in 2020 by Ankara in the Black Sea) assuring that neither Russia nor Iran have a monopoly on these transportation corridors will be a major geopolitical task (Cornell et al., 2015).

Turkey also looks at the South Caucasus as a launching pad for its further gaze into the Caspian region and Central Asia. This does not necessarily mean that Turkey is set to be a major player there any time soon. The country is very much mindful of the limits it faces, but also cannot ignore the improving connectivity and growing trade between the Central Asia and the Black Sea. Geo-economic reasons are at play. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine more than 3 percent of the world's daily oil supply transited the Black Sea. Novorossiysk stood out as did the Georgian ports of Supsa, Batumi, and Kulevi albeit with smaller transit capabilities. Much of Kazakhstan's oil export still goes through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) pipeline to reach those ports. The opening of the new, larger scale pipeline across the Caspian, connecting Azerbaijan to Europe, will be a gamechanger. Some basis for hope is already there with the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, signed in 2018 and paving the way to the January 2021 agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan on the joint exploration of a once-disputed section of an undersea oilfield named the Dostluq (Friendship) (Tsereteli, 2021a, 2021b). Russia's war in Ukraine and the West's reach for alternative routes presents an additional momentum.

In this Turkey and the West in general have similar, if not identical, geopolitical ambitions: promotion of east–west corridors as opposed to traditional Russia-dominated south–north pipelines, roads, railways, and other infrastructure. The results of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War underline this rival strategic visions when railways from Azerbaijan to Turkey via Armenian territory were made part of the November ceasefire agreement. However, as Russia is against the opening of the region to other powers, the implementation of the Nakhchivan corridor sees little prospect at the time of this writing.

In the longer run, Turkey's policy in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus (especially the latter) could generate a basis for a certain rapprochement between Turkey and the West. The latter hampered by distance and the lack of will for major military and economic initiatives could increasingly rely on a NATO-member Turkey in securing the South Caucasus energy and transport corridor.

True that Ankara, whose vision of the Black Sea and the South Caucasus in the post-Cold War period was in line with Russian thinking (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018), nowadays, even after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, still at times prefers talking to Moscow rather than making efforts to try to counterbalance Russian expansion with a more solid Western posture in the two regions. No major strategic shift in this Turkish policy is expected. It is also unlikely that the Turkish government will join anti-Russian sanctions imposed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Limited confidence in NATO, strained relations with the US, historical relations with Russia, including wars and rivalry, energy and trade relationship—ultimately these are the factors that influence Turkish behavior toward Russia. Economic interests and political pragmatism moderate Turkish concerns about Russia.

But it is also clear that divergent long-term interests between the two countries in numerous theaters undermine chances for stronger and trustful bilateral ties. There is a serious apprehension in the Turkish establishment about Russia undermining an unwritten understanding to maintain the balance of powers in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus. Turkey's NATO membership will always hamper closer ties with Russia—cooperation/intense competition mode will govern Russia–Turkish relations.

However, to counter Russian military moves Turkey will try to build an arc of the states threatened by Russia and which seek alternative geopolitical heavyweights to balance the Russian pressure. Developments over the past several years indicate that Turkey is increasingly reaching out to Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan to build closer political, economic, and most of all military ties. Azerbaijan is the biggest success for Turkey as the country have been intensively working on gradual deepening of relations with the three states, but also avoiding direct confrontation with Russia. Any rush move could trigger Moscow's overbearing military response Ankara will be unable to match and therefore would risk damaging its stance in the two regions.

Ukraine however will be the trickiest front. Larger military cooperation with Ukraine could invite Russian reaction as Moscow fears Turkish military technologies could make a real difference in the war zone in Ukraine similar to what was achieved in Nagorno-Karabakh. Over the Ukraine issue Russia has been far more uncompromising than elsewhere. What happens in Ukraine deeply matters for Russia's position in the Black Sea. This explains the intensity with which Russia has been defending Crimea, rebuilding its navy, and reacting to serious efforts by Kyiv to re-equip its army. Therefore Turkey understands how salient the Black Sea region and Ukraine have been in Russia's overarching goal to restore its influence and keep control along its periphery (Flanagan & Chindea, 2019). Therefore, each move by Turkey whether in military sector, economy or diplomacy is carefully portrayed as an advancement of regional stability and building of closer ties rather than a recipe for competition with Russia.

Nevertheless, Turkey–Ukraine cooperation grows and it will continue to unnerve Russia. Turkey as the case with Azerbaijan showed has learned to tilt the balance of power very patiently spread over the years of preparation and gradual investing in military and economic cooperation. This is what is likely happening in bilateral ties in Kyiv.

It still remains to be seen how far Ankara would go. Much will depend on Russia, but Turkey's ability to use grievances and the needs in the arc along Russian borders signals a long-term development. With careful moves, Ankara will try to use its influence in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus to ensure energy supplies and growth of its military power. It will provide Turkey a certain safety arc to the north and south where it is vulnerable to Russian military moves. Larger influence in Ukraine and the South Caucasus will also allow Turkey to pressure Russia where it hurts and be more flexible in balancing Russian power. Ultimately what Turkey pursues is to avoid new fixations in foreign policy. Strategic equidistance among all major powers is what gives Turkey more space for maneuverability and strengthening of its negotiating position.

Turkey's position in the Black Sea is thus at the watershed moment. Russian military incursions broke the post–Cold War status quo. Turkey cannot remain indifferent. Though it will remain careful in not antagonizing Russia altogether, Ankara's foreign policy toward this wider Black Sea, which includes the South Caucasus is in flux. For the first time since the end of the Cold War the collective recognizes this geographic area's importance. It has been one of the most active geopolitically. Civil war in Georgia in the early 1990s, wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, 2008

Russian invasion of Georgia, 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the seizure of Crimea, 2022 invasion of the whole of Ukraine. These are the events that highlight the importance of the wider Black Sea region and require urgent reassessment of Western policy toward it.

The latter has been in shatters. The West has failed to address the changing balance of power in the region when Russia began challenging the status quo. Geography might indeed be the reason to blame. After all, the Black Sea is essentially a lake. Access to it is only possible through maintaining good ties with Turkey—the exact opposite has been taking place since the early 2010s. Turkey needs the West in keeping Russia at bay, but the Western position in the Black Sea region without Ankara's support is as vulnerable. In the longer term, this basic understanding of each other's need could propel Turkey and the West to seek closer ties in formulating a future vision for the Black Sea region.

The alternative to this would be a chaotic order along the northern and north-eastern arc of the Turkish frontiers. Russia will be claiming an increasingly uncomfortable primacy for Ankara forcing the latter to accommodate Moscow's power. The accommodation might be built on the idea of regionalism where Russia and Turkey would be settling Black Sea and South Caucasus affairs (for the latter see chapter seven) by isolating non-regional powers. But this arrangement is unlikely to resemble the system the two countries relied upon before the annexation of Crimea—the balance of power will be decidedly tilted in favor of Russia especially as it is likely to further cut Ukraine from the Black Sea coast.

Much will depend on how the war in Ukraine develops. Pure realpolitik dictates that the bigger Russian military gains are the likelier it is that Turkey will be tilting toward the West. Stripping Ukraine of its access to the Black Sea coast will further increase the Russian control over nearly the whole northern Black Sea shore. What once was considered as the Ottoman lake could well become a Russian lake.

Exactly what the cooperation between Turkey and the West could mean is unclear. Perhaps Ankara could become more receptive to the idea of bigger NATO presence in the Black Sea. It could also limit Russian naval maneuvers by blocking the Bosporus and Dardanelles for Russian ships.

The distorted balance of power in the Black Sea will also affect the South Caucasus. Geographically dependent on the open waters of the Black Sea, Russia's land grabs in Ukraine will impact Western ability

to reach Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. It also means further limits on the ability to penetrate the Caspian and Central Asian regions. The energy and logistics corridor so meticulously built in the course of several decades would be severely constrained if Russia gets away with its power projection.

Russia has thus mounted a decisive attack on the borderlands. Yet cognizant of the inability to conquer or even keep the newly acquired territories a clever Russia approach would be to try to entice Turkey. The tools at Russia's disposal are numerous. Bigger incentives for bilateral trade, bigger say in the Black Sea affairs, and the proposal to build a veritable condominium. Turkey a staunch pursuant of balance in its foreign policy between several big players is likely to cooperate with Russians. After all, the thinking that Russian land grabs could force major changes on Turkey might be wrong. Quite the opposite could happen where seeing that Russia is achieving success in its military campaign in Ukraine, Turkey might see in it further weakening of the West, further signal of changing world order. The alternative is the return of spheres of influence.

Moreover, Turkey similar to Russia, Iran, and China, is influenced by the imperial past and the desire to regain some semblance of influence in former Ottoman territories. Historical experience coupled with the emerging chances to carve out its own zone of near-exclusive military influence could turn out to be a too powerful urge for Ankara to resist. Parts of the eastern Mediterranean, large part of the Black Sea, Azerbaijan, northern Iraq, and Syria can be easily included in the list. But Turkey could also look further eastward to Central Asia and use Azerbaijan as a launching pad for its more tangible economic penetration into the region.

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CHAPTER 5

Iran's Changing Strategic Position in the South Caucasus

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war drastically changed a fragile geopolitical status quo Iran helped to build in the 1990s. With growing Turkish and Russian influence, Iran now has to adjust to the tilted balance of power. Adjustment, however, will be a major challenge for the consecutive Iranian governments requiring significant military and economic resources to compete with Ankara and Moscow in the age of great power competition and the changing global order.

It has long been argued that Iran's policies toward the three South Caucasus states—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—are based more on pure geopolitical interests (Dorraj & Entessar, 2013; Therme, 2011) than ideological principles and the rhetoric which often permeates Iranian leadership's stance toward most of the Middle East and the US (Saikal, 2019). Others claim Iran's policy is a mixture of *realpolitik* with some elements of ideology, historical experiences blended with the constantly changing balance of power calculations. Prudential realism might be a viable foreign policy term for Tehran's stance (Barry, 2016). However, more so than in other regions, and despite the religious nature of the Islamic Republic, the "realist" elements of Iranian policy are more dominating in the policies toward the South Caucasus (Kaleji, 2020). This is a theoretical construct this chapter is built around.

The emergence of pragmatism in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy has been a slow process. It came out of those rather contradictory

E. Avdaliani, *New World Order and Small Regions*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4037-8_5

ideas such as elements of Marxism, anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, and political Islam that have dominated Iran's ideology since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. These contradictions between secular and Islamic ideas paved the way to Iranian diplomacy to pursue a more pragmatic line in foreign affairs (Posch, 2013). Yet another source behind pragmatism was an emerging understanding in late 1980-early 1990s that the export of the Islamic Revolution abroad largely failed to materialize.

Iran's pragmatic approach to the South Caucasus has not been a unique case. Pragmatism was increasingly evident in Iran's tense relations with the West too. Similar developments were discernible in Iran's ties with the newly-independent states which emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Tajikistan's civil war is one example when Tehran pursued "pragmatic regionalism." Pragmatism involves elasticity and this perhaps explains why Iran has not yet developed any specific strategy and has not published any official documents on the Islamic Republic's strategy toward the South Caucasus or Central Asia. Iran has been pragmatic in the Middle East too. During the first Gulf War Tehran dismissed Iraq's hopes for creating a common front against the US (Zaccara, 2016). Thus pragmatism has been a fairly common foreign policy approach used by Iran to exert influence in the neighboring territories.

As will be shown throughout this chapter, pragmatism proved a right choice as it consistently allowed Iran to adjust to changing geopolitical circumstances in the South Caucasus. This does not mean that Iran always managed to successfully confront regional challenges. In fact, quite often Iran has lagged behind Turkey's and Russia's military and economic moves and its soft power failed to turn into an effective tool for policymaking. A critical test for Iran's power in the region came in 2020 during and after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War when the balance of power in the region markedly deviated (and not in Iran's favor) from the long-held status quo of 1990s.

Despite the apparent deficiencies, the foreign policy devoid of religious fanaticism served from the 1990s as a good basis for Iran's diplomatic initiatives, slow but steady growth of trade with the three South Caucasus states, and generally quite nimble foreign policy moves. This pragmatism also allows the Islamic Republic to build long-term workable partnerships with other regional powers such as Russia and Turkey. Iran's pragmatism fits into an overall trend which increasingly permeates bilateral ties of the major Eurasian powers. The notion of traditional alliances is being gradually cast away and replaced by what I call the Eurasian model of relations

where unshackled by formal obligations, Iran, Turkey, Russia, and others find bigger space for interaction and see a larger pool of opportunities across the vastness of the supercontinent. This makes their foreign policy more agile in finding a common ground for cooperation across Eurasia and in the South Caucasus in particular (Avdaliani, 2021c).

To be sure, Iran, Turkey, and Russia compete too, but realist approach to bilateral ties and larger regional problems such as the pressure from the West push the three countries to work constantly toward finding compromises. This requires balancing and unlike in the West, the balance of power concept is closer to the historical experiences of Iran, Turkey, and Russia. Their animosity to democratic ideals and liberalism at large create ripe conditions for trilateral cooperation. The latter can take a number of forms. But perhaps the strengthening of regional organizations, which rivals Western multilateralism is one of the areas. Iran is therefore an ardent defender of multipolar world order and pragmatism in foreign affairs means greater level of maneuverability not only in the relations with the three South Caucasus states, but more importantly with Turkey and Russia.

In many ways the pragmatic strand of Iran's foreign policy is dictated by specific geopolitical circumstances peculiar to each region where Tehran has vital interests. Even across the Middle East, the Islamic Republic's policies are more cushioned in the ideological utterance rather than motivated by it. Geopolitical calculus is prevalent behind Tehran's every rhetorical outburst. Nevertheless a constant struggle between realism and ideological fervor is undeniable within Iran's political elites. Various factions compete for laying out their respective foreign policy visions. This means that diametrically opposed views are often proposed requiring from the Iranian leadership a constant ability to navigate carefully the minefield of religious rhetoric and revolutionary fervor. In other words, pragmatism never means the final overcoming of ideology but rather its containment.

To be sure this struggle has been always present in Iranian history and in every major period (Achaemenid, Sasanian or Safavid) pragmatism often trumped ideology. Realism is what has been driving the rulers of Persian empires or the politicians of pre- or post-revolutionary Iran. However, Iranian leaders always tried to frame their pragmatism with the elements of ideological fervor to meet the hopes of larger audiences across the Middle East (Ramazani, 2013).

Iran has multiple identities. The country is associated with revolutionary Shiitism, pan-iranism, and at times pan-Islamism. There were even

cases when the country positioned itself as a defender of third world countries. These different strands complicate the foreign policy decision-making process. But since each part of the Iranian identity does not exclude the other elements, but rather creates one whole, this increases Iran's agility to respond to rising security challenges and adjust to such difficult geopolitical settings as in the South Caucasus region. This multiplicity of identities influences or rather formulates Iran's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus (Kozhanov & Bogacheva, 2020). Though it should be also noted that Iran rarely if ever pedaled either the Persian or Shia identities in the region. To underline Iran's pragmatism in the South Caucasus Tehran maintained a greater level of cooperation with a Christian Armenia than with the Shia Azerbaijan (Shaffer, 2017).

In a way, Iran's geopolitical vision of the South Caucasus is pretty straightforward. Tehran does not rely on religious sentiments to influence Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Nor does Iran pins its hopes on powerful economic and soft power tools to make the countries seek its support. There are limits to its power and Iran has never pushed beyond its capabilities. Its policies have been always commensurate with the real influence it holds. Nevertheless, Tehran's policies in the South Caucasus come in a striking contrast with what the Islamic Republic's policy is in the Middle East. There since the Islamic Revolution Iran built a web of closely linked militant organizations which through low-cost financial support from Tehran deliver large geopolitical gains for the Islamic regime. Maintaining this veritable transnational military "empire" is difficult and requires a constant dedication of human and economic resources (Ostovar, 2018). This means that in the South Caucasus Iran's foreign policy bears little economic cost. But perhaps the underlying reason behind Iran's relatively inconspicuous position in the region has been the South Caucasus' generally minor importance in the Iranian worldview. Economically the region is unattractive. Rigid landscape makes infrastructure projects way costlier than elsewhere. And the US and the EU fill in the bits of the geopolitical space where traditional Russian or growing Turkish influence have struggled to penetrate.

This however does not mean that the South Caucasus is not regarded as part of the Iranian geopolitical mindset. In fact, the political elites of the Islamic Republic perceive their country as an indispensable regional power, viewing the South Caucasus as a domain where Iran has and will have long-term geopolitical interests. To understand what drives Iran's

foreign policy toward the region it is important to know what is the country's security thinking. Clarifying it would be easier through the analysis of Iran's history of interactions with the South Caucasus and the perception of the region's geography. These both components inform Iran's approach to the space between the Black and the Caspian seas.

The analysis of Iran's present foreign policy toward the South Caucasus should not be made in isolation from interactions in the 1990s or even the period of eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Often the Iranian leadership builds its foreign policy on the ideas and experiences which the country went through throughout the past several centuries. True, this phenomenon is less obvious in the case of the South Caucasus than in the Middle East or in Iran's relations with world powers, but nevertheless historical experiences do shape Tehran's interests toward Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Iran's ties to the South Caucasus go back millennia when various Persian empires dominated the eastern half of the region. For a short period of time in the sixth century the Sasanians even enjoyed a direct land access to the Black Sea coast in what is nowadays the western Georgia. Securing access to the seas and control over the critical passes always was and remains to be at the core of Iran's approach to the South Caucasus.

History informs the present Iranian regime's thinking and explains continuities in its geopolitical vision and perception of security threats, which contrary to the ideas propounded in numerous strands of scholarly literature on Iran, are well apparent between Iran's pre- and post-revolutionary periods (Tabatabai, 2020). Much of the present Iranian strategic thinking toward the South Caucasus emanates from the country's military defeats in the early nineteenth century when Iran fought imperial Russia. In 1813 and 1828, having repeatedly failed to hold off Russian armies, the Persian Qajar dynasty signed the Treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay, relinquishing its territorial claims on most of the eastern parts of the South Caucasus. These traumatizing developments left an indelible trace on Iranian thinking when it comes to dealings with modern Russia whether in the South Caucasus or elsewhere.

The military defeats closed off the region from Iranian influence for nearly the next two centuries, while the collapse of the Soviet Union gave Iran an avenue to re-engage the space as Russian influence began to recede. However, competition from Turkey, with its seemingly pan-Turkic aspirations (and with tacit US support for the Turkish model of democracy) and Russia's still powerful military and cultural influence,

constrained Tehran's maneuverability in 1990s and 2000s (Balla, 2013; Paul, 2015). Moreover, as against the vision of strategic opportunity that the Soviet collapse offered, the establishment of new states in the South Caucasus was problematic for Iran because of numerous emerging regional conflicts coupled with potential Western influence creeping into the lands to the north of the Islamic republic (Shaffer, 2017).

Internal troubles too limited the Islamic Republic's projection of power. Ruined economy as a result of the war with Iraq and falling oil prices in the 1980s hampered economic growth and therefore Iran's projection of power (Kouhi-Esfahani, 2019). Thus though Iran has been eager to assert its regional power, its political elites also acknowledged the constraints the country faced and gambled on a rather cautious and balanced foreign policy (Paul, 2015).

Little changed over late 1990s and 2000s. In the age of the US' unipolar moment and the rapid expansion of the liberal order into the depths of the Eurasian continent, Iran felt threatened, even encircled. The South Caucasus was the region where Western expansion took a salient form when Georgia, following the Rose Revolution in 2003, accelerated the NATO and EU membership process. Further east cooperation between Azerbaijan and the West too seemed worrying to the Islamic Republic. American, Israeli, and Turkish military and economic influence in the lands to the north became an agonizing reality for Tehran.

To mitigate threats from the growing external influence, Iran pursued an active involvement in the South Caucasus (Therme, 2011). This involved reviving traditional ties with the South Caucasus countries through leveraging the existing interstate conflicts, increasing bilateral trade and energy cooperation. The latter was a pragmatic move because for Iran expanding its footprint in the region would bring connectivity advantages through reaching Europe and rebuilding direct land connection to Russia (Kazemzadeh, 2017). It also fitted well with the South Caucasus states' aspirations to diversify their energy and infrastructure dependencies away from Russia.

There were more immediate reasons too for fostering closer ties with the South Caucasus states. For instance, Iran's relationships with Armenia and Azerbaijan often helped Tehran to subvert Western economic sanctions. This took form through the use of Armenian banks for international monetary transactions or by allegedly making use of informal practices in Azerbaijan to hide the Iranian origin or destination of goods (Weiss, 2017). It seems that the scale of dealings through Armenia had grown

enough to draw ire and threats from the US in early 2010s (Charbonneau, 2012).

Iran also pursued cooperative security strategy toward the region. This approach served three goals. First, it allowed Iran to position itself as a power with legitimate geopolitical interests in the South Caucasus. Second, Tehran suggested security initiatives (see below), which, though benign in nature, nevertheless aimed at limiting the Western influence and increasing cooperation with Russia and Turkey. Security and peace initiatives aimed at introducing alternative methods of peace-building which would sideline the Western liberal practices. Thirdly, Iran also continues to view the cooperative security strategy as a measure helping the country to position itself at the center of changing connectivity patterns in the South Caucasus. For instance, Russian efforts to pursue the revival of the Soviet-era railways, if successfully carried out, could provide Iran with two new rail routes that start from the city of Julfa, in East Azerbaijan Province in northwestern Iran. The first route (south–north) is the Julfa railway link to the Nakhchivan exclave then heading to Yerevan and potentially further north to Tbilisi. The second railway line (west–east) goes from Julfa to Nakhchivan, then crossing the border of Armenia into Azerbaijan and eventually reaching Russia (Kaleji, 2021b). Thus failure to play an active role in the region would damage Iran's position in connectivity sphere and lower its status as a power with legitimate ambitions.

Following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Iran followed Turkey (Hürriyet Daily News, 2020) in unveiling its "3+3" model for security in the South Caucasus (Tehran Times, 2021). Ideally the platform would comprise all Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the three South Caucasus states. To promote the initiative Iran's FM Mohammad Javad Zarif, following the war, traveled to the countries concerned. Some tentative agreement on participation was attained from Russia and Azerbaijan, while Georgia and Armenia were skeptical. Iran's initiative was similar in content to that of Turkey as both versions stress the importance of regional security possible to achieve through intensive cooperation. Acknowledging the obstacles to the implementation of the two platforms (Kaleji, 2021a) Iran and Turkey tried to frame the initiatives around such critically important topics as connectivity improvement in the South Caucasus. All South Caucasus states and the powers around them are interested in the expanded links to and through the region. While Russia favors north–south direction of railway and road connectivity, Turkey supports the east–west pattern, with Iran being comfortable to work within both models. This however

does not mean Turkey and Russia would not be favoring some joint road and railway links which benefit both. Therefore, Iran's "3+3" model was an inclusive initiative built around such general notions as improvement of regional security and infrastructure, and which ideally should be acceptable to all parties.

