

HIGHLIGHT OF JOURNAL

The Increasing Relevance of the Middle Corridor in Sino-European Trade: Which role for Azerbaijan?
Simona Scotti



CAUCASUS STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

Volume 3 • Issue 2 • Winter 2022

Building Bridges over Caspian: South Caucasus-Central Asia Cooperation

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Framing and Focusing
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Editor's Note

The current issue of the Caucasus Strategic Perspectives (CSP) journal entitled “***Building Bridges over Caspian: South Caucasus-Central Asia Cooperation***” is dedicated to the new paradigms for peacebuilding and geopolitical gaps, as well as possible confrontation and cooperation matrices in the South Caucasus region with focus on security, economic, humanitarian, political and geopolitical aspects.

The CSP's new issue includes 7 articles and 1 book review. The CSP's current authors analysed the EU's increasing mediation role towards the South Caucasus region, the importance of the Middle Corridor for trans-regional connectivity, the recent processes in the South Caucasus region in the light of ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, Türkiye's engagement, as well as the US strategic interests in this region, the possibility of the potential threats for South Caucasus, etc.

The new issue's *Highlight Section* commences with **Simona Scotti's** article of “*The Increasing Relevance of the Middle Corridor in Sino-European Trade: Which role for Azerbaijan?*” which discusses in detail the potential of the Middle Corridor to establish itself as a viable route for intercontinental trade and the role that Azerbaijan could play to develop this route and to enhance the prosperity of the region. It examines the impacts and benefits of the corridor, as well as its physical and non-physical barriers.

The new issue's *Articles Section* starts with **Alper Coşkun's** article of “*Türkiye's Eastern Engagement: Framing and Focusing This Ambition Wisely Matters*” analysed Türkiye's goal of deepening its eastern engagement to be on the mark. It argues that this ambition needs to be framed in accordance with Türkiye's western vocation and calls for Türkiye to focus on deepening and widening its cooperation in the South Caucasus and Central Asia in view of the new opportunities that are presenting themselves.

James Carafano's article of “*Future and Consequences of US Strategic Interest in the South Caucasus*” explains that stability, prosperity, and regional integration in the South Caucasus are now becoming increasingly important to the US, given the current military crisis in another part of the European neighbourhood. He believes, official Washington is expected to look more favourably on accelerating regional integration along the “middle corridor” – the sea and land

route from Southern Europe via the Black Sea to Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and the Central Asian states.

Natalia Konarzewska's article of "*Unpacking Türkiye-Russia dynamics in the Ukraine war and post-war situation in the South Caucasus*" argues that Russia's war in Ukraine creates not only risks for Türkiye, but also a wide range of opportunities to boost its economy and regional posture. In particular, Moscow's weakening military power gives Türkiye a chance to enhance its role in the post-war security architecture in the South Caucasus region.

Agil Rustamzade's article of "*The Possibility of a New Military Confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Assessment of Risks and Threats in the Short Term*" focused primarily on identifying the maximum limit of the capabilities of the Government of Armenia to restore and strengthen the defence potential of its armed forces in the short term. To that end, his article identifies the entire range of threats and risks that might stem from Armenia.

Gvantsa Davitashvili's article of "*Peace-building in the South Caucasus through the Eastern Partnership: What is the new role for the EU?*" argues that the EU's external governance toolbox has had a limited overall impact on conflict resolution in the South Caucasus countries and concludes that the EU has revised its European integration framework towards Georgia, taking into consideration the increasing security challenges in the region, and has initiated a 'European membership perspective'. With regard to the normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the EU's expanded role as a mediator of this process is considered to be a contribution of the EU to peace-building.

Nurlan Mustafayev's article of "*The Judicialization of the Armenia–Azerbaijan Conflict: Will International Courts Contribute to a Lasting Peace in the South Caucasus?*" analyses the ongoing inter-state legal cases between Armenia and Azerbaijan and their legal and political consequences for the parties and the South Caucasus region at large. The article argues that these international legal forums can partially answer some of the transitional justice issues, but not all matters arising from this three-decades-long conflict, which ended in 2020.

The new issue's **Book Review Series** includes comprehensive review of the book titled "Constructive Competition in the Caspian Sea Region" (authored by Agha Bayramov) by Naghi Ahmadov. This book aims to shed light on the growing role of state and non-state actors in

the Caspian Sea region. The author presents a novel and unorthodox interpretation of the Caspian Sea region. The author picks out three case studies, namely the Caspian Environmental Program (CEP), the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC), and the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) to explore the peculiarities of relationships among littoral states in light of functionalism via social constructivism.

Finally, on behalf of the CSP team, we hope this issue provides food for thought and contributes to and enriches the discussion on subject-matter issue.

Sincerely
Farid Shafiyev
Editor-in-Chief of CSP Journal

The Increasing Relevance of the Middle Corridor in Sino-European Trade: Which role for Azerbaijan?

Simona Scotti*

Against the backdrop of the invasion of Ukraine, several international shippers are reorganizing land transportation to avoid Russian territory and favour alternative transit routes. New transport initiatives are already being redirected to the south and, taking into account that Iran is also under sanctions, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, known as Middle Corridor, is currently in the spotlight as the main alternative multimodal route for East-West land transportation. This article discusses in detail the potential of the Middle Corridor to establish itself as a viable route for intercontinental trade and the role that Azerbaijan could play to develop this route and to enhance the prosperity of the region. It examines the impacts and benefits of the corridor, as well as its physical and non-physical barriers. The article concludes that, despite the presence of some limitations, the Middle Corridor has the potential to emerge in international transport connectivity and to contribute to stability and cooperation in the region, while acknowledging that its viability will also depend on how the European Union (EU) reacts to the latest developments in regional connectivity.

Keywords: Middle Corridor, Connectivity, Transport Projects, Eurasia, Azerbaijan



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Introduction

In the modern era, rail transport holds a strategic position in intercontinental trade. Rail freight represents a preferable solution for many operators because it costs a quarter as much as air transport and is twice as fast as sea transport, which makes it an attractive logistics solution. However, Sino–European trade has been dominated by maritime transport for centuries. Indeed, since the demise of the Silk Road at the beginning of the 16th century, goods have been exchanged mainly by sea. A revitalization of land trade made an appearance at the beginning of the last century with the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway but, until 2011, trade exchange by rail between the two poles amounted to negligible quantities. However, in 2007, Western companies such as Audi, BMW, Volkswagen, HP, Apple, and Acer made attempts to transport some of their components to their subsidiaries in China via overland modes.¹ The success of these attempts led to the establishment of formal rail freight services between China and Europe, and China has now started to invest US\$4 trillion in the so-called Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to connect China to Europe, Africa, and the Middle East by land. In 2021, the value of goods carried by freight train between China and Europe was estimated to amount to US\$75 billion,² which corresponds to almost 16% of the EU’s imports from China.³

Although the exponential growth in overland trade is expected to continue, the recent developments arising from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have severely hampered Eurasian connectivity. The Russia–Ukraine war disrupted global supply chains and weakened economies worldwide. In Europe and Central Asia, outputs are forecast to contract by 0.2% in 2022 and minimal growth of 0.3% is expected in 2023 as energy price shocks continue to impact the region.⁴ In these times of geopolitical turmoil, impacts on the transport and logistics sector are

1 Keuper, M., “The Implications of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the Future of Sino-European Overland Connectivity”, *AIES Fokus*, 6/2022, available at: <https://www.aies.at/publikationen/2022/fokus-06.php> (Accessed: September 29, 2022)

2 Andreea Brlnza, A., “Putin’s War Has Killed China’s Eurasian Railway Dreams,” *Foreign Policy*, March 1, 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/01/belt-road-initiative-new-eurasian-land-bridge-china-russia-poland/> (Accessed: November 11, 2022)

3 Eurostat, “China-EU - international trade in goods statistics”, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=China-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics (Accessed: November 11, 2022)

4 World Bank, “Europe and Central Asia Economic Update, Fall 2022: Social Protection for Recovery”, October 4, 2022, available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/europe-and-central-asia-economic-update> (Accessed November 11, 2022)

massive. New solutions need to be found to bypass the now heavily sanctioned territories of the Russian Federation for intercontinental land transportation.