Iran's efforts were not unique though. I mentioned Turkey's 2020 initiative and there were also several other models for a more peaceful South Caucasus suggested over the course of several decades since the end of the Soviet Union. The "Peaceful Caucasus Initiative" was suggested by the Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze. The idea of the "United Caucasus" was promoted by his successor Mikheil Saakashvili. Turkey was particularly active in coming up with own security initiatives. In 2000 Turkish president Suleyman Demirel talked about the "Stability Pact for the Caucasus," while in 2008, following the Georgia-Russia war, the then PM Erdoğan suggested the "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform." None of these initiatives proved successful because of perennial disagreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Georgia and Russia. Even Russia, which has always positioned itself as a sole security guarantor to the South Caucasus, was not willing to accept the Turkish or Georgian initiatives. But knowing the limits of such platforms, the Kremlin was not vocal in their opposition either.

Similar to the failed Turkish and Georgian initiatives Iran's 3+3 model also had some fundamental weaknesses. Among them was Armenia's position. Armenian public would hardly tolerate any cooperation with Turkey and Azerbaijan following the 2020 war when the two states created a veritable political and military alliance. How ingrained is Yerevan's opposition has been evident in the tensions with Baku over the interpretation of various stipulations of the November 2020 agreement. Among them is an overland transit corridor from Azerbaijan proper to the Nakhchivan exclave through Armenia's southernmost Syunik province. Though Iran's initiative is about improved connectivity which favors everyone, the persistent Armenia-Azerbaijan rivalry shows the limits of such endeavors. In the South Caucasus political questions could easily trump economic benefits.

No less serious problem was the troubled Georgian-Russian relations. Russia's recognition of Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 precluded any regional cooperation platform where Tbilisi and Moscow could work together and reach meaningful progress on security issues. Georgia's precondition of Russia reneging on its promise to support the

two separatist regions remains unacceptable to the Kremlin. The separatist problem Georgia is facing also complicates the regional connectivity as the railway section through Abkhazia remains dysfunctional. The link would allow Iran to reconnect with Russia—a land connection lost after the Soviet Union's breakup. Tbilisi is also hesitant in actively engaging Tehran's and Ankara's 3+3 propositions as it could, so thinking in Tbilisi goes, damage Georgia's transit capabilities, namely connections from the Caspian to the Black Sea and Turkey. Ultimately, if pressured sufficiently, both Armenia and Georgia could take part in the initiative, but the scope of cooperation will nevertheless be far more limited than expected.

Iran also lacks the prestige necessary for implementing successful region-wide cooperation models. Its soft power lags behind that of Turkey and Russia. Moreover, unlike these two countries, Iran cannot boast of a military ally in the South Caucasus. This further limits the scope of the Iranian security initiatives. But in comparison with Turkey, Iran has some significant advantages. Iran is geographically spread bordering the entire southern flank of the South Caucasus. This fortifies Iran's position when it comes to improving regional connectivity. Iran also boasts of regular diplomatic relations with all three South Caucasus countries. In contrast, Turkey and Russia have relations with only two states—Azerbaijan and Georgia, and Armenia and Azerbaijan respectively. Tehran has also been a staunch supporter of territorial integrity of the South Caucasus states. Following Georgia-Russia war in 2008 and Moscow's decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Iran showed its unwillingness to do the same and thus supported the territorial integrity of Georgia.

Iran has also been trying to play an active role in negotiating between the warring sides. For example, during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war a trilateral Tehran communiqué was signed on May 7, 1992, by the Iranian, Armenian, and Azeri presidents. Though the ceasefire lasted only for a short period of time causing Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to criticize the Armenians for occupying Nagorno-Karabakh and oppressing its Muslim population, the initiative nevertheless marked a positive role Iran could potentially play in the South Caucasus affairs. During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war Iran sent its deputy foreign minister of foreign affairs, Abbas Araqchi, to all the regional states to end hostilities and lay the ground for peace resolution (Tasnim, 2020). Iran is also the only regional state whose geopolitical power is less traumatizing for the three South Caucasus states. In contrast, Russia's and Turkey's

political and economic moves are much feared and loathed which often constrains these two powers' ability to act as acceptable security patrons.

However, if Iran is viewed with suspicion anywhere in the South Caucasus this is in Azerbaijan. Since the 1990s Iran feared the establishment of a strong Azerbaijani state. This potentially could have led to the expansion of Turkish and Israeli influence (the latter via military cooperation) and more importantly, to a rise of nationalistic aspirations among Iran's large Azerbaijani minority. Iran's worst fears are often associated with what was taking place under the nationalistic Azerbaijani president, Abdulfaz Elchibey, who embraced pan-Turkic ideas and tried to reach out to the ethnic kin in Iran. More worrisome for Iran was the fact that the "Greater Azerbaijan" idea gained widespread support in Azerbaijan. According to the idea, Azerbaijani national unity was split into northern and southern halves by imperial Russia and Iran and should therefore reunite. Conversely, many Iranians are convinced that Northern Azerbaijan was originally part of Iran lost to Russia in 1828. President Elchibey led the "Greater Azerbaijan" campaign and accused Iran of mistreating its Azerbaijani population living in northern Iran close to Azerbaijan's border. Tehran, fearing the spread of separatist sentiments among its Azerbaijanis, went on the offensive (Atai, 2009; Iashaki et al., 2013). Over years this included financing Islamic parties in Azerbaijan and supporting the Talysh separatist movement, an ethnic minority in Azerbaijan with a strong Persian identity. Together with Russia, Iran managed to undermine Elchibey's policies which led to the latter's loss of power in 1993 and his succession by more moderate Heydar Aliyev (Shaffer, 2017). Occasional troubles did not end there. For instance, in 2012 Tehran even withdrew its ambassador from Baku as a result of protesters near the Iranian embassy allegedly insulting Islam (Saikal, 2019).

Azerbaijani nationalism and close military and intelligence cooperation between Baku and Western powers caused a major shift in Iran's perspective. Tehran adopted a policy of close cooperation with Armenia during and after the first Nagorno-Karabakh war. Power transmission lines, a pipeline of limited capacity (Balla, 2013), Meghri free economic zone and other major projects (Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Armenia, 2018) served as a basis behind the economic cooperation with Armenia. However, it was the fear of a strong Azerbaijani state with the concomitant growth of Ankara's or other powers' influence which served as a single most important driver behind Iran's Azerbaijan and generally South Caucasus policy.

Iran and Connectivity in the South Caucasus

Seen from a wider geopolitical perspective, for Iran the South Caucasus has been all about connectivity. Sandwiched between the Caspian and Black seas, the region could potentially allow Tehran to reach the European market independently from Turkey. Understanding this geopolitical aspiration of the Islamic Republic, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been promoting competing rail routes as part of their infrastructure diversification efforts to limit overreliance on Russia and also position themselves as transit states between Russia and the Middle East on the one hand and Europe and Central Asia on the other.

In Soviet times, Moscow and Tehran were connected through Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan's Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan. Today, no direct rail connections between Iran and the South Caucasus countries exist, and, due to still closed borders (between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the derelict Abkhazian section of the railway), no new link goes from the region to Iran (Zabanova, 2017). This arrangement could change as a result of the agreement which ended the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Yet the likelihood that the links would be operating smoothly when/if opened is still quite low because of unresolved border disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, general lack of trust, and Russia's often suspicious behavior betraying its lack of interest in seeing the region "opening up" with new infrastructure.

Since 2015, Azerbaijan has pursued efforts to build a direct rail link with Iran, based on the official agreement reached in 2010. It constituted the missing element in an ambitious 7200 kilometer North–South Transport Corridor connecting Iran's Persian Gulf port of Bandar Abbas with northern Europe. Potentially the route could compete with other major long-established connectivity patterns such as the Suez Canal. The proposed 375 kilometer Iran-Azerbaijan railway is less demanding financially and technologically than the alternative proposed by Armenia (see below). Lifting of economic sanctions in 2015 allowed Iran and Azerbaijan pour money into the railway project. But the re-imposition of the US sanction under Donald Trump complicated the completion of the 175 kilometer Rasht-Astara section (Weiss & Zabanova, 2017).

A new nuclear deal, if signed, could provide an impetus to complete the project. Increased connectivity would allow the Islamic Republic to diversify its export routes. Diversification brings lesser dependence on specific neighboring countries with which Iran mostly has either tense relations or,

due to the unstable security situation, tries to mitigate the negative effects with alternatives. Turkey is one of such countries as the route proved to be somewhat problematic because of intermittent border closures and poor security (Zabanova, 2017).

Armenia too has had its own vision of regional connectivity. The "Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor" from Iran to Georgia's Black Sea ports via Armenia was the basis for the 470 kilometer-long Southern Armenian Railway project. What was to be the shortest transportation route between the Persian Gulf and the Black Sea, the idea was first proposed in 2008 by the then Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan. However a large amount—$3.2 billion—necessary for the project proved impossible to secure. Continuous Western sanctions make the implementation of the project highly unlikely (Zabanova, 2017). But more importantly, it is the outsize Russian influence in Armenia that doomed Iranian moves. Russia, which controls the Armenian rail network, was not interested in the implementation of the initiative. Similar fate occurred to the 140 kilometer pipeline inaugurated in 2007 that was delivering gas from Iran to Armenia. Under Russian pressure its capacity was reduced because of Moscow's fears that Iranian gas could be an alternative to the Russian resources.

Thus regional geopolitics and the lack of finances for infrastructure put limits on Armenia-Iran ties. But some elements around which bilateral relations could be furthered is the cooperation in the banking sector and IT sphere—the latter especially prominent in Armenia. The banking sector is important here as it often caused criticism from the West because of alleged loopholes through which Iranian companies tried to evade the US-imposed sanctions (Kozhanov, 2020). Tourism is yet another area with a big potential. Armenia also could pursue the policy of advancing Iran's ties with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Indeed Iran has been entertaining the idea of deeper cooperation with the Union. In May 2018 a temporary bilateral agreement on the creation of a free trade zone was signed with the aim to lower trade tariffs and custom duties. Serving as the only EEU member bordering with Iran, Armenia seeks to capitalize on this geo-economic advantage in serving as a bridge for Iran's economic activity both in the South Caucasus and the EEU (Saikal, 2019).

For Armenia ties with Iran go beyond pure economic dividends and relate to the core concept of Yerevan's foreign policy—pursuit of multivector foreign policy. Armenia has long seen its asymmetric dependence on Russia as a burden which constrained the country's maneuverability

in the increasingly multipolar world order. The need to balance Russia's preponderance meant having Iran as one of the counterweights. Before the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia made some attempts to advance relations with many Eurasian states. The war results have largely ended these efforts as Russia increased its influence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by dispatching nearly 2000 peacekeepers to the conflict zone. From now on, Armenia's rather growing dependence on Russia would mean that the attempts to build qualitatively closer ties with Iran are unlikely to succeed. Iran from its part is interested in supporting Armenia's sovereignty especially because of the threats to Armenia's security emanating from Azerbaijan, and Turkey's growing influence in the South Caucasus. Failure to do so would create a prospect of continuous Turkey-Azerbaijan corridor along Iran's northern border. Realism thus underlines the urgency for Iran to support Armenia to keep the balance of power in the region relatively within the acceptable terms for Tehran.

However pragmatism also dictates that Iran's support for Armenia based on the premises of the status quo of the 1990s is no longer tenable. Azerbaijan's victory in the war in 2020 upended the balance of power in the region. This effectively means that an era of implicit support Armenia enjoyed will be gradually replaced by a more nuanced and balanced Iranian stance which would reflect new realities on the ground between Yerevan and Baku. Iran will grow more attentive to Azerbaijan's ambitions and it could be suggested that ties with Baku will upstage in importance Tehran's traditional relations with Yerevan. There is also an issue of energy infrastructure which benefits Baku. TANAP and TAP are the projects which Iran is interested in and where Azerbaijan holds an upper hand compared with the alternative project advanced by Armenia (Vatanka, 2021). Seen from this perspective the change in the Iranian calculus toward building closer ties with Azerbaijan would make perfect sense. The shift toward the improvement of bilateral relations has been apparent even before the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War when the strategic balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan heavily tilted toward the latter because of foreign military help and most of all growing professionalization of the Azerbaijani army (Erickson, 2021). However, as will be shown below, Azerbaijan's strengthened position coupled with Turkey's burgeoning ambitions also push Tehran toward taking a more active military posture in the region.

In comparison with its two neighbors, Georgia features less within Iran's foreign policy thinking. The country's importance for Iran stems

primarily from its geographic position as an access point to the Black Sea and as a hub for east–west connectivity. Nurturing good bilateral ties with Tbilisi has been Iran's policy since early 1990s. Though beyond tourism and occasional flourishing of trade, the bilateral relations have not really reached the expected maximum. Georgia's deep and comprehensive free trade agreement (DCFTA) with the EU and a similar agreement with China positions the country as a shortest route from Europe to Central Asia. This increases Georgia's attractiveness for Iranian investors and places the country on Iranian mental map as a connection point with the European market. Tourism and bilateral trade, albeit limited in scope, are yet another sectors of Georgia-Iran cooperation.

Beyond this, however, Iran views Georgia as a launching pad for the Western powers to expand along the north of the Iranian borders. And though Tehran has been normally quite pragmatic in bilateral relations, the Islamic Republic's views coincide with that of Russia. Both agree on the need to exclude third, non-regional powers from the South Caucasus. This effectively means that both agree on the need to derail NATO and EU expansion into the region, introduce alternative mechanisms for regional security and ultimately create an order of exclusion.

Iran's position on the connectivity in the South Caucasus fits into the overall perspective the country holds regarding its central role in the Eurasian landmass. Iran revives the concept of the ancient and medieval silk roads and the centrality of Iran in them. Through the connection of historical themes with the modern period, Iran wants to harness the power of its geostrategic location to position itself not only as a link between Russia and the Indian Ocean, but also as a bridge between Sino-Indian worlds and the West (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2020). Centrality to trade routes also involves potential blockages from rival powers. In this regard Iran's fears of Turkey go beyond the geopolitics of the South Caucasus and involve the entire matrix of the Middle East where Ankara also tries (and quite successfully) positioning itself as an economic and trade bridge between the West and East.

Iran and Changing Balance of Power Around Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

For Iran the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been important to watch as the conflict zone, where the interests of Russia and Turkey also intersect, is near Iran and could have easily spilled over into its northern border, the regions mostly settled with ethnic Azerbaijanis.

Contrary to the idea that Iran had a largely unchanged position toward the conflict before and after the ceasefire of 1994 which ended the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, Tehran's position in fact was often alternating and dictated by its internal political considerations as well as the balance of power considerations. In the 1990s Tehran opposed an American proposition for the two warring sides to trade corridors: Armenia obtaining a corridor to Nagorno-Karabakh; Azerbaijan the one to Nakhchivan. The initiative could have resulted in a significant extension of the border between Azerbaijan and Iran, while robbing Armenia of direct access to Iran (Shaffer, 2017). This would have allowed Turkey to build a veritable corridor from its eastern provinces to the Caspian Sea. It is this fear which still haunts Iran nowadays especially as the prospects of the Turkish-Azerbaijani corridor following the 2020 war look more promising.

Though unable to be involved as thoroughly as Russia or even Turkey, Iran has nevertheless been attentive to a changing balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the 1990s and 2000s. Tehran officially remained neutral, but through its actions nevertheless contributed to a tacit support for Armenia. For instance, Iran served as the main supply route for Armenia when in 1992–1993, supply routes from all of Armenia's neighbors except for Iran were closed or unreliable (Barry, 2016). In many ways Armenia continued its war effort against Azerbaijan during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war mainly with fuel and food supplies imported from Iran (Shaffer, 2017).

In the following years, Iranian-Armenian ties expanded notably. All Iranian presidents from Mohammed Khatami (1997–2005) to Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021) visited Yerevan, while bilateral trade hit a record $364 million in 2018 (Khoshnood & Khoshnood, 2021). In a way, it could be argued that Iran preferred Armenian control of the Azerbaijan-Iran border around Nagorno-Karabakh. This provided Iran with a much more porous frontier which allowed an active trans-border economic and energy cooperation such as the establishment of a hydroelectric

plant that allegedly served Iran's border regions (Rahimov, 2020). Indeed there should have been tangible economic interactions as reflected in the Iranian state media articles when reports of Azerbaijan regaining the control over the border areas emerged following the war in 2020.

Warm ties between Armenia and Iran often caused Azerbaijan's accusations leveled against Iran. The situation deteriorated by wider misconceptions about Azerbaijani-Iranian relations. Contrary to the unconfirmed reports, Iran did not stop military support to Azerbaijan's army and military groups during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war. Following the first war, Iran made several attempts to resolve the crisis, but received cool reception by the warring states and little enthusiasm from Russia and Turkey too (Dejkam et al., 2016).

Since early 2000s the balance of power began to tilt in Azerbaijan's favor. Propelled by high oil revenues and the growing ability to translate its financial might into the hard power, Azerbaijan grew more powerful than Armenia. Gradually the fear of a strong Azerbaijan and a weakened Armenia have begun to shape Iran's geopolitical imperatives. But instead of leaning on Armenia, Tehran began to seek improved ties with Azerbaijan. Another reason for this behavior was Iran's fear of a potentially disproportionate growth of Turkey's influence. In Tehran's understanding this scenario could have ushered in the Azerbaijan-Turkey alliance largely constraining Iranian interests. Therefore, Tehran's goal was to navigate carefully between Armenia and Azerbaijan lest cause the latter's further tilt toward Ankara.

Unlike parts of the Middle East where chaos, partially caused by American military presence and the Arab spring, allowed Iran move in and fill in the void (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2020), instability in the South Caucasus from early 1990s likewise allowed Tehran to use its geopolitical position to influence, albeit to a much smaller level, the processes in the region. The new geopolitical arrangement following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War however is set to upend the foundation of Iran's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus.

Indeed, since the ceasefire of 1994 till 2020, Iran has been witnessing a changing geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus as Turkish military and economic involvement with Azerbaijan gradually tipped the balance. Azerbaijan's economic power too, propelled by oil and gas revenues, contributed to the unfolding changes. The balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan was growing increasingly asymmetrical, which meant that the existing status quo around Nagorno-Karabakh

could no longer be sustained. The question for Iran was what could have been made to secure its regional stance. Perhaps, this acute perception of unfolding changes in the balance of power served as one of the reasons why Iranian-Azerbaijani relations started to improve as seen in the discussion above.

The Iranian fears materialized in autumn 2020 when Turkey's growing military posture and its quest for being present at the negotiating table drove Ankara to increase its support to Baku. Azerbaijani gas too might be a reason for Ankara to build closer ties with Baku as the latter became Turkey's top gas supplier. From a regional perspective, Iran also fears Turkey's push to create a land corridor to Azerbaijan proper and further to the Caspian Sea. For Tehran, which historically perceives the sea as a condominium between Iran and Russia, Turkish involvement and its potential reaching out to its kinsmen in the Central Asia is a disruptive development.

Iran had little to prevent the growth of Turkish influence. On that its position dovetailed with Russia's, which to prevent growing Turkish influence, signaled on several occasions its unwillingness to give up its brokering role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. But to keep Turkey at bay continually, however, Iran and Russia had to make sure, at least tacitly, that Azerbaijan was paid for its military success—by returning at least some of the territories. A pro-Azerbaijani twist in Iranian rhetoric was visible on September 30, 2020, when four of Khamenei's representatives in Iranian Azerbaijan justified Baku's "move to recapture the [Nagorno-Karabakh] region" as "completely legal according to the Shari'a and in line with four U.N. Security Council resolutions." The supreme leader's international affairs advisor Ali Akbar Velayati called Nagorno-Karabakh an "occupied territory" and vowed Iran's readiness to help Azerbaijan regain control over it.

This stance was taken despite some Azerbaijani shells accidentally landing on Iranian soil (wounding some Iranians) and Iran shooting down Azerbaijani drones that had strayed over the border (Goble, 2020). The twist or rather adjustment to the unfolding changes was further cemented on November 3, Khamenei said, "Azerbaijani lands occupied by Armenia should be liberated and returned to Azerbaijan" (Daragahi, 2020).

Surely, Russia and Iran had enough geopolitical leverage to keep Turkey at bay and allow Azerbaijan to take very little, but then Tehran

and Moscow would have faced a dilemma of not only growing resentment in Baku, but it moving ever closer to Ankara. In the longer term this would have evolved into a much larger Turkish military engagement in the eastern part of the South Caucasus through sending covertly its troops to Azerbaijan. The latter is particularly worrying to Iran because of the potential destabilization this could bring to the country's northern regions. Iran's foreign minister Zarif said on November 2 that Tehran warned Azerbaijani, Armenian, and even Russian and Turkish officials during and before the recent talks that Iran would not tolerate similar developments in the future. As the reports on the presence of Turkey-backed mercenaries in Nagorno-Karabakh emerged, Iranian officials were vocal in not tolerating the presence of terrorists (Sinaee, 2020). Tehran responded by sending reinforcements such as troops and (heavy) military equipment to northwestern borders (France24, 2020). Iran thus signaled that any shift in the internationally-recognized borders of Armenia or foreign presence near Iranian borders would be met with stiff resistance.

Therefore, for Iran and Russia to deprive Turkey of a diplomatic voice, much depended on Baku. Perhaps politicians in Moscow and Tehran thought a victorious Baku would be grateful and less bent on inviting Turkish influence. Tehran thus faced limited options. Confronting Azerbaijan's gains would have further deteriorated Iran's geopolitical standing as it would drag Baku closer to Ankara. More troublesome for Iran was and still remains the ambivalence regarding Turkey's military involvement in the peacekeeping mission. Considering Ankara's scope of military support to Baku, it will be no surprise to expect a similar or even bigger military partnership between the two.

With some 2000 Russian peacekeepers stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan returning control over most of the 7 regions around the troubled region and over some parts of Nagorno-Karabakh itself, a new transport corridor is expected to go through the narrowest part of Armenia to link Nakhchivan with the rest of Azerbaijan. This potentially would allow Turkey to reach the wider Caspian region. Indeed, though Iran welcomed the Nagorno-Karabakh deal, fears that Azerbaijan could turn into a jumping point for Turkey to project influence into northern Iran and the wider Caspian region have not been unrealistic. For instance, following the war Turkey and Azerbaijan signed a memorandum of understanding according to which Turkey's crude oil and natural gas pipeline trading company BOTAS opened a tender for a gas pipeline to supply

Nakhchivan (Cevrioglu, 2020). The new supply route sidelines Iranian gas sales to Azerbaijan (Hussein, 2020).

Turkey and Azerbaijan also reached a new trade deal (Nahmadova, 2021). Turkey also sees benefits in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan's January 2021 agreement, which aims to jointly develop the Dostluk (Friendship) gas field under the Caspian Sea (O'Byrne, 2021). Some Turkish interests were floated in a trilateral meeting with the Azerbaijani and Turkmen foreign ministers in February 2021. The progress around Dostluk could potentially remove a significant roadblock to the implementation of the much-touted Trans-Caspian Pipeline, allowing gas to flow through the South Caucasus to Europe. This is an issue where Russian and Iranian interests align against Turkey's ambitions, since both see Turkmenistan as a competitor in the European gas market (Avdaliani, 2021b).

Further cementing of Turkish interests along Iran's northern borders took place in June 2021 when the so-called "Shusha Declaration" was signed at a ceremony in Shusha by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and his Turkish counterpart. The document stated that an attack on either country would be considered an attack on both parties. The declaration also discusses cooperation in the international arena, as well as political, economic, trade, cultural, educational, sports, youth, energy security, and military cooperation. Azerbaijan and Turkey are now officially allies. But if this alliance dynamic was well apparent well before the Shusha Declaration, the document nevertheless represents a major shift in Azerbaijan diplomacy. From now on, Azerbaijan is balancing between Turkish and Russian influence as against the multi-vector foreign policy the country has been famous for.

It still remains to be seen what Azerbaijan's victory will mean for Iran's Azerbaijani minority. Some complications might indeed follow. For instance, once the war started pro-Azerbaijani rhetoric and protests on social media and on the streets in support of Baku by ethnic Azerbaijanis followed. Moreover, the above example of four prayer leaders issuing a statement and claiming that Nagorno-Karabakh was a "land of Islam" and that Baku was entitled to "end its occupation" by the Armenians also signals growing uneasiness in Iran that supporting Armenia could end up badly among ethnic Azerbaijanis. Indeed, the potential for unrest exists as shown by sporadic protests in northern Iran expressing support for Baku and making demands that Iran stops allowing Russia to use its territory to supply Armenia with weapons.

As the control over the part of the Azerbaijan-Iran state border which since 1994 was under the Armenian occupation returns to Baku, ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran could be emboldened in their nationalistic endeavors. But this narrative should be also counterbalanced with some interesting developments on the ground. The potential threat is often overstated. Pan-Turkic (pan-Azerbaijani) sentiments among the Azerbaijanis of Iran were effectively dealt with by Tehran (Ahmadi, 2016). Moreover, the majority of Iranian Azerbaijanis are quite loyal to Iran, they are widely represented in Iranian political and economic life at different levels. Nevertheless, even a small active minority can cause problems, and the Iranian authorities are watching closely to prevent this.

The presence of the Russian peacekeepers some 100 kilometer from the Iranian border are also a source of tension for Tehran. In the longer term its means that Iran will have to devote time, resources, and troops to adjust to the new geopolitical reality, namely, stronger Azerbaijan and bigger Turkish influence. Perhaps this was a driving motive behind Tehran's massing of troops and military drills near Azerbaijan's southern border in October 2021. Though not explicitly mentioning Turkey, the Islamic Republic leadership must have been worried with Turkey's growing power more than with alleged Israeli presence. It is thus unclear how Azerbaijan's success in the war will affect its bilateral relationship with Iran. Competition will be mixed with cooperation.

As Baku was dependent on Iran for transiting energy and other supplies (gas) to Nakhchivan, which provided Tehran with a significant leverage over Baku, the war changed this too (Coffey, 2020). Armenia is expected to open up a corridor through its territory to allow Azerbaijan to transport goods directly to Nakhchivan. In addition, even before the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war Turkey announced a new natural gas pipeline (O'Byrne, 2020) to supply the Nakhchivan exclave. Ankara also announced that a new railway (TRT World, 2020) from Turkey to the exclave would be constructed.

Iran's position is further complicated by the need to maintain good relations with its historic rival Turkey. Their ties are complex and are often alternating between collaboration and open competition. Economic ties are key as each side sees the other as an important market for its goods. Good relations with Turkey provides the Islamic republic with a powerful tool to limit its economic and diplomatic isolation imposed by the collective West. Furthermore, the two states also cooperate on

combatting the PKK—a potential threat to the territorial integrity of both states (Cordesman et al., 2013).

Iran however managed to regain some momentum. The drills and the ensuing rapprochement with Baku were indicative of Iran's posture. Into the same category should fall an agreement signed in 2022 on transit between Azerbaijan and Iran effectively re-activating the transit for Azerbaijan proper to Nakhchivan once again through Iran's northern territory. New infrastructure will be built bypassing Armenia's territory (Isayev, 2022). The deal is significant showing the Islamic Republic's successful diplomacy, but also the stalled progress on the revival of rail and road connectivity through Armenia.

Beyond Turkey, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war also showed how dependent Baku was on Israeli technologies. Diplomatic relations were established in early 1990s. The growing bilateral relations have been motivated by numerous factors such as Azerbaijan's loss of political control over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories. The desire to correct the disbalance led Baku to become one of the top purchasers of Israeli defense technologies such as military drones.

The scale of the transactions in the military sphere between the two countries is immense. In 2012, reports emerged about a $1.6 billion purchase by Azerbaijan of weapons manufactured by Israel Aerospace Industries. In 2016, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu said Azerbaijan had bought $5 billion worth of weapons from Israel (unmanned aerial vehicles and satellite systems). In 2017, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reported that Baku had purchased $127 million worth of military technology from Jerusalem.

For instance, in 2012, Foreign Policy reported that Israel had an arrangement with Azerbaijan allowing it to potentially fly sorties out of the country (Perry, 2012). Iran has also repeatedly claimed that Israel uses Azerbaijan as a base to gather intelligence on Iran, including alleging Israel have a "listening station" in Azerbaijan (Paul, 2015). In 2012, after the assassination of its nuclear physicist, Iran even accused Azerbaijan of assisting Israeli intelligence (Reuters, 2012). Similar accusations were leveled at Baku in October 2021.

This corresponded with the hardline presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) when ties with Baku were especially tense. As an example, in 2011 Iran's chief of the general staff, Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, threatened the Aliyev regime with a "people's awakening" (Kucera, 2011).

In addition to Israel, Azerbaijan's relations with the US have been of particular concern to Iran. Washington's and Baku's interests have steadily converged over a set of shared concerns. The two countries work together to promote European energy security, expand trade and investment, and combat terrorism and transnational threats. Blackwater (now called Academi) mercenaries trained Azerbaijan's marines and the US provided vessels for the Azerbaijan navy. The US has been providing extensive military funding to Azerbaijan in the last three years to develop anti-drug trafficking programs by strengthening its naval presence in the Caspian Sea (Shadrina, 2006).

Nevertheless, Iran-Azerbaijan ties saw gradual improvement well before 2020 and could be seen as a part of Iran's foreign policy based on pragmatism especially championed by the then president Hassan Rouhani (Kozhanov, 2020). Azerbaijan too has been interested in rapidly improving ties with Tehran. Strategically this would have limited Tehran's covert support for Armenia, limit the latter's geopolitical maneuverability. Azerbaijan's improving relations with Iran since 2013 helped neutralize the fears in Baku that in case of a major military escalation around Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran's position would be pro-Armenian, namely, less supportive of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

The outbreak of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war in September 2020 could not have been more ill-timed for the Islamic regime. Openly supporting Armenia could position Iran against Turkey and by extension even Israel—a formidable array of powers Iran would not have been able to confront. A pro-Armenian stance could have also started religiously motivated domestic protests undermining Iran's credentials as a champion of Islamic cause. Iran thus faced the clash between ideological sentiments and realist foreign policy approach.

That the war caught Iran off guard war visible in the Iranian press underlining the Islamic republic's quandary. Similar absence was characteristic to politicians from various governing bodies of the country. For instance, The news agency IRNA and the conservative Kayhan newspaper, close to Supreme Leader Khamenei, took a rather neutral stance on the conflict. The reports were often limited to daily descriptions of the war, criticism of the Minsk Group as it failed to secure a lasting solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. By contrast, media associated with the IRGC accused Baku of starting the war. Mashregh News, for example, portrayed Azerbaijan as a threat to Iran because of Baku's

close ties with Israel and irredentist ambitions against the Islamic Republic's Azeri-populated northern provinces. Likewise Fars News Agency accused (Fars, 2020) Baku of starting the hostilities and molded it into US-Israel plot to weaken Iran. Allegedly the US embassies in Baku and Yerevan knew of when the war would break out. Another IRGC-associated agency, Tasnim News in one of the articles quoted an Iranian expert who suggested that Armenia had to be removed from Azerbaijani lands (Khoshnood & Khoshnood, 2021).

Relations with Russia

Iran's South Caucasus policy is closely linked to its relations with Russia. Russia-Iran strategic cooperation is driven by three imperatives: both need each other as a stabilizing force in the neighboring territories, primarily in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea; secondly, bilateral military and nuclear cooperation (Saikal, 2019). Thirdly, both countries cooperate in Syria (Rezaei, 2019). And though many consider the partnership in Syria as a backbone for their strong long-term bilateral ties, the South Caucasus is where Moscow and Tehran have been successfully cooperating since the 1990s.

The South Caucasus is the region where Iran's interests has traditionally clashed with Russia's geopolitical imperatives. Achaemenids and the Sasanians in the ancient period and later the Safavids and the Kajars always positioned themselves as dominant actors in the South Caucasus. Two traumatizing Persian-Russian wars in the nineteenth century made Iran cede significant parts of the eastern part of the South Caucasus to Russia. To this should be added Russian imperial influence over the northern Iran in early twentieth century together with Stalin-era Soviet attempts to foment dissent in the northern Iran made the potential aligning of interests less likely.

Nevertheless, following the Cold War a major incentive for constructing closer bilateral ties has been the collective West's expansionist agenda. Iran and Russia felt threatened as the share of their geopolitical influence shrank significantly. As a result, a silent rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran over the South Caucasus materialized.

Bilateral relations grew in particular following the presidential elections in Russia and Iran in 2012 and 2013 respectively when Putin and Rouhani were elected as presidents. The drivers for building tighter bilateral links ranged from challenges in the Middle East to the changing

global balance of power. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its sudden involvement in the Syrian incurred further pressure from the collective West. Russia needed Iran which led to a more concrete understanding over the order both envisioned for the South Caucasus.

Moscow and Tehran inaugurated the idea of the north–south transit corridor via Azerbaijan. Connection via rail links is still lagging in connecting the Baltic ports and the Persian Gulf. This north–south direction of connectivity competes with the Western-led infrastructure projects.

Another common interest is to avoid any foreign, non-regional political and military influence in the South Caucasus. In this regard any military cooperation which involves the Western country or a country related with the Western military power is seen by Tehran as potentially dangerous to its interests. In this regards, the trilateral Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan military cooperation is perceived negatively by the leaders of the Islamic Republic. This means that NATO expansion in the South Caucasus is likewise being seen quite negatively in Iran (Kaleji, 2020; Paul, 2015). Here Russian and Iranian visions align as both fear Western military expansion. Both also fear Turkish influence in the region. Moscow is more predominant than Ankara in terms of military presence, but in trade and investments, Turkey is often ahead. True, there have been positive developments in Azerbaijan-Iran relations recently, but it is still Ankara that enjoys greater strategic ties with Baku (Goudarzi et al., 2015; Hunter, 2010).

This aligning of interests was well seen during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war when both effectively sought a minimization of Western diplomatic influence in the conflict-resolution process. Voicing the official Iranian position Abbas Aragchi leveled criticism at the West: "The foreign players of the Minsk Group—France and the US—are far away from the region and are disconnected from it not only politically, but emotionally and ethically, while having no real desire to establish peace in Nagorno-Karabakh" (Al Jazeera, 2020). Tehran and Moscow also shared nearly identical vision on the exclusion of Western powers from the region and the potential interference of non-regional actors (Iran Press, 2020). Since the beginning of the Islamic Republic in 1979 one of the pillars of Tehran's foreign policy was the promotion of alternative international organizations and conflict-resolution mechanisms which would upstage the Western liberal versions is at the heart of Iran's vision of the order of exclusion in the South Caucasus (Zaccara, 2016).

It is safer for Iranian interests if the region's traditional power—Russia—continues to exercise its long-held outsize economic and military hold and serve as a bulwark against the Western influence. And though Iran has not followed Russia in recognizing separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and is at unease when it comes to the effects of Russia's military deployment closer to Iranian border, the Islamic Republic nevertheless sees the Kremlin's moves as fitting into the overall Iranian vision of the South Caucasus free of external, non-regional players. Iran and Russia support the idea of "regionalism" in the South Caucasus, i.e. solving the region's problems exclusively managed by surrounding powers. This fits into the existing discourse among the Russian and Iranian political elites on envisioning an alternative world order whereby both states embrace a concert of great powers, or multipolar world. Each large Eurasian state would have a freer hand in its respective neighborhood. This also means that Iran and Russia support the concept of spheres of influence with the emerging idea of "regionalism" of the South Caucasus. The 3+3 initiative proposed by Tehran is a practical step toward achieving this goal.

Iran's position in the region has been also characterized by concerns about Russia's geopolitical sensitivities. Tehran has followed this policy quite consistently. And despite some attempts to compete with the Russian influence in the region, those were made with an understanding of potential pushback from and consideration of the Kremlin's core interests (Hunter, 2010). This explains why Tehran has largely abstained from criticizing Moscow's moves in the region. For instance, though the dispatch of Russian peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh is seen as a diminution of the Iranian influence, Tehran nevertheless did not protest. This could be explained by the fear of antagonizing Russia especially at the time when Tehran strived to use Moscow as a counterbalance to mitigate the Western pressure. Deterioration of ties with Russia would only further isolate Iran and make it more amenable to Western sanctions and general foreign policy demands. Russia will continue to serve as one of the poles of geopolitical attraction for Iran, a valuable tool for pursuing multi-vector and multipolar foreign policy.

That being said the bilateral cooperation in most cases was and still is more of a situational character—reaction of the two countries to emerging problems such as competition with the collective West. The bilateral ties are still devoid of the foundation that would allow talking about a real, and not a declarative, strategic partnership. Nevertheless, a real glue for the two countries has been their concerted opposition to the US-led

world order. Both states support the concept of a multipolar international system in which national sovereignty, the Westphalian system of international relations and the principle of non-interference will again be the order of the day. Those concepts have witnessed significant deformation in the age of the liberal internationalism. It is the embrace of the Westphalian principles which dictated Iran's stance regarding the territorial disputes in the South Caucasus as exemplified by the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Final Thoughts

Iran's policies in the South Caucasus remain short of being called a playbook the Islamic regime pursues in many parts of the Middle East (Iran's Playbook, 2019). The country does not have pro-Iranian proxies in the South Caucasus to rely on, nor does Tehran possess enough soft power and economic tools to influence the region on a par with Turkey and Russia. Nevertheless, Iran's vision of the region, despite all the deficiencies, is quite agile and nuanced. Through the interplay of limited use of soft power, economic elements, and geographic proximity Tehran has managed to maintain the balance between the warring sides and fortify its ability to persuade and entice the neighbors when necessary. A critical element in Iran's stance toward the region has been to achieve and maintain security by thwarting the Islamic Republic's archenemies and rivals—the US, Israel and to a certain degree Turkey—from gaining a foothold to the north of the borders. This worked to a certain level.

Considering the high-level threat of potential security spillover onto Iran's northern provinces, Tehran has always striven to preclude the South Caucasus turning into a battleground where foreign powers would militarily compete for influence. It has also worked for the minimization of military confrontation among the South Caucasus states. Ethnic, religious, and economic interconnections between Iran's Azeri population and the region to the north does not allow Iran act otherwise.

A part of Iran's distinct strategic vision across the Middle East has been the use of regional conflicts to its benefit. Tehran pursued this line of thinking in regards to the South Caucasus too albeit not as extensively. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict allowed Iran to wedge itself into the geopolitics of the South Caucasus at the time when Russian influence in the 1990s was in decline. When Azerbaijan threatened Iran with nationalist rhetoric in 1990s this caused, though unofficially, the Islamic regime's tilt toward Armenia. Tehran then managed to bargain when

necessary using this advantage in relations with Baku and maintain a certain balance between the two neighboring countries.

Setting Iran's rhetoric apart from its real intentions is crucial to understand Tehran's foreign policy and most of all better arm Iran's neighboring states with the tools to formulate a strategic vision toward the Islamic Republic. Unlike most countries, Iran's foreign policy is not subject to the country's economic interests. National security is prioritized over the economy. Grand ideas at times covering the entire Middle East or even the entire globe often preoccupy leaders in Iran (Adib-Moghaddam, 2014).

Though it has been argued that in a striking contrast with Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East, Tehran's vision toward Azerbaijan and Armenia is based on pure pragmatism, there are nevertheless near-identical premises which drive the Islamic Republic's strategic vision in both regions. Opposition to the US and its allies, most notably Israel, as well as the post-Cold War world order in general is what drives Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East (Sariolghalam, 2018). Iran's negative historical experience with the great powers has built an understanding that the country's security is best preserved by projecting the power abroad. In other words, Iran is best safeguarded through a near-permanent struggle with the Western powers. Similar, though less salient and more pragmatic, imperatives have informed Tehran's stance in the South Caucasus. Concerns over American and Israeli security involvement with potential intelligence gathering along Iran's northern borders pushed Iran to pay greater attention to the South Caucasus by fortifying an anti-Western narrative.

The resistance against the presence of external powers in the South Caucasus fits into how Iran sees its evolving geopolitical position in the context of the changing global order. The gradual dilution of Western power and the rise the non-Western, mostly Asian powers, their pursuit of near-exclusive geopolitical spheres of influence free of Western involvement in critically important regions, allow Iran to partner with other regional powers to compete with the collective West. The latter's absence from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict-resolution process is an indicator of much wider change such as the evolving world order. Similar changes trickle down every global institution and concern all geopolitically important regions. The South Caucasus is one of those regions where the interests of several neighboring regional powers allow to close off the space geopolitically. Iran is a part of this effort where, along with Russia

and Turkey, it seeks to lessen Western or any other (for instance Israeli) influence present in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

For Iran the Middle East and the South Caucasus have also now become two inextricably linked spaces. Regional security and energy resources underpin the growing interconnection. Russia and Turkey, which since 2010s have been active in increasing their military and economic position in the wider Middle East, now, as the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war demonstrated, consider the South Caucasus as a part of a greater geopolitical game that stretches from the Mediterranean to the Caspian. Turkey is increasingly dependent on resources from the Caspian; Russia has also watched with apprehension how possible it became to have fighters allegedly sent from Syria to Azerbaijan. The trend is clear: for the first time since early nineteenth century when the Russian empire began its expansion into the South Caucasus and effectively cut the region off from the developments in the Middle East, the two regions are again growing closer. Geography's inescapable pull underpins the process and Iran cannot ignore this development. Perhaps, a major adaptation in the Iranian geopolitical worldview will follow by elevating the South Caucasus' geopolitical role in Iranian thinking. This might not equalize the region in importance to other theaters Tehran heavily is involved in across the Middle East, but a major reassessment in Iran's thinking is likely to follow (Avdaliani, 2021a).

This chapter also showed that traditional analyses of Iran's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus built around the realities of the 1990s and 2000s need to be revisited. A major catalyzer was the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Growing Turkish influence in and increasing flows of Israeli technologies to Azerbaijan creates a major dilemma for Tehran as evidenced by tensions in October 2021. Iran's close partner Armenia was defeated and Russian troops are now close to the Iranian border. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war showed that though being a regional power, Iran could be easily left out of the peace resolution process and have little say in the newly emerging regional balance of power.

Thus Iran has to adapt to the changes, but the adjustment will be a slow and painful process. It will require a major investment of resources, both financial and military to shore up Iran's weakening position in the region. Cooperation with Russia could be beneficial as Turkey is arguably less trusted by the Iranians. After all, in the long-term, Iran also sees that Russia's influence in the South Caucasus has

its limits. And this primarily comes to the operation of EEU and other Russia-led groupings as distrust between its members and general fear of Russia's military and economic dominance undermines the organizations' long-term development. Russian military presence on Azerbaijani soil undermines Russian prestige too. Militarization of Russian foreign policy in the South Caucasus would be damaging for the Kremlin in the longer run.

Perhaps Iran could leverage the widening differences. As Baku will work hard to limit Russian peacekeepers' stay, finding balance to growing Turkish influence too might be a path to follow for Azerbaijan. This could create some room for Iran to maneuver. But Iran's foreign policy could also be defensive in nature through mitigating potential threats to its own stability.

Still the South Caucasus' role in Iran's strategic calculus should not be overestimated. It is likely that Iranian political elite's top priority for some time will be the country's worsened economic situation. The consensus that the Middle East and Persian Gulf are arenas of far more vital national security interest than the South Caucasus is still a dominating thinking. Iranian political elites will likely be more attentive to the east of the country where the American exit from Afghanistan created a veritable power vacuum. Security repercussions of this geopolitical move could be huge for Iran's internal security and the country's geopolitical position in general. Tehran will have to play a more active role in the post-American Afghanistan which means a long-term shift in attention from other regions. Furthermore, Iran's national energy will also remain fixed on such traditional arenas as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

The South Caucasus is the region where Iran's ambitions are more or less commensurate with the resources spent to attain foreign policy goals. In other words, to the Islamic regime's credit it has not stated bloated foreign policy aims, has not even published an official strategic vision for the South Caucasus, but rather was satisfied, as argued above, with operating in the shadow of Russia (Atrisangari, 2020). Iran is mindful of the limits to its ability to play an activist role. It has repeatedly failed to attain the status it seeks. The country faces both systemic challenges when it comes to the South Caucasus and domestic conditions which hinder the regime's attractiveness. Additionally, external competition from Russia and to a smaller extent Turkey has served as a veritable blockage to Iran's ambitions. This explains why the South Caucasus seemed relatively inconspicuous for Iran despite the separatist wars of early 1990s or Russian

invasion of Georgia in 2008. Despite vast cultural, historic connections and geographic proximity, Iran's policies in the South Caucasus have not brought expected results.

There is also US pressure which remains instrumental in constraining Iran economically and politically. It is this threat from non-regional powers that is perceived most acutely in Tehran. This reality pushed Iran to seek accommodation with other large regional players such as Russia and Turkey and express support for regional organizations in Eurasia which would serve as an alternative to the West-led alliances and institutions (Atrisangari, 2020).

Thus presently Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus is at the crossroads. The traditional status quo Iran helped to create in the 1990s is no longer tenable with the gradual shift in the balance of power as exemplified by the results of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war. There is also a qualitatively different type of relations built between Iran on the one hand and Turkey and Russia on the other. How effective the Iranian response to the age of great power competition would be is yet unclear. Much will depend on the country's regional position and the changing world order. Re-evaluation of Iran's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus is likely to follow, though the region will still be perceived as less critical than other regions where Tehran has vital interests.

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CHAPTER 6

From Central Asia to the Black Sea: China and the South Caucasus

This chapter traces the evolution of China's geo-economic vision of the South Caucasus with a particular focus made on the development of bilateral relations with the region's three states since early 2010s till early 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine causing changes in Eurasian connectivity. This is when in 2013 Beijing announced its near-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—global infrastructure development project which aims to link China to the European market through the vast Eurasian landmass. Other notable developments which influenced Chinese approach to the South Caucasus were Georgia signing the so-called Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU; Russia preparing to launch its Eurasian Economic Union (EEU); and growing role of Azerbaijan as a gateway to the region.

In the middle of these interrelated geo-economic developments, China's policy toward the South Caucasus has seen much evolution characterized by more active investment and trade activities in early 2010s. However, initial euphoria proved to be short-living as by late 2010s Beijing has eventually shown little interest in pushing its agenda similarly to Chinese activities in Central Asia or other crucial Eurasian corridors. Beyond the seeming disinterest in the economy of the South Caucasus, however, larger geopolitical issues have been at play blocking Chinese aspirations. The US pressure on Georgia to distance itself from China, Russia's efforts to further solidify its influence in the region as well as the

E. Avdaliani, *New World Order and Small Regions*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4037-8_6

EU's pursuit of its Eastern Partnership project, Turkey special relations with Azerbaijan, all this could have also contributed to China's relative geopolitical quiescence lately.