In this context, Azerbaijan has long been one of the major stakeholders in the development of new trade links, notably the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (known as Middle Corridor), through investing in new infrastructure, modernizing its transport system, and boosting institutional dialogue with neighbouring countries. Moreover, as the only country that shares borders with both Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan is critical to the viability of the Middle Corridor across Eurasia, and the possible opening of the Zangezur Corridor would further facilitate and expand trade between China and Europe.

This article will examine the political, logistical and economic consequences of the war in Ukraine on overland Sino–European rail connectivity, will investigate the potential of alternative transportation routes and the particular role that Azerbaijan could play in this context, and will consider the geopolitical implications for the EU and other relevant actors.

Increasing importance of the Middle Corridor in the context of the Ukraine war

On 24 February 2022, the European continent was dramatically changed as the Russian Federation began its invasion of Ukraine. That act disrupted global supply chains and weakened economies worldwide, threatening the existence of overland connectivity passing through Russia and Belarus. Indeed, as a punitive measure over the unprovoked war against Ukraine, several countries imposed a range of economic and financial sanctions on Russia, including restrictions on exports to and imports from the Russian Federation. In particular, since February 2022, the EU has imposed a number of sanctions against Russia⁵ that were additional to the existing measures. Those were adopted in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea and the non-implementation of the Minsk agreements, a set of international agreements aimed at ending the war in the Donbas region between armed Russian separatist groups and the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Among the diplomatic measures and economic sanctions against Russian entities and individuals, closures

⁵ European Commission, “Timeline - EU restrictive measures against Russia over Ukraine”, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/history-restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/> (Accessed November 12, 2022)

of railroad connections between the EU and Russia started in March 2022 with the decision of the Finnish government to close the rail link connecting Saint Petersburg with Helsinki. This disrupted East–West trade and led to increasing isolation of Russia.⁶ There was a higher probability that sectors with high direct dependency on Russian intermediate inputs would start to experience supply chain bottlenecks, which can originate either from the adopted sanctions or from other logistics and transportation disruptions caused by the war.⁷

It should be noted that the EU did not impose sanctions on the transit of goods through the Russian Federation, unless such goods have Russian

In this volatile geopolitical environment, countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia have seized the opportunity to increase their regional relevance in cargo transshipment by expanding their alternative China–Europe freight route.

or Belorussian origins.⁸ However, this uncertainty generates a situation of reduced attractiveness and competitiveness of the Russian route, which, along with ethical considerations over the invasion of Ukraine and the disruption of infrastructure due to the conflict, led international shippers to find alternative routes. For decades, the Russian route has served as the main transport line for containerized rail freight between the EU and China. Known as the Eurasian Northern Corridor, this route presents an undisputed

advantage compared to the other corridors in terms of the arrival time of cargos at the destination. However, on the grounds of sanctions making it challenging to work with Russian companies, international shippers are uncertain about the current viability of this transit route, and countries are trying to shield their economies from setbacks caused by the sanctions on Moscow.⁹

In this volatile geopolitical environment, countries in the South

6 Railfreight.com, “Finland stops all rail freight traffic with Russia after all”, April 7, 2022, available at <https://www.railfreight.com/railfreight/2022/04/07/finland-stops-all-rail-freight-traffic-with-russia-after-all/#:~:text=The%20Finnish%20railway%20company%20VR,Russia%20in%20the%20nearby%20future> (Accessed November 11, 2022)

7 Oxford Economics, “The Russia–Ukraine war: Three key dependencies affecting European industry”, May 17, 2022, available at <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/resource/the-russia-ukraine-war-three-key-dependencies-affecting-european-industry/> (Accessed November 11, 2022)

8 European Commission, “Sanctions Adopted Following Russia’s Military Aggression Against Ukraine,” available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/business_economy_euro/banking_and_finance/documents/faqs-sanctionsrussia-road-transport_en.pdf (Accessed November 11, 2022)

9 Gabritchidze, N., “Georgia, Azerbaijan see surge in transit demand amid Russia’s isolation”, *Eurasianet*, June 2, 2022, available at <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-azerbaijan-see-surge-in-transit-demand-amid-russias-isolation> (Accessed November 11, 2022)

Caucasus and Central Asia have seized the opportunity to increase their regional relevance in cargo transshipment by expanding their alternative China–Europe freight route. The Middle Corridor has thus started to gain relevance as the main alternative to the Eurasian Northern Corridor. Officially known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), the Middle Corridor is a rail freight and ferry system linking China with Western Europe. It starts from Southeast Asia and China, and runs through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and then either via Türkiye or the Black Sea to the southern EU members Bulgaria and Romania.¹⁰

The idea of a Trans-Caspian corridor to connect the East to the West has old origins. A positive trend in the development of the route has been observed over the course of multiple years and has increased sharply following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Indeed, in 2021 the rail freight volumes passing through the Middle Corridor increased by 52%, and this figure is expected to grow further in 2022.¹¹ The project originated from the intention to reduce the time for delivering goods across Eurasia, which led to the revitalization of the historical Great Silk Road concept, which was then transformed into the so-called “New Silk Road” intermodal East–West transport infrastructure initiative. The involved countries have traditionally supported the plan, and consortia of companies working in logistics have started to emerge.¹²

The Middle Corridor was formally established in November 2013, when, on the occasion of the Second International Transport and Logistics Business Forum “New Silk Road”, the leaders of Kazakhstan Temir Zholy, Azerbaijan Railways and Georgian Railway signed an agreement on the establishment of the Coordination Committee for the Development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. The Coordination Committee was then additionally joined by Azerbaijan Caspian Shipping (ASCO), Baku International Sea Trade Port, Aktau International Sea Commercial Port, Batumi Sea Port, and TCDD Transportation, and it has now expanded to include all the major logistics and transport companies of the region.¹³

10 MiddleCorridor.com, *Trans-Caspian International Transport Route*, available at <https://middlecorridor.com/en/> (Accessed November 11, 2022)

11 Van Leijen, M., “Capacity or not, the Middle Corridor is on the rise”, *Railfreight.com*, March 30, 3033, available at <https://www.railfreight.com/beltandroad/2022/03/30/capacity-or-not-the-middle-corridor-is-on-the-rise/> (Accessed November 14, 2022)

12 MiddleCorridor.com, *History*, available at <https://middlecorridor.com/en/about-the-association/history-en> (Accessed November 11, 2022)

13 Eurasian Research Institute, “Development of the Trans-Caspian International

The Middle Corridor presents more border crossings as it runs through several countries, as opposed to the northern route which only crosses Russia.

Now, this multilateral and multimodal route seems to have the potential to offer an alternative, for land-based commercial connections, to the Northern Corridor, which had been responsible for approximately 90% of total China to Europe rail traffic, with volumes transiting through Russia reaching approximately 1.5 million TEUs. Despite the fact that the Middle Corridor already accounts for 3–5% of percent of total rail cargo volume between China and the EU, it is assumed that approximately 10% of the Northern Corridor volume could easily be transported through this corridor.¹⁴ According to the estimates of the TITR Association, the trade volume through the Middle Corridor is expected to grow sixfold compared to 2021, with projections of up to 3.2 million tonnes.¹⁵ New statistics show that, in the first half of this year, cargo transportation through the Middle Corridor increased by 15% compared to the same period last year.¹⁶

Geographically, the Middle Corridor is the shortest route between China and Europe. However, although, in the past few years, transportation volumes have been growing steadily, some geographical and infrastructural obstacles are preventing it from handling all the demand of the Russian corridor and thus becoming the most employed route for Sino–European cargo transportation, especially in the short and middle term. The Middle Corridor presents more border crossings as it runs through several countries, as opposed to the northern route which only crosses Russia. Moreover, the need for multimodal transfer to cross the Caspian and the Black seas further contributes to delaying the transfer of goods and increasing the final cost, thus making this alternative less favourable. Additionally, among the major infrastructural problems

Transport Route”, October 2015, available at <https://eurasian-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Weekly-e-bulletin-05-09-2015-12-10-2015-No-36.pdf> (Accessed November 11, 2022)

14 Report Informasiya Agentliyi, “Azerbaijan’s share in cargo transportation from Central Asia to Europe will increase sharply” (translation from Azerbaijani), April 6, 2022, available at <https://report.az/infrastruktur/merkezi-asiyadan-avropaya-yukdasimalarda-azerbaycanin-payi-keskin-artacaq/> (Accessed November 12, 2022)