Let us start with some obvious curbing factors which limit China's interests toward the region. Economically, the South Caucasus is of marginal interest to China when put within the larger Eurasian picture. Difficult terrain and the two seas "trans-shipment" along the East–West route continue to hamper the region's potential as a transport and logistics transit for China–EU trade even though there are now large incentives after the war in Ukraine.

Another limiting factor is the South Caucasus' three states'—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—relatively small population (with the total of up to 17 million) with constrained economic development potential. The region is also notorious for its political instability. This includes internal political troubles besetting the governments of the countries as well as challenges emanating from separatist entities in Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh). Despite the statements made following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 on re-opening old railways, the lack of connectivity remains a major obstacle for the South Caucasus' large transcontinental trade involvement.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war further underlined that Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia cannot be described as priority areas in China's foreign policy. It even indicated the limits of China's involvement in the South Caucasus. Official rhetoric from Beijing signaled the continuation of China's non-intervention policy in the region (FMPRC, 2020) and deep understanding of Russia's geopolitical sensitivities.

Geographic distance too plays a defining limiting role (Ögütçü, 2005). China does not border on the South Caucasus and the still inadequate, albeit developing, connectivity across the Caspian Sea hampers China's long-term thinking. Nonetheless, the South Caucasus is of interest to China as an interconnector—shortest route to Europe—in Beijing's BRI strategy especially after the route through Russia closed following the war in Ukraine and western sanctions imposed on Moscow. The region's occasional salience in Chinese thinking was reflected in the May 2019 visit of China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, to all three regional countries (Markedonov, 2019).

Beyond BRI considerations the region is also important for Beijing's security motives. As China has now been dealing for some time with the problems of radicalism in its restive Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous

Region, the South Caucasus' geographic closeness to the volatile Middle East, makes the region important for the Chinese to watch. Indeed, as of 2017 several major figures in the Islamic State came from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge (200) and the bulk of South Caucasus fighters (800) came from Azerbaijan. The real numbers are unknown, but could be much higher than reported (Markedonov, 2019).

Pure geopolitical calculations too are behind the South Caucasus states' intention to pursue closer ties with China. For Georgia and Azerbaijan, which both have territorial problems, enjoying China's support on the issue of territorial integrity is of utmost diplomatic importance. As China expands its influence in the international organizations, Beijing tacit support would bring significant benefits for Baku and Tbilisi. Furthermore, China too is interested in the sovereignty and integrity of the South Caucasus states as the country itself experiences troubles in Tibet and Xinjiang, and seeks global recognition of its claims over Taiwan. Support from any states, however small and weak geopolitically they are, deeply matters to Beijing. For instance, in May 2019, when China's Wang visited Tbilisi he said that China respected "the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Georgia" (Markedonov, 2019).

China's stance on territorial integrity could be a sticking point in the relations between the rising power and the South Caucasus states. Indeed one of the components of the nascent Chinese vision of the new world order is the pre-eminence of sovereignty, i.e. non-interference into internal affairs of other countries and support for territorial integrity. Often liberal internationalism undermined these very concepts which from early 2000s began to cause a concerted resistance from Eurasian states. While other elements of the Chinese vision are much debated Beijing's focus on the Westphalian concepts is universally accepted by the scholars. Sovereignty issues are dear to the South Caucasus states as each experiences either direct external military presence or predominant economic influence by larger regional powers. Another appealing theme for the region's states is that China has been less bent on military expansion. Though recently this trend has somewhat changed with Beijing opening military presence in Djibouti, Tajikistan and using private military companies in numerous parts of the world, the country nevertheless is not regarded by the South Caucasus states as harboring malign ambitions. Therefore, there are some larger ideas which China and South Caucasus states largely agree on.

Another geopolitical calculation on a part of the three South Caucasus states has been to try use China as a balancing card against Russia's geopolitical ambitions in the region. But each of the three states has its limits on how effectively they could pursue the China card. Baku, for instance, which has traditionally followed a more equidistant foreign policy from all geopolitical centers of power and sought Beijing as yet another balancing tool in its relations with Russia, Iran, and others, and now following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war, the country has seen major changes to its foreign policy thinking. On the surface, Baku continues to maintain friendly relations with larger powers around it, but increasingly the country's foreign policy is becoming more of a balancing game between Russia and Turkey. China's place in it will be rather limited as Baku's ties with Turkey assume elements of an official alliance.

Armenia's and Georgia's position is likewise ambiguous. Tbilisi's rapprochement with China is contingent on its traditionally close ties with the West, primarily the US. As the global competition between Washington and China heats up, Georgia is becoming increasingly a part of this rivalry. Excessive tilt toward China would be costly for the Georgian economy and political weight as it depends on Western financial aid and its support in the international institutions. Ignoring China too is not an option as Georgia-China trade steadily expands and any anti-China move would damage the country. However, as Georgia sees its chances for NATO/EU membership limited, the official Tbilisi might look more actively at removing its fixation on the West and pursue a multi-vector foreign policy. This would not mean abandoning the Western path, but it will provide Georgia with larger space for maneuver. Expanding the ties with Eurasian powers and treating it as complementary with the Western aspirations is perhaps a foreign policy path allowing Georgia to adjust to the changing world order where the West's primacy is not as unquestionable as in the post-Cold War period. And this is where China could play an important role for Georgia through providing large direct foreign investment and political support when necessary.

Armenia too has sought regional powers to balance its overdependence on Russia. Quite naturally closer ties with Beijing have been seen by Yerevan as a possibility to broaden the country's transit capabilities and find trade and military cooperation alternatives in the age of near total absence from regional transit routes through Armenia. But over the past decade Armenia-Russia alliance has rather turned into a geopolitical dilemma for Yerevan as the asymmetry of cooperation has

grown exponentially in Russia's favor. This is especially seen following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war when Russian peacekeepers were stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh the security of which now depends on Moscow's ability and willingness to defend. The overdependence should push Armenia outward, but it is also clear that reliance on Russia has grown to no-return point where Yerevan's any significant attempt to re-modify its dependence will meet Russian resistance.

Therefore, there are indeed sentiments among the elites of the South Caucasus states toward using China as a necessary balancer against Russia. But as argued above, there are also significant limits, first in Beijing's vision on the South Caucasus and second, exemplified in the efforts by other powers to preclude Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia from making significant tilt toward China.

Important Geographic Bridge

China lacks a long-term strategic vision for the South Caucasus, but if there is a certain area where China thinks geopolitically in regards to the region it is the latter's geographic location—gradually expanding South Caucasus corridor is the shortest route from China to Europe, which potentially makes it an important region for China and the operation of the BRI in the region.

Though China does not yet consider the South Caucasus as a primary region for extending its influence (Charaia & Papava, 2017), Georgia and Azerbaijan have always been considered in the context of the historical Great Silk Road right from early 1990s. On a practical level there were the TRACECA project initiated by the EU in 1993, the INOGATE project starting in 1996 and later supported by US through the Silk Road Strategy Act adopted in 1999. Dozens of silk road projects are still functioning successfully today (Charaia & Papava, 2017).

This brings us to the second important component of China's engagement in the region—its improving infrastructure. It was often assumed that China was content with the existing massive transit routes going through Russia. Though the relations between the two have flourished, for China, as the war in Ukraine showed, dependence on a limited number of routes could be harmful in the long term. The Chinese see that the transit could be both a tool for influence, but also a liability cleverly used in the hands of foreign governments when negotiating with Beijing. Moreover, even beyond the problems caused by the war in Ukraine,

close Russia-China relations are also far from being guaranteed to remain unchanged in the coming decade. This is not to say that Russia and China will be turning into rivals, as it is still often incorrectly suggested, but rather both states will move beyond the current rapprochement and start building a different kind of bilateral relations where the dangers of overreliance on each other will be perceived more acutely. There is also the very nature of the BRI project, which is not static, but rather fluid, constantly seeking new opportunities and responding to rising challenges. Fixed dependence on Russian transit routes would not correspond to the essence of the BRI. Therefore, finding alternative trade corridors and have them as complementary is at the heart of the Chinese initiative.

To penetrate and cross the South Caucasus' rigid geography a substantial improvement in east–west rail and road infrastructure is necessary. Here some steps were made to connect the Caspian basin with the Black Sea. For instance, the BTK railway, unveiled in 2017, offers biggest potential both to access new markets and avoid those constraints which could befall the routes passing from China to Europe through Russian heartland. Though the 826 km BTK route is not seamless as Turkish railways use the European standard gauge while Azerbaijan and Georgia use the Russian standard gauge, the railway reduces the time for cargo shipments to two weeks from a month by rail and 40–45 days by the sea today.

First train cargo from Central Asia to Turkey via the BTK arrived in November 2017. Recently the railway has been used more actively for Turkey–China connection. In December 2020 the Rail Cargo Group train departed from Turkey's Cerkezköy station to Chinese economic hub of Xi'an with a transit time of just 12–14 days (Anadolu Agency, 2020). In January 2021 export freight train from Turkey to Russia and China departed from Turkey's capital Ankara (Xinhuanet, 2021).

The results of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war also make prospects for increased China–South Caucasus connectivity. One of the stipulations of the November 2020 trilateral agreement signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, presumes the opening of a corridor from the Nakhchivan exclave to Azerbaijan proper via Armenia's southernmost Syunik region. Potentially this gives Turkey, along with the Georgian route, a direct land corridor to the Caspian. I already mentioned in Chapter 4 Ankara's plans to construct a railway and a pipeline, and Turkish politicians' high hoped for how the suggested route could lead to a potential growth of connectivity and trade with China (Khorrami, 2020). Baku too openly supports the idea of using what it calls the

Zangezur corridor for China–EU trade. Azerbaijan's president invited Asian countries of to study the potential of a regional project for creating the transport corridor. Though, the implementation of the stipulation from the November 2020 agreement is questionable as Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions are likely to persist and new problems to emerge resulting from the need to have a new demarcation of state borders, Russian border guards' potential control over the corridor could serve as additional protection for Chinese goods bound for Europe (Mammadov, 2021).

The potential of the South Caucasus infrastructure bridge explains China's steadily growing economic presence in the region over the last two decades. For instance, the World Bank data shows that in 2005–2018 period China's trade turnover with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia increased around 2070 percent, 380 percent, and 1885 percent, respectively. Since 2013 alone, trade turnover with Armenia has increased by some 70 percent (Azatutyun, 2021), 100 percent with Azerbaijan, and 60 percent with Georgia (Shapiro, 2020). Overall, from 2016 to 2020, bilateral trade between China and the South Caucasus region almost doubled, from $1.9 to $3.6 billion (Yau, 2021).

Along with overall trade level, the inflow of Chinese investments has also increased through the involvement of Chinese banks and funds. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China Development Bank, Exim Bank of China, Bank of China, and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) (Shapiro, 2020). However, there is no general template for Chinese investments. Unlike Chinese investments in Pakistan or the Central Asian region where the Chinese think more in grander geo-economic and geopolitical terms, separate areas are prioritized by the Chinese in each of the South Caucasus states. Just to cite one example, the hydropower sector in the South Caucasus is of special interest for China. Georgia stands out in this regards as China funded the construction of the Khadori Hydropower Plant (New China, 2017). Another project is the $100 million Nenskra hydropower plant, funded via AIIB (2020). But the project also attracts widespread criticism as many believe its construction would damage the ecosystem of the mountainous part of Georgia.

Seen from a regional perspective there is little evidence to show that those investments are interrelated to advance a long-term Chinese strategic perspective on the region. There is a lack of momentum which perhaps relates generally to the expansion of the BRI. Increasingly doubts

and fears beset countries' approach to the initiative and how economically viable would be the proposed projects. But there is also a growing understanding in Beijing that acknowledges limits to its BRI's ambitions in the South Caucasus and perhaps to the region's ability to serve as a successful transit corridor. This is not to deny the corridor's transit potential, but only to stress the absence of adequate infrastructure and the geographic constrains when it comes to competing with the Russian route. The most realistic scenario would be developing the South Caucasus corridor as an additional passage for China–EU trade where only a small fraction of the trade will be going through. Furthermore, a geopolitical component too hampers a quick operation of the BRI in the South Caucasus. Interstate conflicts still dominate the region, while the regional powers'—Iran, Russia, and Turkey—behavior signals to the emerging great power competition. The latter involves advancing contender infrastructure projects through economic and military expansion. Increasingly, for China to expand economically in the South Caucasus would mean entering an open competition with the region's heavyweights—the scenario Beijing is intent to avoid in the era of a rivalry with the US when Eurasia's illiberal states are key partners for Beijing to succeed. One striking example would suffice. It has been suggested that Azerbaijan could be wary of allowing private Chinese companies into Azerbaijani markets (Yau, 2021). While only some of it might be true, there is indeed a Turkish factor at play. Ankara has long regarded Azerbaijan's market as a sphere of its economic influence. The expansive trade deal signed in 2020 and ratified in early 2021 attests to this (Daily Sabah, 2021).

The South Caucasus Countries and the BRI

The BRI has been supported by all three South Caucasus states' political elites. The need of cash has been driving the eagerness to cooperate. Azerbaijan's active engagement with the BRI began in December 2015 when the president Ilham Aliyev visited China and signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Joint Promotion of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" between the two countries. This aimed at boosting Azerbaijan's growing trade and investment relationship with China. Moreover, Azerbaijan's trade with China has risen steadily since 2015. Azerbaijan also attracts large Chinese investments, but they are mostly linked to natural resources, infrastructure, and transit (Azernews, 2019). Overall it has been argued

that Chinese companies invested over $800 million in the Azerbaijani economy (Baghirov, 2019).

Azerbaijan has increasingly worked to position itself as a gateway for Chinese goods heading westward. In April 2019 Aliyev and China's Xi Jinping took part in the BRI Forum in Beijing throwing support for the BRI. Baku has initiated numerous projects to position itself as interconnector between the East and the West. For instance, in early January 2021 the first "Qilu" train departed from east China's Shandong province to Baku. Thence the goods were to be allocated to Turkey, Georgia, Romania, Italy, and other countries. These efforts make Azerbaijan an essential part of the China–Central Asia–West Asia economic corridor, which is also often called the "Middle Corridor."

The corridor aims to attract some throughput from the China–Russia–Belarus route and perhaps eventually attract even some parts of Europe-China trade especially following the war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia. The corridor begins at the Baku-Alat port in Azerbaijan. The port has various connections: to the south, to the west where reaching the Georgian border. Through Georgia the route goes either to Turkey or the Black Sea shore where Ukraine or other littoral states can be reached (World Bank, 2020a, 2020b). Here the Poti port is critical as it is the largest one in Georgia handling liquids, dry bulk, passenger ferries and nearly 80% of the country's container traffic (Sanders, 2021).

Similar to Azerbaijan and Georgia (see below), Armenia also has sought to larger Chinese involvement to break its economic isolation through active participation in the BRI. Bilateral trade ties are especially promising. For instance, in 2020, China was Armenia's second-largest trading partner with a trade turnover of over $964 million, which was an increase of 2% compared to 2019. This came in the light of 13,2% decline in Armenia's overall foreign trade turnover in 2020 which amounted to $7.1 billion (Armenpress, 2021).

Then come the hopes of using the BRI for breaking the country's geographic and geopolitical isolation from regional transit routes. For this purpose, Yerevan has been actively promoting the establishment of the "Persian Gulf–Black Sea" multimodal transport and transit corridor to link Iran with Europe via Armenia and Georgian Black Sea ports. As Iran and China signed a whopping $400-billlion deal portending deeper Iran-BRI cooperation (Avdaliani, 2020a, 2020b), Armenia hopes Iran's push to find an access to the Black Sea through Armenia could turn into reality.

For Armenia Iran's active engagement with the BRI might be a chance to develop a better infrastructure since the projected Chinese investment aim at revamping the Islamic Republic's railway system and sea ports. However, this multi-billion project could potentially be operational in a distant future, provided, China lives up to its promises and Iran does not find alternative routes to the Black Sea (Huseynov & Rzayev, 2018).

Georgia endorsed the initiative and has been investing in transport projects along its East–West corridor. Though its own seaports and access to world markets make it less dependent on overland corridors, faster transport to China and Central Asia using the BRI corridors is seen as an important step to increase its transit and trade potential (World Bank, 2020a, 2020b). More specifically, Tbilisi has been improving transport connections by road to other towns within the country as well as to its seaports, Poti, Batumi, and potentially Anaklia. The East–West highway connects Tbilisi westward to towns like Khashuri, Samtredia, Kutaisi, and Senaki, northward to Gori, and southward to Akhalkalaki, Sadakhlo (border with Armenia), and Red Bridge (border with Azerbaijan) (World Bank, 2020a, 2020b). Chinese interest in the development of Georgia's infrastructure is seen in 2017 offer by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) when Tbilisi was provided with $114 million to improve regional connectivity (Agenda, 2017). The planned bypass road around Batumi will increase international transit from China to Europe through Georgia. The Asian Infrastructure Development Bank loaned Georgia nearly $100 million in May 2020 for COVID-19 relief (ADB, 2020).

An interesting aspect of China's involvement in the South Caucasus is its investments in the region's separatist regions. Chinese investment in partially-recognized states in the South Caucasus is minimal. However, China has shown some interest and sent representatives to these entities. In 2009, representatives from the Chinese Beifa Group came to South Ossetia to assess potential for investment, raising the ire of Georgia (Yuga, 2009). In 2007 and 2019 delegations from China arrived in Abkhazia to get acquainted with the region's economic potential (Lomsadze, 2019). Chinese investors are reportedly interested in wine exports, tomatoes, oranges, and tobacco products as well as land and settling 3000 workers (Lambert, 2018). The initiative did not work out partly due to local anti-Chinese sentiments and criticism from Tbilisi (Shapiro, 2020).

The case of economic engagement with the separatist regions shows that China does not have a unified geo-economic vision of the South Caucasus. These moves indicate that China's interests primarily lie in

acquiring raw materials. The search for as diversified import ways as possible means that various Chinese companies could venture for pure economic benefits into the territories which could complicate Beijing's official ties with every each of the three South Caucasus states (Babajan, 2012).

As a part of the evolving Chinese stance in the South Caucasus, Beijing's military ties are also important to watch (Rolland, 2018). Though the military cooperation is relatively modest, China has nevertheless made some interesting moves to tap into the efforts by the regional governments to diversify their military arms purchases. As the South Caucasus countries seek ways to diversify their trade relations, no less important aspect for them (especially Armenia and Azerbaijan) is to seek alternative ways to acquire necessary military capabilities. As Baku and Yerevan have been locked in the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the two states were actively seeking to diversify their dependence in military arms purchases away from Russia. Turkey and Israel capitalized on this trend, China to a lesser extent, but some moves are nevertheless worth mentioning as they constitute a part of the overall Chinese approach to the region.

For instance, The Polonez Multiple Launch Rocket System, sent to Azerbaijan from Belarus, was developed in conjunction with China (Rahimov, 2018). Azerbaijan has also purchased the Qasirga T-300 system, which is produced in Turkey with a Chinese license, and China has offered several systems to the Azerbaijani military as well. Azerbaijan's Minister of Defense also visited Beijing in 2018 and 2019. In 2019, Azerbaijan and China signed a document on mutual military aid and the purchase of Chinese arms (Valiyev, 2019).

Armenia's first non-Russian weaponry purchase came from China in the late 1990s. In 2012 defense cooperation agreement was signed between Beijing and Yerevan. Reports indicated that Armenia acquired new CCP AR1A multiple-launch rocket systems in 2013 (Azatutyun, 2013). Following the Armenian Defense Minister's visit to Beijing in 2017, China also agreed to provide about $1.5 million in non-lethal assistance to Armenia (The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, 2017). These hopes for diversification of Armenia's military contacts, however, have not brought the expected results as Russia's preferential sales continued to dominate Yerevan's purchases and Russia has been traditionally against Armenia's military ties with other powers (Gurbanov, 2019).

Hopes for a New Regional Player Dashed

As noted above the South Caucasus has not gained an expected salience in China's foreign policy. The country's ambassadors to the region's three states often announce how important the South Caucasus is, but Beijing's investment policies and political moves reflect little of the expected Chinese grand geopolitical thinking.

Georgia hoped its location on the Black Sea, with ports infrastructure, the railway connecting the Caspian Sea and Turkey as well as the expanding network of roads would allow it to operate as a logistics and transit hub for the sprawling BRI. Moreover, in 2017 China and Georgia signed a free trade agreement (Agenda, 2016). Georgia also pushed for a more robust Chinese investment policy toward Georgia's Black Sea ports. This led to hosting a series of high-profile forums on silk roads in Tbilisi. Georgia believed that intensive economic ties with China would push Beijing to seek greater geopolitical position in the South Caucasus.

Amid Russia's outsize influence in the region and the occupation of Georgian territories, Tbilisi's calculus seemed promising. Ideally, Chinese investments in the country would invite bigger security and lesser willingness from the Russians to act militarily. Rough parallels with Central Asia were made where Russia and China avoid making brusque moves not to harm each other's vital interests.

The Georgian vision however did not materialize. Though bilateral trade has been growing steadily and, for instance, in 2020 China was Georgia's top trading partner by exports (Geostat, 2021), the country has served China mostly as a provider of raw materials bases. Copper and various chemicals exported to China follow the same pattern which is visible in trade relations between China and other Black Sea states (Smolnik, 2018). In other words, the hope that bigger trade with China will lead to diversification of Georgia's export base, and help the country to become more competitive products have largely failed.

Yet another problem haunting bilateral relations has been mounting concerns over alleged corruption around those Chinese projects implemented in Georgia. Many questioned the way Chinese companies were awarded various infrastructure contracts leading some Georgian NGOs and independent journalists to claim that China and the Georgian government might be cooperating in a dishonest manner (Zalinger, 2021). For example, Powerchina's subsidiary Sinohydro, which has a long record—both in Georgia and abroad—of corruption, environmental degradation,

and of generally shoddy work (Asatiani, 2020) was awarded a €26.3 million contract for a 42-km section of the Khulo-Zarzma road (International Construction, 2020). Other reports, though at times seemingly exaggerating, also indicate reports on China building its own chain of contacts of influence within the Georgian political structure which allegedly helps it to bypass various bureaucratic hurdles and adequate competition from foreign companies (Khidasheli & Kintsurashvili, 2020).

As mentioned, bilateral trade grows, but the level of Chinese investments in Georgia remains low. In the three quarters of 2020, FDI from China was just $3 million. In the last five years, the largest investment flow from China was in 2018—$75.8 million. True, there is a general decline of FDI in Georgia, but the Chinese case might be a reflection of how misconstrued were the hopes for greater Chinese economic presence (Agenda, 2021).

Trends have shown that Chinese investment could be more about publicity than substance (Eurasianet, 2021). An investigation in Georgia highlighted the case of a locomotive plant and all the details around Chinese financing. Under the agreement signed in 2015 the new plant aimed at producing modern electric, diesel locomotives and spare parts for domestic use and export. This would have improved Georgia's ability to position itself within the BRI. The project did not materialize. Similar fate befell another Chinese-Georgian initiative—a $5 million investment in a jacket factory in Tkibuli, city in western Georgia. Signed in November 2018, the factory would have made brand-name outerwear for EU markets and create 300 jobs in Tkibuli, city in Western Georgia (Brattberg et al., 2021; Ifact, 2021).

The limits of China–Georgia ties are also underlined by the way Beijing approaches Russian interests in what once constituted the Soviet Union. China is careful not to violate Russia's geopolitical imperatives. For example, China has consistently avoided providing Tbilisi with critical diplomatic support on issues such as UN votes on refugees forcefully expelled from Abkhazia in early 1990s by separatists and Russian troops. Beijing also abstained from denouncing de-facto presidential or parliamentary elections held in Georgia's occupied territories. Moreover, no criticism toward Russia has been expressed over the "borderization" policies in the separatist territories (Avdaliani, 2020a, 2020b; Sirbiladze & Mgebrishvili, 2020). At times there seems to be even a Chinese-Russian coordination in propaganda sphere. In September 2020, the Chinese state-affiliated media outlet *China Daily* followed Russian news outlets

and criticized the work of the US-funded Lugar Laboratory located near Tbilisi and which has been instrumental in combatting the pandemic. The piece even argued that there were cases of ordinary citizens being used for various harmful tests (Avdaliani, 2020a, 2020b).

China's geopolitical vision on Georgia fits into how Beijing has generally regarded Russia and its ambitions in its immediate neighborhood. Beijing recognizes that Russia has legitimate security concerns. Before and during Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 China has consistently supported the idea of Moscow's concerns regarding NATO's eastward enlargement, and that Russia essentially has a right to exercise prevent it. A similar Chinese approach might be applied to Georgia.

Hopes of leveraging the "China card" was also an important factor in Armenia's and Azerbaijan's broader vision to attain maximum diversification of their foreign policy and economic portfolio. Yerevan views China as a power which could help the country develop its transit capabilities. Though historically constrained by closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan (the situation which is likely to change in the near future amid the emerging rapprochement with Ankara and partially with Baku), Armenia looks at the possibility of building Iran–Armenia–Georgia route. China's SinoHydro has been involved in building the 556-km North–South road corridor in Armenia.

Despite some progress, China's ties with the South Caucasus have been slow. Bilateral trade has usually seen steady growth, but there is little indication it will become as significant as the three South Caucasus states hoped for. The region does not feature high on BRI's agenda. China, up until the war in Ukraine always prioritized the transit route through Russia as the multimodal route through the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus was difficult infrastructure-wise. This could however change following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Transit through Russia could see long-term hurdles because of Western sanctions. The Middle Corridor through the Caspian and the South Caucasus could gain traction. In the longer run, the Middle Corridor could assume a complimentary role (along with at least partial re-instatement of Russia transit) for the China–EU trade. A more competitive corridor would require fundamental adjustments such as prices/fees, customs, operation, work processes, and harmonization of regulations from the countries involved (Smolnik, 2018).

China's ambivalent position in the South Caucasus is also dictated the lack of security concerns similar to what Beijing experiences in the Central

Asian region. First, South Caucasus does not border on China as Central Asia does. And secondly, it is not as large as Central Asia and Russia's security/military involvement is significant enough that does not require an outside help (Avdaliani, 2019).

Though geography is a significant constrain, it could be also successfully leveraged. There is no mistrust in the South Caucasus toward China as is the case with Russia. China pursues economic growth, puts a heavy emphasis on infrastructure development, and embraces the so-called "Westphalian principles" whereby it supports sovereignty and non-intervention into internal affairs. Its one-party rule, though inimical to the nature of internal politics of Armenia and Georgia, nevertheless does not present an insurmountable obstacle for more intensive bilateral relations.

This makes China attractive for the three South Caucasus states. Beijing however seems unwilling to use this potential. Among several reasons explaining China's position Russia could indeed be the major constraining factor (Sanders, 2021). Moscow sees the region as its sphere of influence. China's disruptive moves could complicate the bilateral ties. After all, Moscow and Beijing have much greater incentives to work together. Their cooperation is spanning multiple regions and concerns such as global topics as the work toward changing the existing liberal order and replacing it with something new akin to hierarchical worldview. Therefore, nuisances in the South Caucasus are likely to be avoided and even if disagreements arise, they are unlikely to overshadow Chinese-Russian cooperation. This however does not mean that China fears angering Russia. Beijing can challenge Russian influence where it feels necessary. Central Asia is one of such cases. Moscow is worried, but it nevertheless avoids openly criticizing China.

Beijing's weak position in the South Caucasus is also a result of its still developing influence in the wider Black Sea region. Its relations with Ukraine, Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria are economically active, but they have not yet reached the level when China will have to defend its economic assets by active security measures or even diplomatic moves. Perhaps the real disincentive for China is a limited availability of resources.

Beyond Russia there are other actors too which obstruct China's involvement. China does not seem motivated to compete with the EU and US when the potential benefits remain uncertain. The South Caucasus is of critical importance to the EU's energy security and is likely to grow as such amid the intensifying rivalry with Russia and the likely

turn to limit dependence on Russian energy resources in the course of this decade. There are also Turkey and NATO. Ankara has long regarded the Black Sea as a condominium with Moscow, and treated its membership in NATO as a tool to keep Russia in check. Turks and Russians would be uncomfortable seeing greater Chinese involvement in the Black Sea which is increasingly subject to the ideas of regionalism—the pursuit of regional powers to limit outside powers' presence in their respective neighborhoods.

Thus a long-term picture does not look especially promising for China's involvement in the wider Black Sea region and the South Caucasus. The post-pandemic period puts pressure on China's ability to lend money abroad. Additionally, Russo–Turkish pursuit of geopolitical condominium will be a further roadblock for Chinese companies. Russian invasion of Ukraine adds a further limiting factor. The instability will be long-term, which means that the multiplication of geopolitical uncertainties will limit Beijing's thrust into the area.

China and Foreign Actors in South Caucasus

In the age of US-China great power competition and the changing global order, the South Caucasus, though to a lesser degree, but will nevertheless be subject to ongoing geopolitical reverberations. As America's stance on China is likely to harden over time, the South Caucasus states will be more constrained in their ability to freely navigate the regional geopolitics. Georgia as the West's long-time partner will face a bigger challenge. In a series of public letters addressed to the Georgian government sent in 2020, US congressmen and senators were explicit that the country needed to avoid deep entanglements with China and hew closely to Western standards and trade practices. This includes abstaining from drawing substantial Chinese investments in crucial infrastructure areas. The case of Georgia's Anaklia deep sea port tender in 2016 is revealing as it showcased how the US companies were preferred over Chinese competitors.

For Georgia the balancing act the country managed to sustain so far will be difficult to keep. In the long-term Georgia's NATO and EU membership aspirations, the cornerstone of its geopolitical orientation, could be an irritant for China, especially as the alliance expands its scope to the Indo-Pacific region where the bulk of future global competition will unfold.

At this point, criticizing China openly would cost Georgia dearly, which means that it is unlikely that Tbilisi will be taking a firm stance on Taiwan or on human rights issues in Xinjiang. But as tensions ratchet up between the West and China, Georgia could be increasingly tilting toward the West, not only politically, economically, and even when it comes to choosing between Western and Chinese technologies. The latter point is especially interesting as it involves the fate of 5G and whether Chinese technology companies are allowed to dominate the country (Rolland, 2018). Here too, Georgia is expected to eventually stand with western 5G technology practices. In fact, the tilt toward the Western practices is already apparent highlighted by a memorandum of understanding signed in January 2021 between the US and Georgian governments on using future internet technologies which correspond to Western security standards (US Embassy, 2021).

In case of Armenia the choice between western or Chinese technologies has been clearer from the outset. As Russia increasingly partners with China in 5G internet development, Armenia has been open to Chinese moves. Similar to Armenia, Azerbaijan too does not find itself in a crossfire between the West and China over the use of Huawei's 5G internet. In 2019 Huawei announced its intention to develop Azerbaijan's 5G network (Trend, 2019).

For the Russia-led EEU Chinese activities might not pose as big a threat as Moscow sees in Beijing's actions in Central Asia. Russia sees that China does not pose a direct military or even economic challenge to its strategic objectives in the South Caucasus, which consists of the pursuit of hard hegemony, dovetailing its military presence with a strong economic and diplomatic presence (through EEU, CSTO and other measures) to ensure three regional states' overall geopolitical compliance with the Kremlin's stance.

Moreover, it could even be argued that since Chinese economic engagement with the South Caucasus competes (see below) with the Western influence, Beijing's actions coincide with Moscow's broader objectives of keeping the West at bay. A certain complementarity between China's and Russia's actions can be seen.

Though the EU overall does not see Beijing as an immediate threat to its policies in the region, nevertheless, considering tensions between EU and China over investment and other economic issues, bigger Chinese activities in the South Caucasus could turn into a significant irritant for

Brussels. Beijing too could be tacitly against the spread EU's normative basis to the South Caucasus as it would constrain Chinese business activities in the region. For the EU, China's engagement in the South Caucasus and the wider Black Sea region presents both opportunities and potential challenges. The EU's Eastern Neighborhood and the BRI are two economic models, though not altogether exclusive, but nevertheless competitors to each other. This makes the expansion of Chinese economic interests in the region problematic for the EU in the long run.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to the Chinese interests in the South Caucasus emanates from the US. For instance, when Chinese FM Wang's visit to Georgia in 2019 it caused concerns in Washington. This coincided with the stalling of the Anaklia deep sea project. Shortly afterward, in June 2019, Georgia's then prime minister, Mamuka Bakhtadze, during his visit to Washington received a strong message from the then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo regarding Georgia's potential economic entanglement with China (Civil, 2019).

Overall though, in the course of the past several years the South Caucasus region began to be seen by policy-makers in Washington increasingly through the lens of the Eurasia-wide competition between the US and China. This is especially visible in the case of Georgia and less so with Armenia and Azerbaijan. This will continue to hamper China's efforts to penetrate the region while the BRI's expansion will remain patchy at best.

From Central Asia to the Black Sea—A Caucas-Asian Perspective

Finally, we need to place China's policy in South Caucasus within the larger Eurasian picture. Analysis of China's vision of the South Caucasus separately from Beijing's policies in the Black Sea and Central Asia does not provide an adequate picture (Ismailov & Papava, 2008a, 2008b). As a part of the continuous corridor from China to Europe, the South Caucasus is interconnected to the developments in the two regions flanking it, and in many ways China's political moves there reveal a great deal of why Beijing has been relatively modest in its geo-economic aspirations in the South Caucasus.

In Central Asia China increases its role in trade—in 2002 the figure stood at $2.3 billion, by 2019 it grew to $46 billion. More importantly, changes are taking place in the regional infrastructure. The promotion

of alternative routes which essentially "opens up" Central Asia from its historical isolation to the surrounding regions. And China has been instrumental in this (Avdaliani, 2021). Beijing's approach undermines what Russia has been building for centuries. Much like in the South Caucasus, Central Asia too experiences the phenomenon of "shifting borders." No one power is able to impose an exclusive control over the region. Central Asia is increasingly penetrated by other powers and is also growingly resistant to the Moscow's attempts to.

As the region's connectivity to Iran, South Caucasus, and China grow, traditional dependence on Russia's south–north routes is being substituted by alternatives. For instance, over the past several years Beijing has been actively involved in introducing a collection of new transportation initiatives. In early September 2020 when a freight train from China, through Kazakhstan, reached the Turkmen city of Anev three days later, covering in total of some 8780 km (Avdaliani, 2021). China also helped develop a new transportation corridor from the city of Lanzhou that runs through Kyrgyzstan toward Tashkent. Construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) route has been postponed for decades because of Kyrgyzstan with anti-Chinese sentiments and internal political disturbances. Now, with the renewed emphasis on connectivity through the Middle Corridor, the CKU railway project seem more realistic.

Thus there is an understanding in Beijing that the expansion of the BRI in the South Caucasus cannot be made out of the context of what is taking place in Central Asia. Without proper connectivity through Central Asia and across the Caspian Sea, the intensity of Chinese activities in the South Caucasus is unlikely to ratchet up significantly in the near future. China successfully expands its BRI with those states and regions which border on it. Take an example of Pakistan or Central Asia states. But to look beyond the regions adjacent to the country, China needs either a sea access or a continuous viable connectivity. The South Caucasus does have neither. Thus the growth of the South Caucasus' role in China's calculus is contingent upon the evolving connectivity dynamics in Central Asia.

The growth of interconnection between the two regions is undeniable as proved by the Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan deal signed in February 2021 on the joint exploration of a once-disputed section of an undersea hydrocarbons field in the Caspian Sea. The agreement could pave the way for further connectivity (gas export from Turkmenistan) across the sea (RFERL, 2021). But still the level is far behind what is desirable.

There have also been made multiple visits from Azerbaijan and Georgia to Central Asia to strengthen connectivity in the light of the war in Ukraine.

In both regions China started as a stranger which required decades to build connections with the political elites and manage divergent geopolitical interests of the local actors. China has been more successful in Central Asia, while the South Caucasus region, as argued above, experiences a lack of Chinese attention. Replication of its Central Asian methods onto the South Caucasus could boost Beijing's position, but to do this China still has to further solidify its position in Central Asia as a launching pad for westward march (Yau, 2021). The logic of a continuous corridor applies here. One cannot develop the center of the route if the beginning of the passage remains is untouched.

Same logic works to the second, western flank of the South Caucasus, which is the Black Sea region. The space is crucial in many ways but most of all because it serves as a last section of the middle corridor from China to Europe. The basin's states see political value in embracing the BRI. Turkey looks at it as an opportunity to balance the EU and develop its Middle Corridor transit idea, while Ukraine and Georgia are interested in investments for their poor Black Sea port infrastructure. They also see that a deeper Chinese involvement could serve as a certain limit for Russia's military moves in the wider Black Sea region. Thus the geo-economic situation in the Black Sea region is propitious for Chinese investments and generally Beijing's more active policy. The reality, however, is not as promising since Chinese FDI in the Black Sea region has been relatively insignificant to talk about (Blanchard, 2020).

Final Thoughts

Since 2013 the BRI continues its expansion with varying degrees of success. The initiative has shown its long-term ability to adjust to different regions and the rising opportunities and challenges (Lilkov, 2021). Much depends on geography. In bordering Central Asia and Pakistan it is a formidable project (though with its own problems), while elsewhere, in more distant places, the BRI either falters or have not had yet its momentum.

For the moment Beijing could boast of only tailored geo-economic approach to each of the three South Caucasus state. The countries recognize that China's BRI overlaps with their own foreign policy goal of

transforming their respective countries into full-fledged connectivity hubs between Europe and Asia.

Though Chinese investments in Georgia cannot be separated from that in Azerbaijan and vice versa as both countries represent a continuous corridor, the above analysis of the regional dynamics shows that in the projects connecting China to Europe, a solid base for Beijing's deeper strategic and economic engagement with the South Caucasus has yet to be established (Kenderdine, 2021; Larsen, 2017).

Indeed China's presence in the region is contingent upon its position in Central Asia. This explains why China does not still have an overarching vision for the South Caucasus similar to what it has in Central Asia or Pakistan. Without better infrastructure through Central Asia and between the latter and the South Caucasus, Beijing is unable to be more active in the wider Black Sea region.

There is also an element of potential competition with other large powers which serves as a further blocking factor for the BRI in the South Caucasus. The region has traditionally been a hotspot of competing geopolitical agendas of Russia, Turkey, to a lesser degree Iran, as well as other larger players such as the US and EU. Moreover, in the context of the changing world order, the South Caucasus is increasingly becoming a part of the great power competition, which provides opportunities, but could also increase the risks hampering long-term connectivity projects such as the BRI.

A new kind of geopolitical competition, namely, the one over connectivity (Rzayev, 2019), the lack of which has been one of the impediments to progress for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Military conflicts and political tensions limited cooperation between the three. Much has changed following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and China will be watching carefully as the region's connectivity is being reshuffled. The prospects now seem more promising than several years ago when the most the South Caucasus corridor could achieve was to serve as a minuscule complimentary route for China–Europe trade. The war in Ukraine might change this dynamic in favor of the Middle Corridor, but it is still unclear how this geopolitical opportunity will play out in the longer run.

To assess China's future position in the South Caucasus it is also necessary to take a wider perspective at Beijing's interests in the region from Central Asia to the Black Sea. While connectivity across the Caspian Sea increases as China improves Central Asia's infrastructure, its position still

has to be strengthened in this landlocked region. Moreover, China's interests in the Black Sea region are also not as large as hoped for. The South Caucasus is somewhere in the middle. Regardless of whether China makes a serious effort to increase its profile in the region, ultimately much will depend on the two flanking areas where China, to a varying degree, is represented. Once fulfilled, the need and overarching strategic vision to have the South Caucasus as a bridge will gradually emerge in Beijing's foreign policy.

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CHAPTER 7

Russia's "Return" to the South Caucasus

Geography Informs Russia's Grand Strategy in the South Caucasus

Since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has regarded maintaining its influence in the South Caucasus as a part of its wider strategic interests of remaining the major power across what formerly was the Soviet space. Competition with the collective West, inherent quest for great power status (Krickovic & Pellicciari, 2021), and, more importantly, a pursuit of multipolar world order, these are those drivers which form Russia's strategic ambitions in the South Caucasus. Each of these aspects will be discussed separately in this chapter, though most of the time the reader will find that the imperatives are interrelated throughout the narrative.

For Russia the South Caucasus constitutes a part of the so-called "near beyond borders"—*blizhneye zarubezhie*. The concept is a peculiarly Russian perception of the immediate neighborhood (Toal, 2017), which both shows Moscow's acknowledgment of a certain distance (independence) of the region, but at the same time a close historical attachment to it. This dichotomy has often manifested itself in Russia's ties with the South Caucasus' three countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—complicating our understanding of what truly the Russian ambitions are in the region.

E. Avdaliani, *New World Order and Small Regions*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4037-8_7

Geography informs Russia's long-term strategic vision toward the South Caucasus more than in any other space the country borders on. Its importance primarily stems from the South Caucasus serving as a connector with the Middle East. Turkey and Iran, which share the borders with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are the key players in the Middle East and specifically in the Syrian conflict where Russia has been involved since 2015. Moscow has complex relations with both Ankara and Tehran on a number of issues in and beyond the Syrian conflict. This makes the South Caucasus all the more important as it borders on the Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions—two areas where Turkey and Iran respectively have their fundamental interests ranging from security and energy to the preservation of military balance of power, and where both seek cooperation with Russia to sideline external players.

The Caucasus range represents by far the only large geographic barrier the Russians have ever crossed. Russia could well have shut itself behind the mountains instead of initiating an imperial expansion in early nineteenth century and use the South Caucasus as a buffer zone with possibly pro-Russian Georgian and Armenian monarchies against the Islamic world. But since the decision was made to incorporate the southern part or *Zakavkazye* in Russia, its rulers have always cared about improving the existing and creating additional routes through the mountains.

The Caucasus mountains have numerous natural and several artificially created passes that Russia could not allow fall under foreign control following the end of the Soviet Union. The failure to do so would have essentially bar Moscow from projecting hard power into the South Caucasus. Currently, Russia has four major routes in: first from Sochi and the surrounding territories to Georgia's separatist region of Abkhazia along the Black Sea coast; the second through the Roki Pass into South Ossetia (Tskhnivali Region), another separatist region in Georgia; third through the Larsi passage into Georgia; and the fourth along the Caspian Sea coast from Dagestan to Azerbaijan. Russia has consistently dominated all four routes and when threatened, resorted to military action, much as it did in 2008 when there was a real possibility of the Roki Pass being overtaken by the Georgian troops. The control of the passes allows Russia to quickly deploy its forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, in case of urgency, even threaten Tbilisi. From the Russian perspective, this projection of hard military power through the three routes serves the basis of Moscow's foreign policy whereby the chances of NATO enlargement are drastically reduced.

Though for Russia the Caucasus range constitutes a natural barrier, Moscow's control over the North Caucasus is in fact deeply intertwined with ethnic, economic, and most of all military developments in the South Caucasus. Control over the North Caucasus also matters as Russia's territorial integrity is essentially built on peace and prosperity in this region. Separatism in the North Caucasus would trickle down to other potentially problematic regions such as the Muslim Volga-Ural regions of Russia. Furthermore, conflicts and instability in the South Caucasus pose a direct threat to Russia's exercise of control over the explosive North Caucasian entities. Ethnic groups such as Lezgins, Azeris, Avars, and Ossetians which live in both regions create a highly volatile security situation (Hedenskog et al., 2018) making it imperative for Russia to control both sides of the Caucasus range. Insecurity in one part affects the other. It can partially explain Russia's pursuit of military domination through the opening of military bases in the South Caucasus.

Yet another geographic dimension of the South Caucasus is that it serves as a corridor connecting the Black and Caspian seas. As a geographic bridge, the region links Eastern Europe to the landlocked Central Asia. Furthermore, the region also serves as a shortest land route between the EU and China—an important component for Beijing which through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seeks shorter and diversified routes to reach Europe. From a longer-term perspective this constitutes a problem for Moscow which has traditionally been intent on maintaining dominance over the Central Asia-South Caucasus corridor. Central Asia has over the past years witnessed an economically and politically assertive China, which undermines fundamental pillars of Russia's power in the landlocked region. One of the aspects is the Central Asian countries' increased ability to diversify its trade ties, investment inflow and, more importantly for our discussion, infrastructure projects. Development of the trans-Caspian connectivity will further limit Central Asia's dependence on northwards infrastructure. China has already supported some critical infrastructure projects in the South Caucasus and in the longer run can play a similar role to what it does in Central Asia. Thus for Russia especially following the changes in the Eurasian connectivity as a result of the war in Ukraine, the South Caucasus is of transcontinental importance as its improving transit capabilities directly impact Russia's position in Central Asia and vice versa.

The opening of the two regions arguably constitutes the biggest threat to Russia's ambitions to deny the neighboring spaces to competitors.

Controlling the South Caucasus' transit potential could be likened to the benefits from controlling the straits of Suez or Hormuz. Command over them allows countries to exert an outsize geopolitical influence. This is especially true because of the war in Ukraine when the transit role of the South Caucasus is likely to grow further because of China's pursuit of diversification of connectivity and the need to secure land connection with the EU in circumvention of Russia. Generally, Beijing has always feared dependence on only a limited number of routes. Multiplication of trade corridors increases China's maneuverability and decreases potential threats to the BRI. Thus Russia is set to lose from China's push for better interregional linkages as it would bring in greater diversification of once geographically isolated regions.

The salience of the South Caucasus' geography was manifested in other ways too when in early 2000s the US initiated a global campaign against terrorism following the attacks of September 11, 2001 on American cities. Afghanistan's location in the heart of Eurasia was denying the US, effectively a sea power, to reach the target at ease and maintain its long-term presence. The support of nearby states was critical and the South Caucasus served as a logistical corridor to keep American and allied forces on the ground in Afghanistan for years ahead after defeating the enemy. The Western military presence in Afghanistan came to an end in 2021 and with that the South Caucasus lost its transit role. The region's relevance in the Western policymaking is set to be redefined further in the light of America's foreign policy shift toward the Indo-Pacific region and Russian invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless there are some basic geopolitical elements which will continue to inform the South Caucasus' general importance for the collective West. Sandwiched between Russia, Iran, and the wider Middle East the region will keep its relevance as a certain buffer zone against Russia. The issue of connectivity too will keep the region within the purview of the Western policymakers. The South Caucasus is essentially the only viable corridor for the West to reach the depths of the Eurasian continent. Related to economy and trade routes, the region is also a space where the two opposing integration visions—EU and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—clash and also compete with Turkish, Iranian, and to a certain extent Chinese integration and infrastructure projects.