15 MiddleCorridor.com, “The growing importance of the Trans-Caspian international transport route was discussed in Turkey”, May 10, 2022, available at: <https://middlecorridor.com/en/press-center/news/the-growing-importance-of-the-trans-caspian-international-transport-route-was-discussed-in-turkey> (Accessed September 15, 2022)

16 Report News Agency, “Azerbaijan’s role in cargo transportation from China to Europe to increase”, March 14, 2022, available at <https://report.az/en/infrastructure/azerbaijan-s-role-in-cargo-transportation-from-china-to-europe-to-increase/> (Accessed November 14, 2022)

that need to be addressed, the lack of vessels and the underdeveloped port infrastructure make the sea route a serious bottleneck along the corridor.¹⁷ Limited port capacity in the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea and a shortage of cargo ferries create substantial congestion.¹⁸ On the other hand, in terms of soft infrastructure, slow development in terms of reducing tariffs and the absence of unified regulations, technical standards, and customs systems also increase transit time and the cost of cargoes. Finally, in terms of political challenges, the Middle Corridor is dependent on the policies of the countries involved. For instance, the lack of substantial support from the Chinese government and the EU reduces the development of the Middle Corridor. However, given the geopolitical context, an expanded Chinese involvement would likely be perceived by Moscow as an unfriendly move.

A partial solution to the constant congestion in the Black Sea¹⁹ could be implemented with the opening of the so-called “Zangezur Corridor”. Such a corridor would connect Azerbaijan’s Zangilan district to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic via Armenia’s Syunik Province, and it would provide unimpeded access without Armenian checkpoints, in compliance with the provisions of Article 9 of the Trilateral Statement signed in 2020 between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia relating to the unblocking of transport connections in the region.²⁰ In the event of the opening of the Zangezur Corridor, some of the traffic currently headed to the Black Sea could be redirected via this route. This would facilitate a partial reduction of bottlenecks and delays, and would make transport smoother by reducing the barriers related to multimodality. This option could be considered in parallel with the strengthening of the Baku–

17 Sharifli, Y., “Optimization Efforts to Improve Transit Through the Critical Middle Corridor”, *The Jamestown Foundation*, August 4, 2022, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/optimization-efforts-to-improve-transit-through-the-critical-middle-corridor/> (Accessed November 11, 2022)

18 Kenderdine, T. and Bucsky, P., “Middle Corridor - Policy Development and Trade Potential of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. ADBI Working Paper 1268”, *Asian Development Bank Institute*, May 2021, available at <https://www.adb.org/publications/middle-corridor-policy-development-trade-potential> (Accessed November 13, 2022)

19 Papatolios, N., “Middle Corridor unable to absorb northern volumes, opportunities still there”, *RailFreight.com*, March 3, 2022, available at <https://www.railfreight.com/specials/2022/03/18/middle-corridor-unable-to-absorb-northern-volumes-opportunities-still-there/> (Accessed November 14, 2022)

20 Republic of Azerbaijan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Trilateral Statement of the leaders of Azerbaijan, Russian Federation and Armenia of November 10, 2020”, November 10, 2020, Available at <https://mfa.gov.az/en/category/end-of-the-conflict-in-november-2020-and-post-conflict-situation/trilateral-statement-of-the-leaders-of-azerbaijan-russian-federation-and-armenia-of-november-10-2020> (Accessed September 15, 2022)

Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway, which, however, is currently less used than the initial plans envisaged. For this reason, it is desirable that the lack of infrastructure be addressed concretely.

Regional cooperation

The countries along the Middle Corridor have substantial interests at stake in the development of the route. In particular, for the South Caucasus and Central Asia it represents a strategic opportunity to increase their power and infrastructure, as well as an impetus for economic recovery and to reduce their logistic and transport dependency on Russia. Amid the Russia–Ukraine war, legal and diplomatic work has been reinvigorated among the Middle Corridor countries to facilitate the transit of cargoes, reduce the infrastructural obstacles, and increase the competitiveness of the route. Moreover, several agreements have been signed among the major stakeholders.

In late March 2022, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye released a quadrilateral declaration on the establishment of the Middle Corridor (TITR) Joint Venture with the purpose of improving the

In order to optimize transit through the Middle Corridor, enhance its capacity, and attract new customers, the participant countries have been making significant investments in their infrastructure.

region’s transportation potential, harmonizing freight rates, and providing a unified cyber-platform to automate freight services.²¹ In April, the state railway companies of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan signed bilateral agreements on logistics cooperation.²² On 10 May, Türkiye and Kazakhstan signed an Enhanced Strategic Partnership agreement for the strengthening of the coordination between relevant institutions for effective and sustainable use of the Middle Corridor,

focusing on the flat-rate carriage of wagons and containers along the route via the new BTK rail network.²³ On 27 June, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye signed the Baku Declaration, which provides for deeper

21 RailFreight.com, “Middle Corridor joint venture to be established in 2023”, April 7, 2022, available at: <https://www.railfreight.com/beltandroad/2022/04/07/middle-corridor-utlc-to-be-established-in-2023/> (Accessed September 2, 2022)

22 Ahmadova, I., “Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan discuss logistics cooperation”, *Azertag*, April 13, 2022, available at https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Azerbaijan_Kazakhstan_discuss_logistics_cooperation-2092523 (Accessed November 12, 2022)

23 DailySabah.com, “Turkey, Kazakhstan agree on ‘enhanced strategic partnership’”, May 11, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-kazakhstan-agree-on-enhanced-strategic-partnership> (Accessed September 2, 2022)

customs cooperation and smoother transit of cargo along the Middle Corridor.²⁴ Finally, on 24 August, during the visit of Kazakhstan's President Kassym Jomart Tokayev to Baku, the transport companies of the two countries signed cooperation agreements on logistics and cargo transshipment.²⁵

In order to optimize transit through the Middle Corridor, enhance its capacity, and attract new customers, the participant countries have been making significant investments in their infrastructure. In terms of hard infrastructure, a new railway bypassing the Dostyk/Alashankou border crossing between Kazakhstan and China, and running instead through Almaty, is being developed, and it is expected to strengthen efficiency throughout the corridor.²⁶ A remarkable achievement is the decision to start the construction of the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan (CKU) railway after twenty years of negotiations.²⁷ Another significant development is represented by Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's commitment to double the number of vessels sailing between their respective ports of Alat and Aktau in the Caspian Sea²⁸. Finally, on 5 September, Uzbekistani fertilizer was sent to Europe with a cargo that went from Turkmenistan's Turkmenbashi port on the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan's Alat port, from where it was sent to Georgia's Batumi port using Azerbaijan's railway system and, from there, to Europe through the Rasul Reza feeder vessel service, a joint project of Azerbaijan's ADY Container and ASCO.²⁹

24 Azernews.az, "Azerbaijani, Turkish and Kazakh FM's sign co-op declaration in Baku", June 27, 2022, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/196015.html> (Accessed September 2, 2022)

25 Sadikhova, N., "Visit of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev – Kazakhstan bets on Azerbaijan", *Trend*, August 26, 2022, available at: <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3636934.html> (Accessed September 2, 2022)

26 RailFreight.com, "Will this new line solve congestion at China-Kazakhstan?", November 11, 2021, available at: <https://www.railfreight.com/railfreight/2021/11/23/will-a-new-railway-line-solve-congestion-on-the-kazakhstan-china-border/> (Accessed September 5, 2022)

27 Lillis, J., "China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan sign landmark railroad deal", *Eurasianet*, September 15, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-sign-landmark-railroad-deal> (Accessed September 25, 2022)

28 PortsEurope, "Three more container ships to double the cargo capacity of the Middle Corridor between Aktau and Baku", April 19, 2022, available at <https://www.portseurope.com/three-more-container-ships-to-double-the-cargo-capacity-of-the-middle-corridor-between-aktau-and-baku/> (Accessed November 13, 2022)

29 Sea-news.az, "ADY Container provides services for delivery of Central Asian fertilizer to Europe", September 5, 2022, available at: <https://sea-news.az/2022/09/05/ady-container-provides-services-for-delivery-of-central-asian-fertilizer-to-europe/> (Accessed September 12, 2022)

Several shipping corporations have started new train services along the Middle Corridor, including Finnish company Nurminen Logistics, which started running a container train from China to Central Europe through the trans-Caspian route in early May;³⁰ Danish Maersk, one of the largest container shipping companies in the world, which launched a new train service along the Middle Corridor in April;³¹ and Swiss company Hupac which, on 28 November 2022, is expected to launch a new direct container service between Italy and China, connecting Milan with Suzhou.³²

Azerbaijan as a connectivity hub

Given its prime position at the crossroads of Europe, Central Asia, the Far East, and the Gulf states, Azerbaijan is likely to become a preferred transportation hub in the region.

Given its prime position at the crossroads of Europe, Central Asia, the Far East, and the Gulf states, Azerbaijan is likely to become a preferred transportation hub in the region. In addition, Azerbaijan borders Russia in the north and Iran in the south, both of which are sanctioned by a number of countries, which makes Azerbaijan a compulsory crossing in the land route between Europe and China. In order to enhance the corridor's efficiency and position itself as a key trade intersection in East–West trade, Azerbaijan has been making significant progress in addressing its infrastructural weaknesses and reinforcing regional transportation platforms. Indeed, following the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the disruption of the Russian route, Azerbaijan

took substantial steps not only to improve its infrastructure network, but also to promote the development of the Middle Corridor. Various initiatives have been undertaken by the Azerbaijani administration to address the structural gaps that have prevented the Middle Corridor from becoming competitive on a comparative level. In this context, some Azerbaijani companies are acquiring protagonist roles in Eurasian

30 RailFreight.com, “Nurminen Logistics joins the Middle Corridor”, March 16, 2022, available at: <https://www.railfreight.com/beltandroad/2022/03/16/nurminen-logistics-joins-the-middle-corridor/> (Accessed September 2, 2022)

31 Maersk.com, “Maersk launches a revamped Middle Corridor rail service”, May 16, 2022, available at: <https://www.maersk.com/news/articles/2022/05/16/maersk-launches-a-revamped-middle-corridor-rail-service> (Accessed September 12, 2022)

32 Raimondi, M., “New Italy-China service by Hupac coming soon”, *RailFreight.com*, November 15, 2022, available at <https://www.railfreight.com/beltandroad/2022/11/15/new-italy-china-service-by-hupac-coming-soon/> (Accessed November 15, 2022)

transport. Among these, ADY Container, Baku Shipyard, Azerbaijan Caspian Shipping Company (ASCO) and Baku International Sea Trade Port are becoming leaders in the route because of both their geolocation and the expansion plans they adopt. All these companies are currently carrying out monitoring activities towards developing Azerbaijan's infrastructure potential.

In terms of hard infrastructure, Azerbaijan's decision to introduce two ships into the Black Sea represents an unprecedented initiative. Azerbaijan, a landlocked country, accomplished an extraordinary feat by launching the first vessel, with a capacity of 220 TEUs, connecting the Georgian port of Poti with the Romanian Port of Constanta, in May 2022. In June, a second vessel connecting the Georgian Port of Batumi and the Romanian port of Constanta started sailing.³³ The initiative was set up by ADY Container in partnership with ASCO. Although the Port of Constanta often presents severe congestion due to surging cargo volumes,³⁴ the increase in vessels will help reduce bottlenecks and strengthen multimodal transport along the corridor. This unparalleled effort shows that Baku is not only seeking to develop the efficiency of its own infrastructure, but is also aiming to contribute to the general development of the Middle Corridor.

Moreover, the agreement between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to raise the number of vessels sailing between Alat and Aktau ports in the Caspian Sea to six will result in a doubling of the cargo capacity of the Middle Corridor. Currently, there are three feeder vessels operating regularly in the Caspian section, with capacities of 350, 125 and 125 TEUs for a total of 600 TEUs. These vessels are able to provide five departures per week, which translates to a maximum total capacity of 3,000 TEUs per week, equivalent to 30–40 trains, and, from September 2022, the capacity is expected to reach 60–80 train equivalents per week.^{35,36} Other remarkable initiatives include the construction of a new

33 RailFreight.com, "ADY Container goes beyond borders and adds vessel on Black Sea", June 22, 2022, available at: <https://www.railfreight.com/railfreight/2022/06/22/ady-container-goes-beyond-borders-and-adds-vessel-on-black-sea/?gdp=deny> (Accessed September 12, 2022)

34 Papatolios, N., op. cit.

35 Don, S., "Middle Corridor room for 60-80 weekly trains this fall, is this enough?", *RailFreight.com*, April 12, 2022, available at <https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2022/04/12/middle-corridor-room-for-60-80-weekly-trains-this-fall-is-this-enough/> (Accessed November 11, 2022)

36 RailFreight.com, "Middle Corridor room for 60-80 weekly trains this fall, is this

On the one hand, it is necessary to enhance the infrastructure system to enable the full development of the Middle Corridor; on the other hand, close bilateral relations and strong coordination with all countries are equally fundamental for optimizing its potential.

fertilizer terminal; the completion of a second phase of the port, which is expected to handle 25 million tons of cargo against the current capacity of capacity of 15 million tons;³⁷ and the inauguration of a new roll-on/roll-off (Ro-Ro) terminal in Baku Port that aims to optimize the transportation system and reduce time consumed.³⁸ It thus seems clear that Azerbaijan considers it fundamental to increase its port capacity in order to improve the connection between the Caucasus and Central Asia.

On the one hand, it is necessary to enhance the infrastructure system to enable the full development of the Middle Corridor; on the other hand, close bilateral relations and strong coordination with all countries are equally fundamental for optimizing its potential. To this end, Azerbaijan has taken enormous steps to strengthen cooperation with its neighbours, especially with Kazakhstan, Türkiye, Uzbekistan, and Georgia, through both bilateral agreements and the establishment of trilateral platforms. In particular, transit through the South Caucasus section of the Middle Corridor is possible thanks to coordination among Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Georgia in projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, which the three countries plan to optimize. Indeed, these countries have recently reached an agreement on customs procedures, through which they aim to accelerate border crossings and improve freight transport. The agreement consists of the decision to implement electronic information exchange to simplify customs procedures for goods transported along the BTK railway through the territory of all three countries.³⁹ Azerbaijan is also actively engaged in the development of regional platforms with Central Asia, with the aim of further strengthening this section of the Middle

enough?”, April 12, 2022, available at: <https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2022/04/12/middle-corridor-room-for-60-80-weekly-trains-this-fall-is-this-enough/> (Accessed September 12, 2022)

37 Hajiyeva, G., “Intercontinental Overland Cargo Transit Through Azerbaijan Increases”, *Caspian News*, July 21, 2022, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/intercontinental-overland-cargo-transit-through-azerbaijan-increases-2022-7-20-0/> (Accessed September 12, 2022)

38 Ağcayev, S., “The term of operation of Ro-Ro terminal in Baku port has been announced” (translation from Azerbaijani), *Trend*, July 15, 2022, available at: <https://az.trend.az/business/3621321.html> (Accessed September 18, 2022)

39 News.az, “Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Georgia agree to simplify custom procedures”, August 18, 2022, available at <https://news.az/index.php/news/azerbaijan-turkiye-and-georgia-agree-to-simplify-custom-procedures> (Accessed November 14, 2022)

Corridor. During Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's visit to Baku in August 2022, Azerbaijani and Kazakh companies signed strategic cooperation agreements regarding the strengthening of regional connectivity and the improvement of logistics coordination. Through the agreement, the two countries aim to develop the corridor's full potential to contribute to increasing bilateral trade turnover, which is forecast to hit \$480 million by the end of 2022.⁴⁰ In addition, both countries are currently upgrading their port infrastructure to enhance the movement of goods. Azerbaijan has also been involved in improving trilateral coordination with Uzbekistan and Türkiye, which led to the signing of the Tashkent Declaration in August 2022 to reduce tariffs, increase freight flows, and develop joint projects for the expansion of international transport links.⁴¹ The mutual interest in the Middle Corridor thus makes maintaining cordial relations a priority for all the involved countries.