Thus, as argued above, geography informs the Russian strategic thinking toward the South Caucasus. It is by far the single biggest factor motivating Moscow's behavior. The Kremlin has not yet published an

official policy document elaborating on its foreign policy and long-term strategic thinking in the South Caucasus. The lack of official papers in many respects has allowed Russia to develop a quite elastic foreign policy. It could resort to the military solution in one case, to diplomacy and the use of prestige in other instances to forestall fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan (though this often failed), or growth of Western influence. Despite the lack of an explicitly stated strategic vision, and because of quite multifaceted methods, Russia's goal has been surprisingly consistent in pursuing assertion of regional leadership against external actors like the collective West, and with pushback against liberal ideas through containing the democratic development of the three South Caucasus countries. To pursue this aim, Moscow supported Abkhazia and South Ossetia, influenced the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by retaining a central role in the negotiation process, partnered with other regional players such as Turkey and pursued the construction of the order of exclusion in the region.

Russia's flexible foreign policy is evident in the fact that while Moscow recognized the independence of separatist Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it has not done so in regard to Nagorno-Karabakh. It does defend Westphalian concepts of state sovereignty and border inviolability in Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, but violates the principles in case of Georgia's separatist territories. This selective pursuit of Westphalian principles increases the Kremlin's maneuverability in responding to arising challenges (Fischer, 2016). The elasticity of the Russian foreign policy allows to adapt to various challenges by building tailored approaches to specific problems, and then weave them into a strategic vision for the entire South Caucasus.

Therefore, Russia's vision of the region is less about producing some sort of imperial resurgence. The region is relatively poor economically. Russian companies, though represented in the control over three countries' some of the critical infrastructure, are nevertheless not a driving force behind Russian foreign policy. Geography on the contrary is. Moscow is more after ensuring military stability in the region which is a prerequisite for its own peaceful domestic development and the preservation of territorial integrity.

Geography also motivated Russia not only for extending its influence over into the South Caucasus, but for establishing the bridge with the wider Middle East. The emerging geopolitical vacuum following America's excesses in Iraq, and the chaos as a result of the Arab Spring,

pulled Russia into the Middle East. The South Caucasus is the only physical region connecting Russia to the territory. This is how the issue of having direct infrastructure links to Iran and Turkey became to play an increasingly larger role in Moscow's foreign policy vision for the South Caucasus.

The South Caucasus is also destined to fall into Russia's geopolitical interests due to geographic proximity of the imperial center and the colony. Technically the South Caucasus was not an imperial possession in the Western sense of the word, but the history of nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows how increasingly distorted the relations between the three South Caucasus states and the imperial center became. All indicated to the region being regarded by Russian imperial or Soviet leaders as a colonial backwater. Again, geography might be a key here. Unlike the countries in the West which built their colonial empires overseas, Russia constructed the empire around its borders. This made it easier for Russia to invade, establish control, and a long-term rule. In comparison, the European empires had to wage military campaign thousands of kilometers away from the metropolis. It is this geographic distance which eventually made a difference when the age of empires ended and colonies had to be freed. Security-wise the Western empires were shielded by enormous distance, Russia was not (Nalbandov, 2016). This perpetually invited Russian military measures, caused fears of potential discontent turning into a revolt. This can explain a particularly high pace of militarization of Russian foreign policy in the South Caucasus since 1990s.

The regions which abutted Russia's heartland thus were "dangerous" lands which without Russian pacifying involvement could create a long-term security threat to Moscow. If the European empires freed themselves of their respective empires relatively easily, Russia could not do it, even if it wanted. The regions such as the unstable South Caucasus are still there. But gradually the measures to stop potential instability evolved into the tools for exerting geopolitical control over the region. Then Moscow itself added to the insecurity in the region by providing support for the separatist regions. Geography pulls Russia back to the South Caucasus. Total detachment from the space potentially could result in troubles for the internal Russia.

Russia and the South Caucasus—Eurasian Outlook and Order-Building

There is an emerging trend in scholarly literature arguing that Russia's influence has generally grown in the last two decades and that in fact it is a global power, but of slightly different kind in comparison with the traditional understanding of this term in the West. The traditional elements which a great power is measured by such as population, army, economy, and elements of soft power matter, and in comparison with China, US, and many of the European countries, Russia significantly lags behind (Stoner, 2021). But critical to understanding Moscow's apparent success is geography and the shift to multipolar world order. There where Russia is located—in depth of Eurasia—external influence is weak and the states are fragile. Take an example of Russia's former Soviet neighbors. All states are smaller, weaker militarily, fragile institutionally (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania being an exception), and are vulnerable to Russian pressure. Staggering geographic distances preclude active Western involvement when Russia makes a major military move. Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 are striking examples of the existing logistical constrains.

Interestingly Russia's push to redraw the neighboring countries' borders as well as its heavy reliance on the military component in formulating the foreign policy coincided with critical geopolitical changes in the world and Russia's evolving position in it. With the shift to the multipolar system Russia before 2022 Western sanctions has been increasingly able to dilute Western sanctions and diplomatic pressure by looking elsewhere (Karaganov, 2020). The pivot to China, wider Asia, and the Middle East served the purpose. It began well before the blowback which followed the annexation of Crimea, but markedly accelerated as a result of it and now after February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has reached the limit.

It is thus no coincidence that Russia waged war with Georgia and Ukraine and by extension against NATO's overblown enlargement threat eastward at the age of the shift from America's unipolar moment and liberal order to the multipolar system. Russian actions signaled that the West no longer held a monopoly over the use of military tools and economic coercion to pursue foreign policy goals (Tsygankov, 2019). It also showed that Russia can blunt Western moves by balancing the pressure with closer economic and political ties with the Eurasian states.

Another factor which empowered Russia's activist foreign policy toward the South Caucasus before 2022 was the perceived shift in Western attention away from eastern Europe and the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region. It allowed Russia to act more freely in its neighborhood as the willingness and capabilities of the US and its European allies to act militarily and through active politics against Russia's great power posturing were visibly declining.

As a reflection of these tectonic global changes, Russia now wants to build a different order in the South Caucasus. In many ways Russian foreign policy toward the region is based on the efforts to promote exclusive peace-building, economic and military initiatives, which leave little room for Western or any other foreign involvement. Russia resists internationalization of the separatist conflicts in the South Caucasus. But Russia is not powerful enough to impose a new order unilaterally. Increasingly Russia looks at the neighbors also pressured by the West and willing to exercise greater influence on neighboring space. This is how cooperation with Iran and especially Turkey gains momentum. Though the three have historical grievances toward each other, they share a similar understanding on the need to construct a regional ownership system in the South Caucasus, the Black Sea (Russia and Turkey), and the Caspian basin (Iran and Russia). We are witnessing Russian and other regional powers' intention at least to replace significant portions of, if not in its entirety, faltering Western multilateral institutions.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war, its causes and results reveal the cracks within the liberal international order and multilateralism (Oskanian, 2021). It might be even argued, the war hastened the decline of Western-led initiatives and widened the gap for alternative, illiberal mechanisms to be deployed in the South Caucasus. For instance, the war showed the inability of the OSCE Minsk Group to effectively implement its status as a key peacemaker in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The operation of the OSCE is too cumbersome and slow to produce effective responses to volatile conditions on the ground.

Other Western-led organizations too distanced themselves from the conflict. NATO stood aloof as the alliance was not part of the conflict and supported the Minsk Group-led conflict-resolution format. The EU and UN were likewise inactive or absent. The Western-led multilateralism, a creation of decades-long tireless work for preventing tensions and facilitating security and economic development, proved ineffective, and one might argue even obsolete.

The South Caucasus is also being regarded by Russia as a part of the already ongoing great power competition (Sadiyev et al., 2021). The idea has been an integral part of Russian thinking even before the concept made its way into the present discourse on international relations in the West. Ever since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus was perceived by Russian policy-makers as an area for Russia–West rivalry. For instance, Moscow and Washington have been opposed on a number of critical issues regarding the future of separatist regions, promotion of infrastructure projects, expansion of liberal norms, and general security architecture (Markedonov & Suchkov, 2020).

For Russia, dominance in what was once the Soviet space is a necessary condition for positioning itself as an independent pole in a multipolar world (Busygina & Filippov, 2020). This however will be difficult to achieve. The diffusion of power away from the West to Asia also means that a far larger number of states are now engaged in the South Caucasus. The era of near-exclusive Russia–West competition in the region has ended. Regional powers such as Iran and Turkey and to a certain extent China disrupt the traditional geopolitical notions. They help Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia diversify their foreign ties. They make inroads into the region's economy and infrastructure. Russia now has to deal with a much wider array of actors rather than a traditional competitor—the West. Thence, Russia will have to adjust to the reality where it is unable to manage the region unilaterally. Excluding competitors will be difficult, but managing which those rivalry powers could be is more realistic—the debate which ties into the divisions between mobilizers and expansionists. The former category is more realistic in assessing Russia's geopolitical power and claims that building an exclusive order in Russia's neighborhood would prove futile (Tsygankov, 2019).

For Russia the South Caucasus as a whole is now tightly interconnected geo-economically with the Middle East. Azerbaijan, for example, with its oil and gas resources is tied to Turkey, which is successfully positioning itself as an energy hub. For Azerbaijan, and the wider Caspian basin, this means that the change in energy routes, unstable alliances, and persistent regional conflicts in the Middle East now have a direct bearing on the country and the region overall. The connection is also geopolitical. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war showed Turkey and Iran develop their strategic vision on the conflict in relation to processes in the Middle East and the Mediterranean (Has et al., 2020).

Russia's Order-Building in the South Caucasus

Beyond geography Moscow's objectives in the South Caucasus are primarily driven by guaranteeing security for the volatile North Caucasus region and projecting powers into the wider Middle East region. Peace in the South Caucasus itself, however, is hardly a critical objective in Russia's strategic calculus. In fact, Russia is less interested in the long-term peace in the region as it would open up the space to other regional players or external actors. Diversification of foreign or economic ties would dilute the advantages Russia has historically held over the South Caucasus. The latter's relative geographic isolation served Russia's strategic interests. Reversing it would be tantamount to diminution of Moscow's ability to deny the region to others.

It can be even argued that Russian actions in the region in fact engender further instability. The case of separatist regions is revealing as Russia through military and economic support actually weakens the region's states. Georgia has been unstable because of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The situation with Nagorno-Karabakh is different, but since the stationing of Russian forces in the territory in 2020, it will constantly serve as a distraction for the authorities in Baku. And considering the experience of other separatist regions, Russian troops are unlikely to leave Nagorno-Karabakh soon, which means that there will be constant discomfort for Azerbaijan, which will be hampering Baku's ability to develop a more independent foreign policy.

In the South Caucasus Russia is also driven by ideational factors. Russia is status-conscious. It has worked hard to be recognized as a regional hegemon across what once constituted the Soviet Union. The success in attaining the status in the South Caucasus falls within the overall strategic vision Russia holds for its place in the changing world order. Pursuit of great power status cannot be achieved without hegemony in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, or the Black Sea region. Other ideational determinants are the pursuit of regional spheres of influence and the construction of an order of exclusion. It cuts against both liberalism, separate Western actors capable of limiting Russian influence, and most of all fits into the gradual shift toward the multipolar world order.

But Russia is also conscious of limits to its power, realizing that seeking an outright dominance over the South Caucasus will prove a futile endeavor. Therefore it is more willing to position itself as a hegemon. Similar to how the US built an order after the WWII where it was first in

a hierarchy and its primacy was not too onerous, Russia too believes the mechanism will ensure its vital interests in the South Caucasus. Russia has all the attributes to pursue hegemony, i.e. order of exclusion and a sphere of influence concept (Prys, 2008). Military and economic superiority over the South Caucasus states and more importantly Turkey and Iran guarantees the integrity of its position (Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990). Superiority however cannot guarantee the total consent from smaller or regional powers. Willingness to accept someone's hegemony is also contingent upon respect, prestige, and the ability to use the military power when only absolutely necessary and in right quantity. There are also questions of how stable and reliable the hegemon is and whether he is interested in a long-term solution to conflicts. Therefore, a hegemon should be also able to provide region-wide ideas which are more or less acceptable to all participants.

As stated, hegemony in a region involves constructing an order exclusion. To guarantee the endurance of its position, however, a hegemon should also propose integration projects and loose institutions. Russia in comparison with other regional actors is the power which is best suited to be accepted as a hegemon because of deep historical, economic, and cultural ties with the South Caucasus. But the acceptance does not mean acquiescence from smaller actors or regional powers. Extreme hegemony (Destradi, 2010) bordering on the willingness to pursue total domination will generate blowback. Therefore, Russia is likely to pursue an order-building where Turkey and Iran too will be present.

The three avow the need to preclude external, non-regional powers and ultimately construct a new order from the Black Sea to the Caspian basin. The critical element here is the resuscitation of the regional ownership concept when regional powers tend to squeeze out non-regional actors. It goes hand in hand with the idea of re-emergence of spheres of influence, which in turn relates to the multipolar system where large powers seek hegemony over strategic neighborhoods.

Though Russia has been a staunch supporter of the concept as it would guarantee its special place in the South Caucasus affairs, it has also been mindful of existing constraints on its power. Thence the willingness to approach the South Caucasus order building more realistically. The latter means seeing the South Caucasus not as an exclusive Russian sphere of influence, but rather as a space where it would have both to cooperate and compete with other regional powers. It still means that Russia seeks hegemony, but it understands that in a highly globalized world managing

the region similar to how the Russian Empire or later the Soviets did is unrealistic.

From Moscow's perspective the new order in the South Caucasus must revolve around Russia. Hegemony might be a loosely-built system not organized or regulated by strict rules. Iran, Turkey, and Russia will be cooperating out of the need to limit the collective West's ability to penetrate the region. In this way Russia will try to build a sort of a hierarchical system where it holds the foremost place, anticipates occasional challenges from Turkey and Iran, which however will not be undermining Moscow's set of core interests.

The new order in the South Caucasus will be based on a new type of bilateral relations, which casts away the notion of official alliances and instead embraces the idea of autonomy and equidistance. Multipolar world requires multi-vector foreign policy, which negates the need for geopolitical fixations.

Beyond the "regional ownership" and "sphere of influence" ideas, the operation of a new order in the South Caucasus could also involve initiatives on infrastructure improvement. Spearheaded by Russia the region-wide development of railways and roads could serve as a powerful method to underline its hegemonic position. It is also about the need to heed what the smaller actors want. Without cooperation and consent from them the order cannot be fully operational.

This is what Russia proposed following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war. The restoration of the Soviet-era railway routes (Armenpress 2020) would facilitate connectivity in the region by linking the Russian mainland to Armenia and from there with Turkey and Iran.

Ever since the end of the Soviet era, Georgia was a major route for Armenia to reach Russia via the Georgian Military Highway. Due to it being notoriously unreliable because of difficult climate conditions the successive Armenian governments have put an emphasis on finding new routes. The suggested railway route through Azerbaijan, or some 900 km more, would be less profitable economically for Armenian and Russian businesses.

For Georgia potential economic gains from the railway revival are not clear though. Surely, alternative transit routes potentially established by Azerbaijan and Armenia would naturally bite at Tbilisi's transit revenues. To hold the initiative, however, Georgia might entertain the idea of unblocking the dysfunctional Abkhazia railway (which has been considered as an economically unviable project), or try to compete with building

new infrastructure and developing the existing one. In a way, what Tbilisi lacked all this years has been competition. Often transit through Georgia was seen as a permanent fixture leading to a rather slow development of transit capabilities. The emerging alternatives might change this lack of activism and serve as a necessary momentum for new infrastructure.

So far these plans failed to materialize and are likely to remain unfulfilled. The reasons are multiple. Still geopolitical interests could be far outweighing the real need to improve region-wide connectivity. For Russia the military thinking remains a powerful motivator in formulating its approach toward the South Caucasus. Moscow has always aspired to penetrate the South Caucasus, limit the blocking power of the Caucasus mountains, and establish a direct land link to Iran and Turkey. This, potentially, will be expanding Russia's access to the wider Middle East and allow it to shape a long-term vision of its position.

Decline of Russia's Prestige

As argued above, Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus is also driven by the country's pursuit of great power status. It is not just about nurturing the status for internal consumption. Upholding great power status in the South Caucasus is critical to Russia as it allows to act in opposition to the liberal world order (Clunan, 2019). The latter presupposes the prevention of the emergence of the concept of spheres of influence, the very notion Russia eagerly seeks to resuscitate by acting as it sees fit its interests. Though it has also been suggested that *derzhavnost*, or the quest for superpower (great power) status, is more of a superficial creation which often does not find acceptance within Russia's large population groups (Frye, 2021), its pursuit is nevertheless critical to understanding Russian thinking. The conception is in fact so important that the idea was even included into the country's National Security Strategies of 2009 and 2016.

But great power status is a much subtler phenomenon than just an outright domination. Based on loyalty among the neighbors and it is nurtured by prestige. The neighbors are loyal because the great power manages relations between coercion and charm. Failure in one of the two components is fraught with the collapse of the entire geopolitical edifice the great power built.

The decline in Russia's prestige accelerated since early 1990s. Difficult economic situation in Russia and the country's demoralized military

power caused it, but there are also political moves Moscow made which precipitated the decline in Russia's prestige in the South Caucasus. Georgia witnessed Russia supporting Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists. Azerbaijan regarded Moscow's position and tacit support for Armenia following the first Nagorno-Karabakh war with suspicion. Mistrust was even prevalent in Armenia's political class too because of the potentially dangerous intensification of Azerbaijani-Russian ties, which proved correct during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Distrust toward Russia grew even stronger in 2000s when Moscow began actively pushing for the resurrection of its influence in the region. This is when contradictions in Russia's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus grew more striking. Active peacekeeping went hand in hand with the support for separatist movements. This tailored geopolitical approach to each South Caucasus state (Sadiyev et al., 2021) was based on realism helping to navigate and respond to rising challenges but was fraught with causing wider fractures in Russia's prestige. The war with Georgia and persistent ambivalence regarding allied obligations toward Armenia harmed Russia's ability to dominate by prestige.

Moscow's policy of freezing the separatist conflicts also proved problematic as no concrete mechanism for resolution was offered. Uncertainty and vagueness in Russian policies pushed Georgia and Azerbaijan to seek alternatives by allying with other powers. This in turn caused "internationalization" of the conflicts as the West and especially Turkey began increasing their influence. Moscow's privileged position as a major actor in providing various conflict-resolution mechanisms was shaken (Markedonov, 2018). As a result, to maintain its primacy Russia's reliance on the military instruments accelerated.

Russia has thus failed to develop a comprehensive model for the South Caucasus. It sought and failed to position itself as a regional stabilizer. Moscow also does not offer an alternative developmental path to the South Caucasus countries—its integrationist initiatives such as EEU are not economically promising. A theme which drives Moscow is an open anti-Westernism, anti-liberalism, and the support for an illiberal state governance system.

To correct the situation, since early 2000s Russia began to rely upon military tools. All this indicates that the Russian leadership holds rather blunt tools for achieving the country's primary goals. This constrains the ability to project Russian power more effectively and over the longer term (Frye, 2021).

The bluntness of the Russian foreign policy underlines its continuous inability to find a balance between cooperation and domination, which serves as a significant blockage for regional integration among the former Soviet nations. Total lack of trust now governs Russia-South Caucasus relations. Russia multilateralism does not work as a unifier. To salvage the situation and mitigate the effects of its military overbearance Moscow has increasingly relied on transactional approach in bilateral ties (Busygina & Filippov, 2020). The approach means that Moscow does not differentiate between official allies and non-allies. Realism drives Russian calculus and this explained, much to Armenia's chagrin, Russia's close ties with Azerbaijan and generally Yerevan's failure to get larger support as a CSTO member. This was evident during and after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war when realism helped Moscow to reap as many benefits as possible, but in the longer term undermined its multilateral institutions.

Russia is too geopolitical about the South Caucasus. It is rarely interested in the societal changes and often casts political preferences of the local elites which go against Russian interests as instigated by the West. This allows Moscow to mobilize military and economic resources to influence the region, but it also shows the limits of Russian foreign policy thinking, its propensity to cast the region as a sphere of competition with the collective West. This great power rivalry model ignores paying attention to critical generational changes, evolving political preferences among the local elites, the growing diversification of foreign ties of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. As a result, Moscow fails to propose a single unifying vision which would suit the local actors. In nearly all the concepts such as the fight against separatism, inviolability of UN-recognized state borders, and support for the Westphalian principles, which could serve as binding mechanisms for South Caucasus states, Russia itself can be accused of having inadvertently violating or purposefully undermining them in relation to the region's states or other neighbors (Moldova and Ukraine). The decline of Russia's prestige is also observable even among the semi-independent actors of Moscow's "separatist empire" which stretches from the Black Sea to the Caspian basin.

The Crisis of "Separatist Empire"

Since the decline of its influence following the end of the Soviet empire Moscow has consistently used latent or emerging conflict zones in its immediate neighborhood for maintaining its geopolitical influence.

Competition with the collective West over the borderlands—i.e., the space roughly stretching from the Baltic states to the Black and Caspian seas—involved an active fomenting or effective use of ethnic conflicts in Moldova, Ukraine, and the three South Caucasus states.

The policy overall has paid off as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine failed to secure the NATO/EU membership. The collective West has also seemed hesitant not to incur Russia's military moves. This way, Moscow has effectively obtained an unofficial veto on NATO/EU eastward expansion.

For Russia the approach, however, workable in practice, nevertheless has posed many unsolved long-term problems. First is the financing of the entities amid Russia's unstable economic situation. Secondly, Moscow has largely failed to muster support for wider recognition of the separatist territories even among its closest allies within EEU and CSTO. Moscow also sees that in the longer run it failed to change the pro-Western course of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Last, but not least, there is little evidence suggesting that Moscow has a viable long-term strategy for political or economic development of its sprawling "separatist empire" (Avdaliani, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d).

Moscow's approach toward the conflicts have been shaped by relations with the West, regional powers such as Turkey and Iran, Russia's re-emerging imperial vision, pure military-strategic calculations, and most of all grievances in bilateral ties with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (de Waal & von Twickel, 2020). It is also true that the strategy we see now employed by Russia has not been so well designed from the very beginning. Rather it was a slow process with first signs emerging in the 1990s and early 2000s, and finally molded by 2022 just before the invasion of Ukraine in February that year when Moscow recognized the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk separatist republics. By this time, the purposeful use and management of conflict zones across the post-Soviet space transformed into a well-played strategy applicable to different countries and became an integral part of Russia's grand strategy toward its immediate neighborhood.

This Russian strategy is a reaction to the ongoing geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West over the territories stretching from the Baltic to Caspian sea. The borderlands has been the space where the active phase of EU and NATO enlargement has been taking place. This is also the area where Moscow was counterattacking by introducing the EEU as an economic measure roughly corresponding to the borders of the

Soviet Union. Another measure was CSTO as a military tool to potentially prevent NATO. The military-economic countermeasures did not necessarily stall the "fleeing" of Russia's neighbors to the West. It was the use of the separatist conflicts that turned out to be far more effective tool.