Relations between the EU and Azerbaijan often focus on energy cooperation, mainly due to Azerbaijan's renowned reliability as a commercial partner that makes it a prime support to Europe, which is facing an unprecedented energy crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Geopolitical implications for the European Union

Azerbaijan has become strategically important as an EU supply chain link with the East. Relations between the EU and Azerbaijan often focus on energy cooperation, mainly due to Azerbaijan's renowned reliability as a commercial partner that makes it a prime support to Europe, which is facing an unprecedented energy crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, cooperation in the field of transport and logistics is also proving to be fundamental, as the EU has a strong need to differentiate not only its gas suppliers, but also its transport routes. The visit of the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, to Baku on 18 July 2022 made it clear that the EU is willing

40 Karimli, I., "Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan Join Forces to Tap into Middle Corridor's Potential", *Caspian News*, August 25, 2022, available at <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-kazakhstan-join-forces-to-tap-into-middle-corridors-potential-2022-8-25-1/> (Accessed November 14, 2022)

41 Republic of Azerbaijan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "No:352/22, Information of the Press Service Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the first trilateral meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Trade/Economy and Transport of Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Uzbekistan", August 02, 2022, available at: <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no35222> (Accessed October 1, 2022)

to develop connectivity projects jointly with Azerbaijan. Addressing Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Von der Leyen stated:

We are investing EUR 60 million of EU funds in Azerbaijan until 2024. And the Economic and Investment Plan has the potential to mobilise up to EUR 2 billion in additional investments. It is already at work, supporting round about 25,000 Azeri small and medium companies, and making the Port of Baku a sustainable transport hub. This is for us very important, because this leads indeed to the topic of connectivity that you have mentioned. We also discussed that. In particular, how to deepen our ties to bring our people and societies closer together. This is the mission of our Global Gateway strategy. And this is also the essence of our Eastern Partnership. The European Union wants to work with Azerbaijan to build connections with Central Asia and beyond. So, we follow with great interest the discussions and the ideas about trans-Caspian connections. We will deepen these discussions. Finally, we want to finalise the Common Aviation Area Agreement. Because this would greatly boost opportunities for business, trade and for tourism.⁴²

Furthermore, the EU had already declared its intention to expand the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) towards the Eastern Partnership before the invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, in its July 2021 Economic and Investment Plan, the European Commission indicated the building and upgrading of 3,000 km of priority roads and railways in line with EU standards as one of its top ten targets with respect to the countries of the Eastern Partnership.⁴³ Moreover, the EU also allocated financial assistance to strengthen the digital transport corridor in the Caspian Sea and connectivity to the Black Sea.⁴⁴ Furthermore, significant EU funding has been allocated to expand infrastructure and facilities at Romania's Constanta Port⁴⁵ and at Bulgaria's Burgas and Varna ports.⁴⁶ Romania could thus become a vital commercial and military hub on the Black Sea, connecting

42 European Commission, "Statement by President von der Leyen with Azerbaijani President Aliyev", July 18, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/da/statement_22_4583 (Accessed September 18, 2022)

43 European Commission, "Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities. Joint Staff Working Document", July 2, 2021, available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eastern-partnership/joint-staff-working-document-recovery-resilience-and-reform-post-2020-eastern_en (Accessed November 15, 2022).

44 Ibid.

45 Romania-insider, "Port of Constanța to receive EUR 1 bln makeover of railway infrastructure", November 9, 2022, available at <https://www.romania-insider.com/port-constantin-makeover-railway-infrastructure-2022> (Accessed November 15, 2022)

46 European Commission, "Cohesion policy in Bulgaria: the first 2021-2027 programme adopted", October 3, 2022, available at https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2022/10/10-03-2022-cohesion-policy-in-bulgaria-the-first-2021-2027-programme-adopted (Accessed November 15, 2022)

the Caucasus and Ukraine to the rest of Europe. Ultimately, an effort by the EU to promote Sino–European land connectivity through the Middle Corridor would provide the whole of Europe with resilient and diversified supply chains. This would, in turn, lead to more prosperity and stability, which is an opportunity that the EU cannot ignore. Additionally, a greater European involvement in such infrastructure investments would allow Brussels to counterbalance Chinese influence that could make some countries, especially those of Central Asia, overly dependent on China. Even in this case, however, Chinese policies seem to be cautious, as the country must act from a double perspective – on the one hand maintaining an economic and political friendship with Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, while on the other hand taking advantage of Russia’s post-invasion weakness to advance its interests in Central Asia.

Conclusion

Due to the hostile geopolitical environment, the EU, heavily affected by the connectivity crisis, is compelled to find an alternative route capable of resuming uninterrupted supplies from East to West, and vice versa. The strategic location of the South Caucasus is important in the framework of the Middle Corridor for developing transport links in the Eurasian continent. In this context, Azerbaijan, as the transport hub of the region, can play a significant role in improving interregional communication.

The creation of a safe route for overland transportation is the common goal of the corridor’s countries. The rise of the Middle Corridor as a viable route not only increases the resilience of the participating countries vis-à-vis Russian pressures, but also decreases Russia’s importance in another geostrategic area: connectivity. At the same time, China possesses investment potential for infrastructure development; the economies of the corridor countries have successfully attracted investment and already proved that they are ready to be open for business and to cooperate with a number of actors. The BTK railway was a successful beginning, and the EU has a stable regional competence and the willingness to increase its influence in the region. In addition, given the complex international situation, international transshippers need to secure a safe alternative route that will prevent countries from facing a major logistical crisis.

Although the current corridor conditions, especially with regard to its reduced capacity and lack of strong coordination, have made the Middle Corridor not particularly competitive in the eyes of transport companies, all the efforts undertaken by the participating countries offer good prospects for the improvement of the route. One of the main advantages of the Middle Corridor is that it is not subject to any international limitations compared to other routes. Participating countries have clearly demonstrated their willingness to take steps to optimize the corridor's capacity, and the recently inaugurated infrastructure projects offer promising opportunities. The redirection to the Middle Corridor of an increasing number of goods previously transported through Russia is of great benefit to all the countries involved. Conversely, it is reasonable to expect that, in the short and medium term, there will be more and more cohesion with the aim of improving the infrastructural obstacles that have hitherto prevented the optimal functioning of this route.

Türkiye's Eastern Engagement: Framing and Focusing This Ambition Wisely Matters

Alper Coşkun*

Türkiye is a long-standing NATO ally that also prides itself on being a founding member of many leading European institutions. Yet, by virtue of its history and geography, Türkiye is at the same time an integral part of Asia; hence, its self-depiction as the easternmost European and the westernmost Asian country. As Türkiye prepares to commemorate in 2023 the centennial of the proclamation of the Republic of Türkiye, it is adapting to the realities of a multi-polar world order and exhibiting greater interest in the Global South. In 2019, Türkiye announced an initiative coined 'Asia Anew', designed to strengthen its interaction with the East. This analysis considers Türkiye's goal of deepening its eastern engagement to be on the mark. It argues that this ambition needs to be framed in accordance with Türkiye's western vocation and calls for Türkiye to focus on deepening and widening its cooperation in the South Caucasus and Central Asia in view of the new opportunities that are presenting themselves.

Keywords: Türkiye, Russia, South Caucasus, Central Asia, NATO.



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Introduction

Russia's war in Ukraine has refocused global attention on Euro-Atlantic security and the fact that peace and stability in this region cannot be taken for granted. But it has not changed the overriding truth that the global centre of gravity is gradually shifting to the east.

Türkiye is among those trying to reposition itself according to this geopolitical reality by intensifying its eastward gaze. While this makes sense, Ankara should have two considerations in mind:

Firstly, Türkiye should pursue its ambition to deepen its engagement in the east, including with China and the wider Pacific region, with due regard for its western vocation. Türkiye's inherent uniqueness as a country that is anchored in the West but is also a part of the East adds to its strength and appeal. Therefore, accordingly calibrating the right balance in its policies and actions is in Türkiye's own interest.

Secondly, deepening Türkiye's role in the South Caucasus and Central Asia should be the centrepiece of Türkiye's eastern outlook. In the early 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Türkiye had euphorically engaged these regions largely inhabited by its kinsmen. That effort needs to be reinvigorated. There is untapped potential in this vast region in fields such as energy, transportation, and the defence industry, and current geopolitical trends have brought about new and favourable dynamics that Türkiye can act on.

Duality: A source of strength for Türkiye

A recurrent and somewhat worn-out discussion, both within and beyond Türkiye, is about whether the country is a part of the West or the East. The answer is short and simple: Türkiye is a part of both. It is critically important for Türkiye to believe in and effectively practise this reality. Seeing Türkiye through the wider prism of being a country with a foothold in both the West and the East has always been a core element of the foreign policy of Türkiye. It was an approach that was embraced at the outset by the Republic of Türkiye and, in many ways, constituted a natural continuum of an Ottoman legacy.

Türkiye's founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was cognizant of the value of Türkiye's historical and natural ties to the East and took care

to nurture them, even as he focused on integrating the country into the western world. Far from seeing any contradiction, he utilized this quality of the young nation to offset challenging external dynamics coming from either direction. This duality prevailed even as Türkiye's western orientation became more pronounced during the height of the Cold War to offset the weight of a growing Soviet threat from the north.

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Today, the rise of China and the shift in global geopolitics towards the Asia-Pacific region has amplified the importance of an eastern outlook for Türkiye. And, as Türkiye tries to redirect its energy through initiatives like its Asia Anew policy,¹ it will need to keep the right balance between this ambition and the country's western vocation.

This can be achieved by consistent action and messaging in a manner that precludes doubts over the country's orientation. This, of course, is a wide-ranging effort that encompasses things from adherence to universal standards in democratic practices at home to assuming an international posture that is commensurate to Türkiye's place in the western world. Türkiye's trajectory should not raise doubts on either count.

For starters, what not to do

This year in February, Türkiye commemorated 70 years in NATO, the preeminent western collective defence alliance.² And, just seven months later, within the same calendar year, Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced his vision for Türkiye to become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),³ a platform contemplated at the time by China and Russia, above all, to offset the western-dominated global order.

1 Mfa.gov.tr, "Asia Anew Initiative", available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/asia-anew-initiative.en.mfa> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

2 Mfa.gov.tr, "No: 53, Press Release Regarding the 70th Anniversary of Türkiye's Accession to NATO", 18 February 2022, available at: https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-53_-turkiye-nin-nato-ya-katiliminin-70-yildonumu-hk.en.mfa (accessed: September 30, 2022)

3 Reuters, "Turkey's Erdogan targets joining Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, media reports say", September 17, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-targets-joining-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-media-2022-09-17/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

The contradiction between Türkiye's long-standing membership in NATO (not to mention its candidate status to the European Union) and the idea of it joining the SCO did not go unnoticed in many circles. But some in Türkiye saw it differently; the world was changing, and so should Türkiye's approach to it.

Pundits of Türkiye joining the SCO reference the emergence of a multipolar world order, especially with the rise of China and the growing importance of the East in all domains. Even some non-partisan, reputable analysts view the proposition of Türkiye joining the SCO as an opportunity.⁴ The conventional wisdom behind this thinking is that Türkiye needs to expand its horizons according to evolving circumstances, that it cannot be constrained by an outdated western-centric outlook on global affairs, and that the obvious direction to turn to for emerging opportunities is the East.⁵ The subtext is that the West is in decline.

These are compelling arguments that have also gained traction with the Turkish public at large. According to a recent public survey, whereas in 2016 only 6% of the population believed in the need to increase Türkiye's engagement with China and the far east, today 26% believe that to be the case.⁶ This changing sentiment is a function of evolving global realities. It is also nurtured by a sense of estrangement from the West that has partly infused Türkiye and has come to disproportionately dominate the national discourse.

This latter dynamic is something that President Erdoğan is aware of, increasingly exhibits an affiliation to, but more importantly, is apt at stoking for political purposes. His sudden pronouncement of Türkiye's SCO membership fits this pattern and can be read in this light, especially as it comes against the backdrop of rising election fever in the country.

Türkiye is moving towards presidential and parliamentary elections in June 2023. Meanwhile, the economy is in dire straits, burdened, among

4 Yetkin, M. , "Shanghai Summit and Turkey: New Balance of Power", *Yetkin Report*, September 15, 2022, available at: <https://yetkinreport.com/en/2022/09/15/shanghai-summit-and-turkey-new-balance-of-power/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

5 Öney, S. "Turkey's new President and foreign alliances" (translation from Turkish), *Politikoyol*, September 20, 2022, available at: <https://www.politikoyol.com/turkiyenin-yeni-cumhurbaskani-ve-dis-ittifaklar/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

6 Adın, M. "Turkish Foreign Policy Public Perceptions Survey – 2022" (translation from Turkish), Kadir Has University, September 8, 2022, available at: https://www.khas.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/TDP_2022_TUR_FINAL_05.09.2022.pdf (accessed: September 30, 2022)

other things, by a steep rise in inflation. An overwhelming percentage of the population believe that the economy is being mismanaged.⁷ Galvanizing public support through foreign policy stunts becomes a convenient low-hanging fruit under such political circumstances.

While the whirlwind around his statement about Türkiye joining the SCO had not even subsided, President Erdoğan took the stage at another international venue on the other side of the world and this time gave a very different message. In an address to the 77th session of the UN General Assembly in New York on 29 September, Erdoğan underscored Türkiye's European identity as a NATO ally of 70 years. Only then did he speak of Türkiye's engagement in Asia, with no mention of the SCO.⁸

It did not, however, take long for him to return to the topic of the SCO, albeit in a slightly different tone. Just a few days later, this time at a press conference in Türkiye, Erdoğan cited the combined population and gross national product figures of SCO countries as 3.2 billion people and \$20 trillion respectively, and went on to make the case for Türkiye's enhanced engagement with this part of the world. His comments notably fell short of talking about full membership to the SCO, though it is not clear whether that was a considered omission.

As Türkiye's official rhetoric oscillates in this manner, it is difficult to predict how far the idea of Türkiye becoming a full member of the SCO will be taken. This, by the way, is a topic on which others, such as SCO members Russia and China, will also have to weigh in. In fact, the Russians have already done so by underlining the incompatibility of NATO and SCO membership.⁹ Moscow's reaction is a good reminder of two things: firstly, that NATO ally Türkiye joining the SCO as a full member is unrealistic, and secondly, that Türkiye's current status as a dialogue partner in the SCO is the right dose of engagement.

7 Twitter (@ozersencar1), "The change over time in the answers to the question of whether the economy is managed well or badly." (translation from Turkish), February 17, 2022, available at: <https://twitter.com/ozersencar1/status/1494253482576121860> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

8 Tccb.gov.tr, "Speech at the 77th General Assembly of the United Nations" (translation from Turkish), September 20, 2022, available at: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/139774/birlesmis-milletler-77-genel-kurulu-nda-yaptiklari-konusma> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

9 Euronews, "According to Russia, Turkey cannot join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization while it is a NATO member (translation from Turkish), September 20, 2022, available at: <https://tr.euronews.com/2022/09/20/rusyaya-gore-turkiye-nato-uyesiyken-sangay-isbirligi-orgutune-katilamaz> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

Changing dynamics in the South Caucasus and Central Asia

Türkiye's post-Cold War outreach to the South Caucasus and Central Asia in the early 1990s had come in the wake of a global geopolitical transformation that was driven by the sudden dissolution of the Soviet Union. Although the forces of change are different today, we once again find ourselves at a transformative juncture in international relations.

The greatest shock this time has come from the unexpected re-emergence of war in Europe, compounded by the forceful annexation of territory under the threat of nuclear sabre rattling.

A similar image in terms of Russia's waning influence is emerging in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia's shadow has always loomed large over this region, particularly in relation to emerging cooperation mechanisms it is not involved in.

As the perpetrator of this aggression, Russia faces enormous sanctions, and its stature as an energy supplier for Europe – that was dubious to start with – has irrevocably been shattered. Russia's overreach in Ukraine has been self-defeating in many ways, including by consequently depriving Russia of its greatest leverage over Germany and Europe as the continent moves to wean itself off energy dependency on Russia.