Russia has been religious about maintaining the buffer states between itself and the enlarged NATO and to a lesser degree the EU. Resources were dedicated to that end, but it was also well apparent to the political elite in Moscow that the country's low economic attractiveness, the South Caucasus states or Ukraine and Moldova would in the end choose the West. With Moldova and Ukraine, these countries' pro-Western stance was only a matter of time because of geography and shared history with historical Central Europe.

As argued above, to forestall Western economic and military influence and preclude Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova from joining the EU/NATO the use of territorial conflicts turned out to be a rather effective foreign policy tool for the Kremlin. Though successful, Russia now faces a different problem. Separatist territories provide little economic benefits and create additional financial demands. The eastern Ukraine presents a case study. Arguably the most advanced in Russia's "separatist empire," Donbas nevertheless faces economic troubles as it is now solely dependent on Russia and especially because of wide-ranging sanctions imposed on Moscow as a result of the invasion of Ukraine.

Another problem is that local elites are increasingly unwilling to submit to all Russian demands. For example, Abkhazia has for years refused to allow selling lands to Russian citizens and businesses. While this arrangement is unlikely to hold for a long time, Abkhaz resistance indicates that disenchantment with the Moscow's vision for separatist entities is there and might be growing. Though limited in scope, separatist entities can at times play an independent game too. In that sense Abkhaz politicians are famous for often refusing to follow Russian objectives. Moreover, increasingly the "separatist empire" becomes difficult to control. In early 1990s it consisted only of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria—not a burdensome endeavor considering that Georgia and Moldova were poor and internally divided countries unable to muster enough of foreign support. By early 2022, however, Russia's purview grew exponentially. With peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh and February 2022 recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk entities Russia has to simultaneously manage geographically diverse regions all of which demand economic and military support (Avdaliani, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d).

Russia also failed to garner international recognition for the states it recognized (Abkhazia and South Ossetia are only recognized by Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru). Nor is there any credible evidence indicating this might be changing in the near future. Quite the opposite, the recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk by Moscow could even further degrade the chances of, for example, Abkhazia and South Ossetia for wider international support. Few, if any, would be ready to recognize so many newly-forged separatist states simultaneously. Belief in Russian intention of defending ethnic minorities in Georgia no longer serves as an argument in the Western analytical community.

The long-term battle with the West, lack of internal economic stability, and the necessity to support separatist groups, places enormous strain on Moscow's capacity to oversee and, more importantly, establish a long-term policy for dependent regions. Indeed, as the effect from Western sanctions on Moscow intensifies, Russia's economy and industrial growth will lag behind, negatively harming people who rely on it. EEU states and, in particular, separatist entities fall within this category. Parts of the inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will leave in search of better medical, economic, and educational opportunities. The tendency has been seen over the past decade, but it is now expected to become more widespread.

Moreover, what is more troublesome is the growing unwillingness of the Russian political elite to distribute financial support to the separatist entities as freely as it was years ago. The trend will get even more noticeable as the economic troubles in Russia set in. The discontent Moscow has long been expressing is rooted in the increasingly predatory nature of the separatist regimes. As time goes, the financial aid from Moscow is growingly contingent upon, for example, Abkhazian leaders meeting Russian demands regarding the sale of lands and electricity system to Russian nationals (Ekho Kavkaza, 2020).

Russia's strategy of precluding Western expansion has little long-term capacity. While it is true that the EU/NATO expansion has been lagging in the wider Black Sea region and the South Caucasus, Moscow was unable to undermine the pro-Western direction of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Moreover, Western unity in responding to the Russian invasion of Ukraine proves the support for NATO/EU aspirant countries will likely remain firm. Indeed, as the invasion began the EU's willingness to have Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine onboard have only increased.

The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh

Nagorno-Karabakh is a particularly insightful case for the study of Moscow's policies toward the separatist conflicts along its neighbors. This is one of those rare cases when Russia enjoyed close relations with both sides of the conflict. Moscow has been comfortable with Azerbaijan which has also benefited from a transactional approach in relations with its northern neighbor. The case of Azerbaijan-Russian relations is also insightful because of Baku's refusal to participate in any multilateral cooperation involving Armenia, thus putting a considerable limit on the extent to which Azerbaijan was interested in Russia-led CSTO and EEU (Remler, 2020).

The simmering Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, in which Russia was never militarily involved, but was indirectly in Moscow's orbit, is now under the Kremlin's direct geopolitical influence. Almost 2000 peacekeepers deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh signals toward the existing pattern of Moscow's geopolitical approach to the territorial conflicts discussed above—it uses separatist conflicts to advance its interests thereby denying outside powers a room for maneuver.

Though Russia has had a significant experience in managing and using the separatist conflicts for its gains, Azerbaijan's victory put Moscow in a difficult position. The long-established approach of maintaining a military status quo between the two rivals could no longer be maintained. And the challenge was not only Baku's superior military posture, but the re-emergence of Turkey. The former imperial power which had long controlled large parts of the South Caucasus in pre-nineteenth century period was effectively shielded from expanding into the region by the Russian empire in early nineteenth century. Ever since, a nearly two-century-long period of exclusive Russian control over the region was established.

This moment has long been in preparation. Azerbaijan was far more able financially to increase its military power with arms purchases from Turkey and Israel. It also successfully isolated Armenia's and Nagorno-Karabakh leaders' diplomatic attempts to gain international recognition. In hindsight, the 2016 four-day "April War" was repetition of what Baku was preparing for. Armenia saw it had difficulty in containing the Azerbaijani attack. Some territories under Nagorno-Karabakh control passed into Baku's control leading the Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan to replace top military leadership. Little however changed in Armenia's

overall approach as the economic weakness coupled with internal political challenges distracted the public from looming problems in the East. For the present discussion what is critical here is that Russia once again managed to assert itself as the sole arbiter when its negotiating efforts led to a ceasefire between the warring sides.

Though successful on a diplomatic front and effectively able to sell large amounts of arms to Azerbaijan, Moscow also was increasingly worried that the status quo seemed unsustainable. Its ability to influence Azerbaijan was shrinking, while Turkish influence was growing. As a manifestation of diminishing Russian influence, in the 2020 war, Russian attempts at brokering a ceasefire were ignored several times.

Russia needed weeks to bring about some kind of solution. Though many believed the reason behind Russia's ambiguous position was an antipathy toward Nikol Pashinyan and its initially openly pro-Western when he came to power in 2018, but the real reason could have been that the Kremlin initially failed to persuade Azerbaijan. Alternatively, there could have been a purely geopolitical thinking from the Russian side. Moscow simply allowed Azerbaijan to take as much territory as was needed to effectively force Yerevan into allowing Russian troops into Nagorno-Karabakh—a scenario which had long been resisted not only by Baku, but by Armenia.

Russia stopped the war just before the fall of the core of Nagorno-Karabakh. This was a red line beyond which Moscow's interests would have incurred a lasting damage to Russia's reputation in the region as a guarantor of security and status quo. Moreover, the conquest of all Nagorno-Karabakh would strip Moscow of a critical element in its ability to influence and manipulate Armenia and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan with full control over its territory would have been less pliable to Moscow undermining the latter's ability to persuade Armenia in the need to rely on Russian troops.

Moscow's approach to Nagorno-Karabakh is a part of the overall Russian strategy toward the unrecognized territories we discussed above. But there was also the Turkish factor when the Kremlin was making decisions over Nagorno-Karabakh. Ankara's diplomatic and most of all military support for Baku has been biting at the Russian position in the region. Never before since early nineteenth century has Russia witnessed such a sustained challenge to its position in the South Caucasus. Even NATO's half-hearted attempts to take Georgia onboard were not as problematic when Russia resolved the matter by a quick invasion in

2008. Here, however, Turkish approach is more of a long-term nature. NATO member Turkey's re-emergence as a direct military player in the South Caucasus is significant. Though scholarly discussions on the results of the war vary (Avdaliani, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d; Losh, 2020), it is Azerbaijan supported by Turkey that won and Russia's ally—Armenia—lost.

The 5-year term of Russian peace-keeping mission in the region is also an uncomfortable reality for the Armenians in Karabakh. As the stipulation says, both Armenia and Azerbaijan have a right to stop the extension of the agreement. Surely, Russia will work hard to make sure neither Baku nor Yerevan would want to have Russian peacekeepers return home. It is also clear that Yerevan is unlikely to be a side, which would support the removal of Russian troops. Baku, on the contrary, could pedal this scenario. This would create problems for Russia and its geopolitical interests in the region. After all, with the euphoria around the war gains slowly dissipating, Azerbaijan's political elites and the general public will start to realize that the conflict has not been resolved and that Yerevan still has a direct line to the truncated Nagorno-Karabakh territory. Besides the very perspective of Russian troops' long-term presence on Azerbaijani soil undoubtedly would be an uncomfortable reality for the country's politicians.

Russia's decision to station its forces in Nagorno-Karabakh is in a way an escalation of those options which were traditionally at the hands of Russian politicians since the breakup of the Soviet Union. As a dominant power, Russia ideally should have navigated the disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan without entering the fighting. Acting as a power, which dissuades from war based on its prestige, rather than acts out of necessity, is what constitutes the great power position (Broers, 2020). The Russian decision, however, signals if not an outright decline, then a limit of options, escalation of commitments. And Turkey is instrumental here. After all, if not the dispatch of forces, Ankara influence in Baku would have grown even further.

The decision to send the peacekeepers also means an increasing reliance on the military options in Moscow's policy toward the South Caucasus. Ultimately every step made in the region by the Kremlin since the war with Georgia in 2008 and ending with the peacekeepers move in Nagorno-Karabakh falls within a policy of solidifying Russian military and political influence in the region. Fear of losing a military grip on the South Caucasus and the concomitant growth of Western or Turkish

influence was a single biggest motivator behind Russian moves. But, as argued above, this heavy reliance on the military component also signals the lack of options on Russia's behalf.

The war also triggered what Russia feared the most—internationalization of the conflict. Turkey served as a disruptor and though it has been suggested that Russia gained most from the November tripartite agreement, the inability to address Turkey's role is also seen in the fact that the Ankara has not been mentioned in the deal. This creates a significant loophole will be increasingly able to use by setting up its own military presence on Azerbaijani soil. Cooperation with Russia will take place but as long as it fits into Turkish interests. Otherwise, Moscow's military position could be challenged through various means considering how intensive Turkey's relations with Azerbaijan are. Each negative trend in Moscow-Baku relations would be an opportunity for Ankara to use.

In the case of Russia, the outcome of the war indicates Moscow's increasing pragmatism in the region and ability to make careful calculations based on securing key interests and readiness to compromise at least on second-tier issues, where its key interests are not directly at stake. Pragmatism also drives the Russian leadership to acknowledge that growing Turkish influence in the South Caucasus is inevitable. The power vacuum created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the growing diversification of South Caucasus states' foreign relations invited other players into the region. To balance the Turkish presence Russia will relying on other regional players such as Iran (Young, 2020).

Resentment in Baku toward the Russian military presence, which is unwilling to leave Nagorno-Karabakh, is slowly emerging. As the cases of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova show, Russian presence was either negatively viewed from the very beginning or turned into such over a certain period of time. Azerbaijan is unlikely to be a different case and politicians in Baku prepare for this possibility. As the desire to avoid prolongation of the mission will be running high in Baku, Moscow might have to make some concessions to Baku as well as to use coercive measures to secure Azerbaijani leadership's agreement. One of the scenario could be of Russian peacekeepers legally forced preparing to leave with Moscow purposefully tilting the military balance of power in favor of Armenia by supplying it with high-tech weaponry (Avdaliani, 2021).

It will be difficult for Azerbaijan and Russia to navigate the bilateral ties as the Russian peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh is likely to remain beyond 2025. Other separatist conflicts in the South Caucasus

and elsewhere along Russian borders showed that Russian peacekeepers tend not to leave the territory after deployment. Purposeful instigation of insecurity on the ground serves as a constant reminder for the host country not to force Russians out. Decision to do so, however, will result in separatists gaining military hardware to resist the central government. This happened in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and could happen in Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku also fears the large-scale "passportisation" of Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh and the spread of Russian language. Defending Russian citizens i.e. Russian speakers has been a consistent measure used by Moscow to invoke the need to interfere into Georgia's two regions (Rácz, 2021).

A definite downward trajectory in Azerbaijan-Russian relations still could be avoided. Both states continue to favor the transactional method in bilateral ties. Personal relations between the leaders of the two states too provide a basis for smoother cooperation. In February 2022 the two countries signed an agreement on expanded cooperation in nearly every sphere of state-to-state ties. It surprised many. Azerbaijan, seen as ditching its successful multi-vector foreign policy following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, has effectively returned to the normalcy.

Azerbaijan and Russia have not been enemies, nor even silent rivals—the fact that provided the ties with a momentum leading to the expanded coordination in foreign and economic policies as stipulated in the February agreement.

The agreement once again points to Azerbaijan's flexible foreign policy. Pressuring Russia to leave Nagorno-Karabakh in 2025 would be futile and most of all dangerous militarily. But what is critically important is to sooth Moscow's grievances and lessen the potential dangers emanating from the north. Azerbaijan's calculus is also driven by Eurasia-wide geopolitical shifts when Russia is making major military moves whether it is in Central Asia (as the case with unrest in Kazakhstan and the subsequent dispatch of CSTO troops in early 2022 showed), Ukraine, or earlier in Georgia and Syria. Moreover, the West has been notably absent from active diplomatic and military positioning in the wider Black Sea region. As Moscow faces no serious military pushback the balance of power on the ground shows the need for Azerbaijan to heed Russia's major security concerns in the region (Avdaliani, 2022).

Russian peacekeepers providing security and Moscow spearheading peace talks make the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict a litmus test of how successful "illiberal peacebuilding" could be (Lewis et al., 2018; Ohanyan,

2021). The model could be used for other conflicts in Eurasia. Its potential success will cut at liberal practices of peace-building. Western norms will be further undermined, while the militarized solution to territorial stalemates could gain momentum. Illiberal peace-building is flexible, it can suit different nature of actors and complexity of conflict.

However illiberal norms have deficiencies too. Constructing a long-term peace requires genuine political willingness, prestige, and a record of untarnished leadership. When Russia negotiated a ceasefire agreement in November 2020 many were optimistic this could lead to a revival of Soviet-era transportation links. Ensuing economic cooperation would potentially decrease tensions and ultimately lead to sustainable peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia's illiberal peace-building methods, however, fail to produce real security, largely because the Kremlin has no long-term interest in peace. The geopolitical component of Russian efforts creates unfavorable conditions for peace-building and serves as a fertile ground for continual skirmishes along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, which kill and wound soldiers on both sides, prevailing harsh rhetoric prevails and ensuing limited space for diplomatic solutions.

The near-permanent tensions between the two countries suit Russia's interests. Managed tensions make Moscow the winner as both sides have to look for the Kremlin's benevolence. For instance, unable to resist the Azerbaijani army, the Armenian government is now seriously considering the extension of Russian military activities along the entire Armenia-Azerbaijan border. There are already reports on Russian soldiers working on some sections of the border.

Ultimately various territories, separatist entities, along the Russian borders, represented a suitable tool for exerting Russian influence on the neighboring states. Despite serving this similar bottom line geopolitical goal as an effective obstruction for the West to penetrate into what formerly constituted the Soviet space, there are crucial differences how the Russian political mind perceives Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Gagauzia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Donbas, and Crimea. They differ in importance as most are not perceived by Moscow as an integral part of the Russian sphere of influence (Toal, 2017). They are close to Russia in as much as they allow to reach concrete geopolitical goals, but most of these spaces failed to take a place as high as the Crimea, which has been integral to the Russian historical and geopolitical thinking—thence Moscow's drastically different set of policies toward the peninsula than what has been the case with the statelets in Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan. In

Donbas, the space is closer to the Russian thinking than other separatist spaces, but it too nevertheless failed to be as critical as Crimea. The latter is integral to Russian history and therefore occupy a special place, thus always likely to trigger more direct and powerful Russian military and economic response in case of need.

But even among Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Gagauzia, and Nagorno-Karabakh there are differences in the way they are perceived by the Russian political elites. Some are closer than others. Geography might be a reason. Those which neighbor Russia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) have experienced first-hand contact with their patron, and therefore could hope for closer connections with Moscow than the distanced Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria. But even then, there is a gradation among those which neighbor Russia. For the Russian political mindset, Abkhazia has been dearer than South Ossetia, and here it is not about economic potential (though it too plays an important role). Too many historical experiences connect Russia to Abkhazia, which make it difficult for Moscow not to pay more political attention to Sokhumi than to Tskhinvali. The war experience is perhaps the strongest bond and Abkhazia in the Russian mind is associated with the struggle against Tbilisi and the various levels of military support the territory was receiving from Moscow.

As seen, the war can be a strong bond allowing a territory to earn promotion not only up the ladder of geopolitical importance, but to be elevated in the Russian political mindset. The 2008 war between Russia and Georgia promoted South Ossetia within Russia's political thinking and created a historical bond, which will be difficult for the Russian political elites to abjure in the future.

But Russian decision to intervene into Georgia, twice invade Ukraine and dispatch a peacekeeping force in Nagorno-Karabakh helped harden attitudes in these states toward Russia. Military component also constrains Russia's ability to influence internal political processes in those states. Pro-Russian political stance is being increasingly regarded as anathema to the politicians seeking high governmental positions. This means that pro-Russian leaders are unlikely to emerge in Ukraine, Georgia and likewise in Azerbaijan too. Russian military moves also cause changes in the political classes of the neighboring states. They become more unified in their vision, more hardened toward Russia with a greater level of nationalism, and also less hesitant to seek alternative foreign policy options.

Another problem is that Russia's inability or rather purposeful policy of maintaining constant pressure through low-level military moves (for

instance, kidnappings of locals along contact line in South Ossetia) as well as intermittent violence in eastern Ukraine and occasional military operations near Ukraine's borders serve as constant reminders to the political elites and populations of the concerned states of Russia's malign activities.

The regions are disparate geographically, ethnically diverse, and having different economic potential. Nearly all territories are characterized by simmering instability. Even there where the war took place in distant 1990s, the effects of the conflict are still felt, especially as hundreds of thousands of displaced are searching for ways to return home. Concomitant processes of high-level crime, kidnappings, and corruption further complicate Russian efforts. Even dependence on Russian subventions creates a fertile ground for deception and fraud among local elites in the separatist entities.

Looking at Russia's policies toward the separatist regions, it is now become clear that with the invasion of Ukraine Russia switched to an imperial agenda. Before Moscow was more concerned with pursuing its genuine interests, but only that geography and ethnic composition of the territories on both sides of the South Caucasus frontier propelled Russia to build a foreign policy aimed at the exclusion of other powers, i.e. limiting the penetration into the region by third powers. This at times gave Russia's policies a distinctly imperialist touch—the use of the separatist conflicts to increase its geopolitical clout. As the case of sending a peacekeeping mission to Nagorno-Karabakh showed, Russia views the conflicts in its neighborhood as a potential to advance its interests, maximize gains and keep foreign powers at bay.

The invasion of Ukraine changes the very fabric of Russia's position in the region. Moscow has now openly shifted toward building a territorial empire. Repercussions will wide-ranging. It is also clear that pragmatism Putin's foreign policy was characterized with before 2022 is now gone. The war in Ukraine shows that those limited military goals that Russia pursued in Georgia, Syria, or Ukraine in 2014–2015 are now substituted with an openly imperial agenda. To be sure, Russia has never fully abandoned its former imperial thinking. This was well evident in state-to-state relations with the neighboring countries. But its policies seemed to many just as a relic of the past—a process similar to what other former empires went through, a transitory period with bouts of imperial excesses, but nevertheless declining will to position itself as an imperial power.

The invasion of Ukraine and openly stated military goals of establishing military control over large swathes of the country's eastern and southern

parts have finally pushed Russia to re-claim its imperial position. This will have a tremendous impact on the way Moscow behaves in the South Caucasus. Anti-Russian attitudes will only grow, albeit the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia will remain short from openly challenging Moscow. Military reprisals could be as devastating as in Ukraine. This also means that Russia's strength in the region will solely be dependent on the military element. It has been so for some time even before the invasion of Ukraine, but now could be even more palpable.

The lack of soft power will complicate, but not endanger Russia's position. What could undermine its position is the defeat in Ukraine and the coming change of top political leadership in Russia. Another critical element in weakening Moscow's grip over the South Caucasus is the re-invigorated West. It has shown its elasticity in addressing Russia's military campaign by providing both military and economic support for Ukraine. It is now obvious the West-Russia competition is now turned into an open rivalry and the borderlands zone is again in the spotlight. The South Caucasus is an integral part of this geographic area and the West is likely to try to attain a bigger position despite recent setbacks which we discussed in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Final Thoughts

Thus geography drives Moscow's economic, military, ethnic, and political views in the South Caucasus. But these very factors also complicate Russia position. The Kremlin has to exert direct influence on each of the region's three states. Failure to do so could produce a domino effect and have further repercussions for Russia in such regions as the North Caucasus, separatist entities in Ukraine and Moldova.

To exert an effective control over the South Caucasus an ideal scenario for Moscow would have been a minimum number of military bases, and the influence mostly based on economic tools and soft power elements. However, Russia's relatively weak economic position since the end of the Soviet Union has stripped Moscow of these vital sources of geopolitical and geo-economic influence. This explains why Russia has been especially active in the region through a steady military build-up.

It is difficult to build a clear picture of what Russian influence would look like in the next decade, but several observations nevertheless can be made. Firstly, Russia's reliance on the military component in formulating its foreign policy is likely to grow. While this allows Moscow to have

a greater impact and expect greater obedience from the South Caucasus countries in such grand strategic visions as relations with the West or even involvement of regional powers—Iran and Turkey, the emphasis on the military element will increasingly betray numerous weaknesses.

Military presence in the three South Caucasus states creates constant pressure points for Russia to solve. Among the challenges is not so much military threats, but rather troubles of upholding a positive image in the region. This is being increasingly difficult to make. The troops presence which is portrayed as a source of regional stability is being growingly regarded as a tool of projecting Russia's geopolitical influence. Even in the case of Azerbaijan which has traditionally enjoyed good relations with Russia, continuing to do so will prove extremely difficult. The Russian military presence established in Nagorno-Karabakh will be driving a wedge between Baku and Moscow.

Thus Russia faces a two-way road: enjoying its geopolitical power in the region in the short term, and in the longer-term risking reviving animosity toward Moscow in Baku and Yerevan. To be sure, negative sentiments toward Russia were always present in both capitals, but now it will grow beyond the political class and trickle down other segments of the population.

Russian move to place peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh expands Moscow's unofficial "separatist" empire. And though the motives differed from similar moves in Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh is now firmly within Russian orbit of influence. Just as in the case of other separatist regions, Russian presence allows Moscow to influence the host country. With Armenia traditionally being excessively dependent on Moscow, the peacekeeper move now puts pressure on Azerbaijan—the country where Moscow's influence has been less salient than.