A similar image in terms of Russia's waning influence is emerging in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia's shadow has always loomed large over this region, particularly in relation to emerging cooperation mechanisms it is not involved in. At times, this has caused its former vassals to tread lightly and be over cautious when engaging in new ideas. Nowadays, though, that hesitation seems to be evaporating. Putin's dismissive narrative on Ukrainian nationhood and Russia's indiscriminate use of force have led to widespread unease. It has eliminated any semblance of altruism in cooperation with Russia and, instead, sowed the seeds for a recalibration among countries of the region in their approach to this ever-fraught relationship.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Kazakhstan, where President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev defied expectations by refusing to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰ He is now busy transforming the country's political system and building an image of himself as a truly

10 Umarov, T. "Kazakhstan's Snap Presidential Election: A Shot at Democratization?", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 15, 2022, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87922> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

independent leader. This stands in sharp contrast to the situation at the beginning of the year when he called for Russian-led support through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to quell domestic unrest.¹¹

Another example is Azerbaijan which, for its part, raised its profile as a reliable alternative source of energy for Europe by agreeing to increase its gas exports to 20 billion cubic meters a year by 2027.¹² Meanwhile, after having liberated its occupied territories in 2020 as Russia looked on, Azerbaijan made further advances against Armenia this September when confronted with challenges on its state border.¹³ Unsurprisingly, Russia's inaction in the face of Azerbaijan's military gains became a source of resentment among Armenians who had already been taken aback in 2020, when their appeal for intervention by the CSTO had fallen on deaf ears in Moscow. The Russian-led CSTO had a good pretext: the conflict was not taking place on Armenian territory and the CSTO did not have any obligation for extra-territorial intervention.

Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two Central Asian countries that host Russian military bases, engaged in renewed fighting this year over a long-standing border dispute, revealing Russia's inability to, or deliberate choice not to, weigh in on the conflict.

These developments have inevitably raised questions over the degree to which Russia retains the ability to exert influence in its 'back yard'.¹⁴ Clearly, neither Russia's nor, for that matter, China's influence in this region can be dismissed. Nor should it be underestimated. Both Russia and China can be assumed to have their own reasoning in their

11 Daily Sabah, "State of emergency in Kazakhstan as Tokayev asks CSTO's help, January 5, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/state-of-emergency-in-kazakhstan-as-tokayev-asks-cstos-help> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

12 Reuters, "EU signs deal with Azerbaijan to double gas imports by 2027", July 18, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/eu-signs-deal-with-azerbaijan-double-gas-imports-by-2027-2022-07-18/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

13 Ilyushina, M. "Azerbaijan and Armenia exchange fire in Nagorno-Karabakh border zone", *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2022, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/13/armenia-azerbaijan-karabakh-border-conflict/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

14 Weir, F. "Is war in Ukraine costing Russia control of its own backyard?", *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 28, 2022, available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2022/0928/Is-war-in-Ukraine-costing-Russia-control-of-its-own-backyard> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

approaches to emerging contingencies in the region, including when they choose not to act.¹⁵

But be that as it may, in Russia's case, regional dynamics have been affected by its act of war against Ukraine, coming at the expense of Russia's general standing. This, in turn, has hastened some existing trends and unleashed others, in turn presenting new opportunities for Türkiye.

The momentum is increasing

Azerbaijan has historically been Türkiye's linchpin in its connection to the east. The same can be said for Türkiye's role as Azerbaijan's western gateway. Since Azerbaijan's independence was restored in 1991, the two countries have systematically deepened and expanded their cooperation.

The two brotherly nations also used the synergy among them to advocate regional cooperation schemes, resulting in grand projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, as well as the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway and the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP)

Azerbaijan has historically been Türkiye's linchpin in its connection to the east. The same can be said for Türkiye's role as Azerbaijan's western gateway.

natural gas conduit, both of which extend into Europe. Just recently, Türkiye and Azerbaijan agreed to double the annual capacity of TANAP to 32 billion cubic meters a year, marking a significant development in the wake of rising energy prices and supply shortages that have come with resounding effects in Europe.¹⁶

The trajectory of the Turkic Council that was established in 2009 between Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye is a good example of this changing dynamic. After years of reluctance to do so, Uzbekistan acceded in 2019 and Turkmenistan, which, together with Hungary, is currently an observer, is also expected to join.¹⁷

15 Doolotkeldieva, A. and Marat, E. "Why Russia and China Aren't Intervening in Central Asia", *Foreign Policy*, October 4, 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/04/tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-russia-china-intervention-central-asia/> (accessed: September 30, 2022)

16 TRT Haber, "TANAP's capacity will be doubled" (translation from Turkish), October 6, 2022, available at: <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/ekonomi/tanapin-kapasitesi-iki-katina-kadar-artirilacak-713926.html> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

17 Business Türkmenistan, "Turkmenistan will become a full member of the Organization of Turkic States" (translation from Turkish), September 30, 2022, available at: <https://>

The Turkic Council rebranded itself in 2021 as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), thereby raising its political stature, and adopted a landmark document called Turkic World Vision 2040, laying out an ambitious agenda for cooperation.¹⁸ Among the stated goals are political and security cooperation; economic and sectoral cooperation; enhancing people-to-people contacts; and expanding ties with external parties. This is the strongest manifestation ever by these countries of their desire to leverage the OTS to strengthen their collective resilience through intensified cooperation.

The momentum behind the OTS can also be seen in motion in different formats among the countries of the region, with energy and transportation projects taking the lead in terms of their output.

Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, for example, finally resolved a long-standing dispute over gas fields in the Caspian Sea in 2021, opening prospects for joint exploitation and enhanced export capacity to the west.¹⁹ Kazakhstan, meanwhile, quickly learned from Russia's recent temporary blockage of its oil exports through the Caspian Sea and moved to diversify its energy trade routes, including through cooperation with Azerbaijan.²⁰

On the transportation front, the foreign and transport ministers of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye met in a newly established joint format in June 2022 in Baku, with the aim of boosting their cooperation and strengthening the potential of the transcaspian pathway, also known as the Middle Corridor.²¹

business.com.tm/tr/post/9226/turkmenistan-turk-devletleri-teshilat%C4%B1na-tam-uye-olacak (accessed: October 6, 2022)

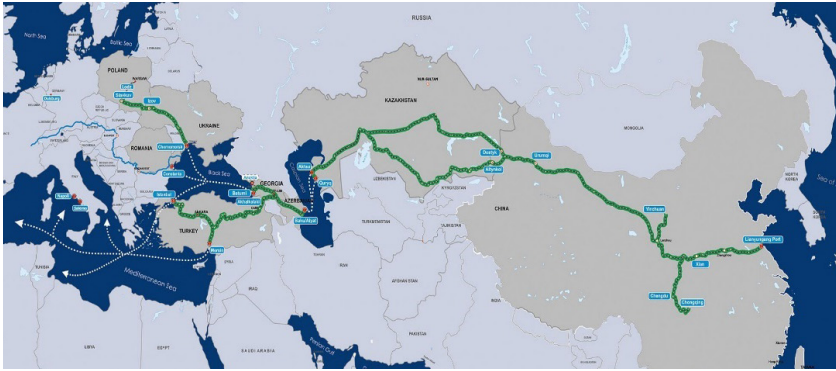
18 Turkkon.org, "Turkic World Vision – 2040", available at: <https://www.turkkon.org/assets/pdf/haberler/turkic-world-vision-2040-2396-97.pdf> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

19 Daily Sabah, "Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan to resolve disputes on Caspian oil field", January 22, 2021, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/azerbaijan-turkmenistan-to-resolve-disputes-on-caspian-oil-field> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

20 Reuters, "After Russian move on pipeline, Kazakhstan says it needs other routes", July 7, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/kazakhstan-needs-diversify-oil-supply-routes-tokayev-says-2022-07-07/> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

21 Fatih, C.M. "The Modern Silk Road in the 21st Century: Where Are We in the Middle Corridor?" (translation from Turkish), Ankara Politikalar Merkezi, January 21, 2021, available at: https://apm.org.tr/2021/01/21/21-yuzyilda-modern-ipek-yolu-orta-koridorun-neresindeyiz/?utm_source=pocket_mylist (accessed: October 6, 2022)

The Middle Corridor



Source: <https://middlecorridor.com/en/route>

This is a particularly important development, given the potential contributions of this route to sustaining east–west trade flows. The middle corridor brings considerable advantages compared to its alternatives, such as the northern route through Russia or sea-based traffic that carries an overwhelming percentage of western-bound goods, in metrics such as distance, days of unfettered access within a calendar year, and connections to air and seaports.²² These attributes of the middle corridor have appreciated exponentially after the COVID-19 pandemic and, more recently, as a result of the war in Ukraine, which has led to a realization of the importance of resilient supply chains.