Through the dispatch of the troops in Nagorno-Karabakh Russia effectively managed to gain monopoly on the only remaining aspect Armenia's foreign policy where it had little or no direct influence. Always subject to nationalist sentiments in Yerevan, Armenian stance toward Nagorno-Karabakh was difficult to navigate from Moscow prior to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war. The conflict molded the peacekeeping mission into an effective geopolitical tool for the Kremlin to pressure Armenia and Azerbaijan when necessary, and try limit their efforts to maneuver and balance Russian preponderance.

But as shown, the expansion of the "separatist empire" is fraught with consequences for Russia. The territories Russian troops are located in are geographically diverse. Russia's military preponderance is still decisive and its troops will be very much capable of responding to potential military challenges, but over time it will be increasingly difficult to do. Moreover, the growth of the "empire," though on the surface it solidifies Moscow's military grip over the region, pushes Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to seek diversification of their foreign policies. In case of Georgia, recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 solidified Tbilisi's resolve to associate its future with the collective West. Those aspirations remain short of actual membership in NATO and the EU, but the level of integration between Georgia and the Western institutions have never been higher. Moreover, even official stalling of Georgia's pro-Western aspirations will have little impact on the general public attitude toward cooperation with Russia. In other words, in the long-term Georgia is unlikely to be brought under Russia's fold again, even if within the pursuit of multi-vector foreign policy, Tbilisi would be looking at deepening economic ties with Russia.

Similar developments take place in Azerbaijan. Faced with the growing Russian influence and the potential staying of Russian troops on Azerbaijani soil beyond 2025, Baku is increasingly looking for balancing this Russian preponderance. Turkey is a natural option. Both countries have always been strategic allies in all but name. But with the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war the relations between the two states have reached a markedly level. This takes place in the military and economic realms, and the Shusha Declaration signed in 2021 made a special emphasis on advancing the military and economic ties between Ankara and Baku.

Thus we see in the above two cases how Russian military moves in the region aimed at cementing Moscow's influence in the region, do in fact produce long-term negative results. They invite foreign powers into the region, alienating local political elites from nurturing pro-Russian foreign vector. They capitalize on growing local suspicions toward Russia. China, the EU, US, and Turkey have managed to build layers of influence in all three South Caucasus countries and are increasingly able to defend those interests against Moscow's pursuit of exclusive domination (Remler, 2020). Even in the case of Armenia, the period from the Velvet Revolution in 2018 till the war of 2020 was characterized by Yerevan's low-level but nevertheless consistent attempts to diversify its military dependence

on Russia. Advancement in relations with NATO was entertained as well as arms trade with other countries was pursued.

Russia's influence is ebbing in yet another area too. Foreign policy of the three South Caucasus states is becoming increasingly diversified. A greater number of external players is interested in investing into the region. This means that viewing the South Caucasus solely in terms of the Russia–West competition does no longer correspond to the reality on the ground. It looks at the developments in the region from a much narrower perspective than is currently necessary. There is a greater dynamism in terms of new infrastructure projects, foreign trade ties, and the ability of the neighboring regional powers as well as China to penetrate the once geographically closed and exclusively Russia-dominated South Caucasus. This diversification reshapes the traditional geopolitics of the region, albeit in a more silent, longer-term way.

The region adjusts to and reflects the economic and generally geopolitical dynamism in Eurasia. As the world enters the post-liberal age, there is a number of emerging poles of geopolitical and economic attraction. A multipolar world means a growing tendency by the South Caucasus states toward embracing a multi-vector foreign policy.

The dynamism of the region was manifested in the increasing ties with the Middle East. Ever since the Russian Empire began incorporating the South Caucasus lands in early the nineteenth century, the region's economic and cultural connections with the Middle East, shaped by geogprahy, were cut off. The Middle East has deep historical links with ethnic groups across the Caucasus. The Circassians, Abaza, and Vainakh peoples have kindred which were forcefully removed from the lands and sent to the Middle East (Sushentsov & Neklyudov, 2020). Muslim Abkhazians banished by Russian imperial authorities in the nineteenth century still reside in their thousands in Turkey and constitute an economic and political power.

The disconnect lasted till 1990s when after the fall of the Soviet empire the two regions regained erstwhile links. Geo-economics pulled the regions closer. The process was slow, but inexorable. This manifested in energy infrastructure which linked the Caspian basin to Turkey. Geopolitics too helped the two regions interweave. For instance, the war in Syria showed how the South Caucasus could serve as a source of extremist fighters. During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war Turkey was accused of allegedly sending fighters from Syria to support Azerbaijan. Increasingly the processes in the Middle East have a bearing on the South

Caucasus. Iran, Turkey, and Russia which border on the South Caucasus, are the powers deeply involved in Syria, Iraq, and other parts of the South Caucasus.

The South Caucasus is thus a region of critical national interest to Russia. The historical ties, institutional and demographic advantages as well as geographic proximity pull Russia to position itself as a hegemon in the South Caucasus. Its policies bring numerous benefits to national interests. But it is more so because the country's highly militarized foreign policy in the South Caucasus is aided by the West's inability to present a comprehensive strategic vision for the region (Cornell et al., 2015). It is also because of other powers, Turkey, Iran, and China, still insufficient power and prestige to decisively tilt the balance of power against Russia.

Lastly, how can Russia's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus be characterized? Some elements of neo-imperialism are present. The three states are independent, but in essence still dominated economically and militarily by Russia (Sadiyev et al., 2021). Their ability to turn to the West or other actor is hampered by potential Russian countermeasures. To call Armenia's, Azerbaijan's, and Georgia's independence only nominal, will belittle an incredible progress the three have made since the end of the Soviet Union. Progress in institution building and diversification of foreign policy ties underline the advances made so far. Moreover, explaining Russian militarized foreign policy toward the South Caucasus by neo-imperialist motives, is to look at the multifaceted nature of the geopolitics of the region and Russia's policies toward it from a rather narrow perspective (Rezvani, 2020). Fuller picture is much more complicated to be sufficiently explained solely by one geopolitical notion.

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusion: The Future of the South Caucasus

This book is about the South Caucasus in the age of great power rivalry. The trends discussed throughout the chapters reveal that the competition is likely to grow in intensity both among the players which surround the South Caucasus, and between the regional and external (mainly the collective West, though the latter is still rethinking its long-term position) powers. The narrative was laid out in the context of a much bigger processes which unfold globally, namely the China-US struggle and the shift toward a multipolar world order. This final chapter looks at the future of the South Caucasus, the regional order which will be governing the region and how this would be fitting the wider Eurasian picture. The projections outlined here are not intended to be regarded as definitive scenarios, but they are nevertheless meant to serve as guidelines for what to expect from the new world order and its influence on the behavior of China, Iran, Russia, and Turkey in the South Caucasus.

The liberal internationalism as we have known it since 1990s has come to an end. As shown in Chapter 2 the rise of China hastened the shift in the global balance of power, or rather accelerated the diffusion of power from the West to other regions. America will likely scale back the liberal push. As the country faces a formidable array of Eurasian powers, witnesses a relatively even spreading of technologies, the multipolar world order gradually emerges. This does not mean the US is declining, as many scholars argued. A broader agreement exists that the future world order

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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4037-8_8

will revolve around America and China. It will be an uneven multipolarity where these two powers will be two major poles of attraction, while other geopolitical centers (Russia, India, or even smaller—Turkey, Iran), smaller economically and less influential politically, in broad terms will mostly align with Beijing's or Washington's core interests.

The South Caucasus will increasingly fall into the purview of second and perhaps third tier powers. This means that the future geopolitical order around the region is likely to be mostly shaped by Iran's, Turkey's, and Russia's intensifying attempts to create loose mechanisms serving as alternatives to the Western multilateralism. This does not entail the West's total withdrawal from the region, however. Rather a major rethinking of Western approach to the order building will likely follow. This will open the space for Iran, Russia, and Turkey to fill. The trio will tend to support each other and support the kind of rule amenable to their influence. Differences will be present, but there will be a growing ability of the three to cast aside disagreements or rather manage them for reaching compromises. The three will be increasingly able to preclude external powers and ultimately construct a new order from the Black Sea to the Caspian basin ushering in a successful application of the regional ownership idea. The pursuit of exclusive geopolitical rights is closely linked with the gradual re-emergence of spheres of influence concept. This in turn means that the future order around the South Caucasus will be based on realism which has largely prevailed against the liberal internationalism.

In the new ordering Russia's role will be critical. Moscow has been cautious not to overestimate its power, conscious of its limits, and willing to approach the regional and global geopolitical trends more pragmatically. This might change with the 2022 invasion of Ukraine where Russia certainly overestimated its potential. In the South Caucasus, however, Russian vision will be more tempered. It means seeing the South Caucasus not as an exclusive Russian sphere of influence, but rather as a space where Moscow would have both to cooperate and compete with other powers. The difference is that Moscow prefers to talk to the regional powers—Iran and more so Turkey—than to the Western actors whose vision of the South Caucasus is incongruent with Russian conceptions.

Nevertheless, Russia wants the new order in the South Caucasus to revolve around itself. It will be, however, a loosely-built system not organized or regulated by strict rules peculiar to how the Western alliance logic works. Iran, Turkey, and Russia will be cooperating more out of the need to confront (in case of Iran and Russia) or constrain (in case of

Turkey) the collective West's ability to penetrate the region. But all the three understand that building an exclusive order is futile. On the one hand, this thinking will push Iran and Turkey to accept Russia's primacy, on the other, Russia to embrace a sort of a hierarchical system where it would hold the foremost place, but accommodates some Iranian and Turkish interests. Moscow will also accept that challenging its position will be a part of the game, but the scope of competition, however, should not be cutting at Russia's set of core interests such as the military supremacy.

The new order around the South Caucasus will be also about challenging what will be left from liberal internationalism and instead advancing and defending the concept of sovereignty. The latter is seen differently by illiberal states from what the liberal countries profess. The West largely supports the idea of national sovereignty contingent upon a government operating without brutality inside the country. Illiberal states, on the other hand, embrace non-interference into internal affairs irrespective of human right violations and other possible crimes (Blackwill & Wright, 2020). Nevertheless, the illiberal states are unlikely to follow those principles wholeheartedly. The South Caucasus is one of such spaces where small states will fare worse as their state sovereignty will be growingly dependent on the neighboring larger powers. This could involve military intervention when necessary, redrawing of the borders where possible for security reasons and wider geopolitical agenda. Region-wide infrastructure projects will also face constant challenges. Getting an approval from all parties will be a daunting task. Thus beyond the desire to minimize the Western influence (Turkey being not as radical as Iran and Russia), the trilateral cooperation will be driven by the Westphalian principles. Emphasis on sovereign rights will guarantee the looseness of regional cooperation on such issues as combatting terrorism and drug trafficking.

The changes in and around the South Caucasus usher in the period of the decline in the Western involvement in the region. The US is a striking example as the country is increasingly looking at the Indo-Pacific region. Its withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq serve the purposes of foreign policy recalibration, namely, the shift in attention away from west Asia and parts of the eastern Europe to China. The war in Ukraine might delay this development. But in the longer run Washington cannot allow threats to Taiwan be overshadowed by Ukraine. At some point America will have either make a drastic decision to choose which front it prioritizing or become increasingly dependent on its local allies and

partners. In Ukraine's case those could be Poland, Baltic states and the UK propping this grouping. Being actively involved in two geographically distanced regions requires both attention and finances. America can afford it, but not indefinitely. The EU support in this matter will be decisive. EU member states will have to shoulder the expenses or face an even more powerful Russia with the gaze set on the heart of European continent.

The diminution of the US' activist policies in the South Caucasus which began under Barack Obama's presidency fits into the gradually emerging global refocusing in America's foreign policy. Ever since, the process accelerated and it is presently unclear how committed the US will remain in the South Caucasus. Geography is a determining factor here. The region is far from the US deep in Eurasia, in those lands where the sea power has traditionally struggled to establish its position on the long-term basis. And though the US continues to enjoy an unrivaled position in the sea and the South Caucasus borders on the Black Sea, the access to the region and the sea is constrained by the Montreux Convention. Occasionally unstable Turkey-US ties and Ankara's general unwillingness to allow third parties from exercising an outsized influence in the basin also have precluded the US from actively engaging the wider Black Sea region. When US warships wanted to enter the Black Sea during the Georgia-Russia conflict in 2008, they encountered resistance from Turkey. Thus, there were some serious limitations to America's power even before the Russian pushback in the late 2000s. For sober minds, the ambiguity in the US involvement in the South Caucasus was a well-anticipated development even at the height Washington's activist policies in the region in the 2000s.

In fact, the turn away is not solely limited to America's behavior. The EU has been unwilling to expand into the South Caucasus for quite some time (Rumer et al., 2017). Internal divisions regarding the enlargement eastward, the war in Ukraine as well as fragile relations with Russia limited EU's ambitions—gradual shift to a more realist approach followed. Moreover, the South Caucasus is and likely will continue to be beset by the lack of coherent US and EU policies over governance and security issues. These are far more important than economic policies where Brussels and Washington more or less find some common ground. Both also agree on some basic elements of the South Caucasus' importance in the regional connectivity. The stalling of EU's eastward expansion brings about deep disillusionment among the political elites of the South Caucasus states. Increasingly Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are propelled to adopt a

more realist approach in their foreign policy which involves looking at the ties with the EU as one of the strands in their multi-vector policy.

There are also some positive trends. The South Caucasus is no longer seen as a part of the West-Russia confrontation. Regional powers and China now have made and will continue making inroads into the region's economy and politics accelerating the South Caucasus' closer ties with Central Asia, eastern Europe, and especially the Middle East—the region geographically and historically Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were linked to for a much longer period than, for instance, to Russia. Multiplication of foreign actors in the region is what has been Washington's long-time foreign policy objective (Stronsky 2021). This effectively allows to deny Russia an exclusive control over its neighboring territories. As the history of the South Caucasus shows establishing a total political control over the region has been an insurmountable task which often ended in defeats and hastened the decline of occupying forces. Similar arguments could be posited for the present period—no power is now able to be a sole-ruler of the region.

The ambiguity of Western involvement in the region coupled with the regional powers' growing activism to establish an order of exclusion will accelerate some long-present negative trends, which have been hampering connectivity development and improvement of the general security environment in the South Caucasus. The region is fragile security-wise. Terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking have proved from time to time to be a region-wide problem linking the South Caucasus to the wider Middle East. Regional powers and to a limited extent China might engage in a higher level of cooperation on these and similar issues through intelligence sharing or other measures. Some believe that the increased cooperation between intelligence bodies might lead to cross-border repression, the trend which is observable across Eurasia involving concerted measures of the leading illiberal and openly autocratic states to stamp out internal opposition. This leads to another fear that this kind of coordination will undermine the South Caucasus' fledgling democracies, the work of non-governmental organizations, and the ability of the international organizations to positively influence the political developments on the ground. The assertion that the liberal democracy is the only model guaranteeing development and stability in the South Caucasus, will be increasingly challenged. The decline of general security and the waning democratic institutions in the region will go hand in hand.

Insecure and fragile region will become a more fractured space. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia will have more markedly divergent foreign policy paths than ever since the end of the Soviet Union. As argued in Chapter 3, radicalization of partnerships and alliances into dependencies has long been in the making, but has gained a greater momentum over the past several years. Dependencies engender heightened militarization of the region. A map of the region reveals an extraordinarily high number of military bases, regional conflicts, "borderization" processes (illegal installation of border markings by Russian troops in Georgia) all tightly packed which increases a possibility for the region-wide conflagration. The development is unlikely to subside in the near future undermining the general security and decreasing the potential for infrastructure development in the region.

Those very trends also produce an entirely new understanding of the region's position in the Eurasian geopolitics. Similar to the world at large, the South Caucasus is in a transitory period. It is perhaps safe now to say that the region has moved beyond being an isolated area it was famous for being in the Soviet Union and following its collapse. The region has turned into an increasingly dynamic space. Viewing it simply as a subject to Russia's exclusive influence is no longer a tenable argument. Moreover, seeing the region solely through the prism of the Russia–West competition, a still dominating theme in the scholarly and everyday discussions, is likewise a deep misrepresentation of a much more nuanced reality on the ground. Likewise, the region can no longer be a subject of a potential grand geopolitical bargain between Russia and the West. Local actors have their strategic interests, which they relentlessly pursue and at times even succeed at. They seek diversification of their foreign ties and try to build viable national institutions to withstand foreign pressure. In the increasingly multipolar world order, the geopolitics of the South Caucasus also evolves with the emerging interests of a significantly greater number of foreign powers than just traditional Russia and the collective West. The overcrowded space with the influence of the three Eurasian powers plus China, though the latter to a smaller degree, signals the growing importance of the South Caucasus in international relations and the inability of the West or Russia to singlehandedly decide the fate of the region.

This book argued that Turkey's active foreign policy toward the South Caucasus is a direct result of several interconnecting developments: Turkey's shift from neutrality in the Middle East, the gradual dilution of geopolitical fixation on the collective West, the rise of China and

the concomitant application of the realist Eurasian perspective. These give Turkey a growing scope of autonomy reflected in its efforts to portray itself increasingly not as a continuation of the Western influence, but rather as an independent player in the South Caucasus. This thinking could prove accurate. The West is rethinking its position in the region, but in order to retain a semblance of influence, reliance on Turkey could take place. It suits the West because Turkey possesses a wide array of tools to penetrate the depths of the Eurasian continent where Brussels and Washington are otherwise unable to exert influence. In this Turkey and the West in general have similar, if not identical, geopolitical ambitions: promotion of east–west corridors as opposed to traditional Russia-dominated south-north pipelines, roads, railways, and other infrastructure. In the longer run, Turkey's policy in Black Sea and the South Caucasus (especially the latter) could generate a basis for a certain rapprochement between Turkey and the West. Turkey is the only NATO country which has engaged Russia militarily and knows the operational mode of the Russian military from Libya to Syria to the South Caucasus. Losing such a valuable ally would be tantamount to a major geopolitical mistake.

The South Caucasus catches Beijing's attention as an emerging trade and energy corridor and also the shortest route from China to Europe. But no less a critical role in opening up the space has been played by Turkey. Its involvement serves as a major catalyzer for the growth in the region's geopolitical importance as Ankara uses the region more practically to reach out to the wider Caspian region which increasingly serves as a major source of energy supplies.

The South Caucasus' importance is underlined in Ankara's careful steps to build an arc of influence along Russia's southern borders. This would serve as a buffer zone for Turkey, but also as a space where Moscow's moves have threatened security on the ground and undermined the local governments. The circumstances thus promising for Turkish involvement. Turkey is increasingly reaching out to Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan to build closer political, economic, and most of all military ties. The arc of influence will also enable Turkey to puncture Russia where it hurts most and build an effective negotiating tool with Moscow when it comes to bilateral tensions in other theaters.

Thus Turkey helps to open up the South Caucasus by enabling the region to loosen dependence on Russia's economy, energy resources, and

military cooperation. In a way Ankara now enjoys a much bigger practical influence in the region than the collective West. This serves as yet another reminder of how diversified the South Caucasus' geopolitics has become. Energy needs, Eurasian-wide connectivity, the pandemic, diversifying military ties, and the emerging multipolar world propel the scholars of the South Caucasus to move beyond such geopolitical clichés as "the region as a hotbed of Russia-West competition," "the space of exclusive Russian influence," and "enduring Western influence."

To a lesser degree than Turkey, Iran too seeks and helps the opening of the region. The Islamic Republic supports greater connectivity as it fits into the country's vision about is the central location in Eurasia. As Iran re-invents the concept of the ancient silk roads, it seeks to harness the power of its geostrategic position as a link not only between Russia and the Indian Ocean, but also as a bridge between Sino-Indian worlds and the West. The North–South corridor is one of the examples, another is Tehran's interest in the Georgian ports and railway infrastructure.

Iran also facilitates the growing interconnection of the South Caucasus with the Middle East. For the first time since the early nineteenth century when the Russian empire began its expansion into the South Caucasus and effectively cut the region off from the Middle East, geography pulls the two spaces together. The South Caucasus has been a largely inconspicuous region within the Russian and Soviet empires. It remained so after the Soviet collapse—for Iran and Turkey never paid enough attention to the region. Both states might now have to slowly reconsider the South Caucasus' role in their respective geopolitical calculations. It might not end up on the same footing as the wider Middle East, but the South Caucasus will no longer be a backwater it used to be.

The elevation in status means that the great power competition in the South Caucasus will be accentuated in the coming years. A further catalyzer behind this process will be yet another power—China. Though Chapter 7 showed that Beijing's activities in the South Caucasus still lack a long-term strategic vision, the level of engagement has grown steadily over the past two decades. China is a "region-opener." It breaks Central Asia's "geographic prison," connects Pakistan and the South Asia through new infrastructure to the outer world. It plays a similar role for the South Caucasus, though for Beijing the region has always stood lower in importance than other spaces in Eurasia.

There is little evidence to show that Chinese investments in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are interrelated to advance Beijing's long-term

Chinese strategic perspective. A lack of momentum probably related generally to the operation and expansion of the BRI serves as a major hindrance. Instead only a tailored geo-economic approach to each of the three South Caucasus state is in work, which means that a solid base for Beijing's deeper strategic and economic engagement has yet to be developed.

The corridor through the South Caucasus is nevertheless critical when it comes to considering Beijing's long-term vision of Eurasia and especially amid the war in Ukraine when the route through Russia stopped to operate. From early 1990s Georgia and Azerbaijan have always been viewed in the context of the historical Great Silk Road. To penetrate and cross the South Caucasus' rigid geography a substantial improvement in east–west rail and road infrastructure is necessary. Expanding the South Caucasus corridor makes it the shortest route from China to Europe. Geography informs how Beijing approaches the region. From a wider perspective China's presence in the region is contingent upon BRI's successes and failures in Central Asia and the Black Sea. So far the developments are promising as the countries in the two regions flanking the South Caucasus are eager to embrace Chinese investments.

However, much has yet to be made from the Chinese side—new railways, ports, and other infrastructure in Central Asia and the Black Sea are needed. Therefore, investing billions into the South Caucasus—the Middle Corridor—without a strong position in Central Asia and the Black Sea would not make sense. Reaching the corridor from the east is still hard and at times impracticable, while getting adequate benefits from the Black Sea basin has not materialized so far. Chinese investments follow the logic of connectivity. Once the gaps in Central Asia are filled, Beijing will be more able to sharpen its investments in Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Whatever the future of the South Caucasus in China's calculus, its interests, and investments made into the region fits into the pattern of outside powers enabling the region's three small states look beyond Russia and the West. As in the case of Turkey and Iran, China helps the region be less-Russia oriented, become more variegated economically, and seek more diversified foreign policy.

The efforts China, Iran, and Turkey have been making are not necessarily aimed against any country. But by diversifying Armenia's, Azerbaijan's, and Georgia's economic and foreign policy portfolios Russia—the region's traditional hegemon since early nineteenth century—is benefiting less as it has to abandon the idea of exclusive management of the South

Caucasus. The region's borders are increasingly blurred because of security, economy, infrastructure, and military developments linking the space with the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Black Sea area. Though the future of the South Caucasus might seem uncertain as much will depend on global shifts, one trend is clear—the region returns its historical notoriety of a space unsubdued by any single power. The age of multipolar world has diluted the ability of single countries to claim exclusive control over the South Caucasus.

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