A new and flourishing area of engagement that Türkiye is spearheading in the region is related to the defence industry. As the success of Türkiye’s unmanned aerial vehicles, and most notably that of the Baykar-produced Bayraktar TB2, continues to capture global headlines, including in the context of the war in Ukraine, Türkiye is making a name for itself as a source country for arms supplies.²³ Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan have all purchased the already legendary TB2, while Kazakhstan recently signed a deal to produce Turkish Aerospace’s ANKA model.²⁴

22 Mfa.gov.tr, “Turkey’s Multilateral Transportation Policy”, available at: https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa (accessed: October 6, 2022)

23 Carlin, M. “How the Turkish-made TB2 drone gave Ukraine an edge against Russia”, *Business Insider*, September 18, 2022, available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-turkish-baykar-tb2-drone-gave-ukraine-edge-against-russia-2022-9> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

24 Kumenov, A. “Kazakhstan seals deal to produce Turkish drones under license”,

With Baykar looking to build a drone factory in Ukraine and Turkish Aerospace deciding to co-produce in Kazakhstan,²⁵ Türkiye is upending Russia's traditional hold over defence industry sales in the region and challenging China, thanks to the success of its cost-efficient and battle-tested technologies. Moreover, Türkiye's success is not only limited to drone sales, as interest in different types of Turkish automated weapons systems and other items such as attack helicopters, patrol vessels, corvettes, and frigates is on the rise, both in the region and beyond.²⁶

In terms of new opportunities, it is also important to bear in mind the potential impetus that can come if Armenia and Azerbaijan are able to sign an official peace agreement, and there could be progress in the normalization of relations between Armenia and Türkiye. Despite many existing challenges, this is a time of hope in that regard.²⁷ Both Azerbaijan and Türkiye have repeatedly said that, should there be concrete progress, Armenia's isolation would come to an end and regional cooperation would prosper. Together with its political implications, such a development would undoubtedly inject additional energy to cooperation efforts in the region.

The middle corridor brings considerable advantages compared to its alternatives, such as the northern route through Russia or sea-based traffic that carries an overwhelming percentage of western-bound goods, in metrics such as distance, days of unfettered access within a calendar year, and connections to air and seaports.

Conclusion

While the global balance tilts towards the east, power dynamics are shifting in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia's grip over the region is dwindling and this is opening the road for greater change. Countries of the region have embraced this reality and are adapting

Eurasianet, May 13, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-seals-deal-to-produce-turkish-drones-under-license> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

25 Daily Sabah, "Zelenskyy honors Turkish drone maker, discusses its Ukraine plant", September 11, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/zelenskyy-honors-turkish-drone-maker-discusses-its-ukraine-plant> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

26 Tavsan, S. "Turkish defense contractors enjoy sales bonanza in Asia", *Nikkei Asia*, May 3, 2022, available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Turkish-defense-contractors-enjoy-sales-bonanza-in-Asia> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

27 Coşkun, A. and Heffern, J. "Bottom-Up Change in the South Caucasus Is Possible", *The National Interest*, February 5, 2022, available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/bottom-change-south-caucasus-possible-200316> (accessed: October 6, 2022)

accordingly, further strengthening the winds of change. By virtue of its history and geography, Türkiye is well placed to benefit from these developments. A well-framed policy that embraces Türkiye's strengths and aims to build on its ties in the South Caucasus and Central Asia can empower Türkiye to make the best of this moment. That, in turn, would be the natural centrepiece of Türkiye's eastern engagement.

Future and Consequences of US Strategic Interest in the South Caucasus

James Carafano*

One of the unexpected outcomes of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a reconsideration of the strategic importance of the South Caucasus to the United States' effort to protect its global interests and responsibilities. Although the region does not represent a vital interest for the US, stability, prosperity, and regional integration in the South Caucasus are now becoming increasingly important to it, given the current military crisis in another part of the European neighbourhood. Therefore, there is a need for greater engagement from the US, in concert with its European and Middle East allies, in promoting a broader range of security, economic, and energy partnerships. Most notably, Washington is expected to look more favourably on accelerating regional integration along the "middle corridor" – the sea and land route from Southern Europe via the Black Sea to Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and the Central Asian states. This process will likely be supported by Türkiye and accepted with growing accommodation by Russia, China, and Iran.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, United States, South Caucasus, Eurasia, Central Asia



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Beyond the Road to Nowhere

To Washington, for most of modern history, the nations of South Caucasus region were the epitome of the furthest foreign country: far away, poorly understood, and of little import. During the Cold War, the lands beyond the Black Sea lay well behind the Iron Curtain. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the “end of history”, geo-politics seemed to matter less, with “middle earth” mattering the least of all.

From an American perspective, until recently, prospects for overcoming the obstacles to regional integration across the heart of the ancient Silk Road looked overwhelming. Across the former Soviet space and neighbourhood, many issues bedevilled cooperation, including the former conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the occupation of Georgia’s territory by Russia, and the collapse of the government in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. Further, the continued antagonism of the West to Russia, China, and Iran, all of which border and influence the region, has led to viewing the region as an area of elevated strategic risk and uncertainty.

After 9/11, if the US paid attention at all, the post-Soviet space and surrounding nations were viewed through the prism of global counterterrorism operations. The focus of American action was, without question, Afghanistan. The prolonged post-conflict occupation and major force presence in support of the Afghan government, as well as the growing strategic bilateral relationship with India, expanded American interests in South Asia in new and important ways. During the presidency of Donald Trump, the US also increased its engagement in Central Asia, while traditional relations with Pakistan became increasingly strained.

In many ways, the Trump administration marked a return to great power politics for the US.¹ Arguably, since the end of the Cold War, the US, like many Western powers, looked to increasing international cooperation and the establishment of global norms to mitigate and moderate conflict. Republican and Democratic presidents, each in their own manner, viewed increasing globalism as both constructive and inevitable.

1 O’Rourke, R., “Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress”, *Congressional Research Service*, March 10, 2022, p. 4, available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43838/92> (accessed: September 9, 2022).

In contrast, the Trump administration recognized the challenge that great power competition represented to global stability and adopted increasingly aggressive policies in dealing with adversarial powers, principally China, Iran, and Russia.² The administration, for instance, withdrew from the Iran Deal (The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which granted Tehran access to international markets and sanctions relief in exchange for promises to constrain its nuclear programme), insisted on strengthening NATO, and challenged China in the Indo-Pacific region, notably joining the “Quad”, a cooperative group of the US, Japan, Australia, and India.

The US also recognized the value of the middle corridor (this runs from Europe to Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and, via the Black Sea, to Türkiye) for expanding European energy security, a key aspect of strengthening the NATO alliance.

Bringing geo-politics back to American foreign policy was like getting a retired racehorse back on the track. Washington had to recover its muscle memory on how to compete with great powers. As a global power with global interests and responsibilities, the primary geo-political priorities for the US are a stable Europe, greater Middle East, and Indo-Pacific – the three great “lily pads” that link the world together – as well as the critical commons: the air, sea, and cyber routes that connect them. This worldview is different from globalization; it shifts the focus from obsessing about global integration to a preoccupation with global access, including surety, redundancy, resiliency in infrastructure, and supply chains.

This strategic shift explains, in part, the increased attention Washington began to show to the space from the Black Sea to Central Asia. The Trump administration, for instance, looked to improved relations in the Central Asia to strengthen the American position in Afghanistan and challenge the Russian and Chinese spheres of influence.

The US also recognized the value of the middle corridor (this runs from Europe to Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and, via the Black Sea, to Türkiye) for expanding European energy security, a key aspect of strengthening the NATO alliance. The Trump administration, for instance, embraced the Central European Three Seas Initiative to enhance north–south energy infrastructure. Former President Trump intervened with the Italian Prime Minister to press

2 Carafano, J.J. et al., “Preparing the US National Security Strategy for 2020 and Beyond”, *The Heritage Foundation*, May 23, 2019, available at: <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/preparing-the-us-national-security-strategy-2020-and-beyond> (accessed: September 9, 2022).

for the completion of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC). Initiatives to pair wider European access to energy, while at the same time opposing the completion of Nord Stream 2, reflected the US interest in limiting the dependence of NATO partners on Russian energy and promoting diverse energy options including Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Notably, the Trump administration did not intervene in the Azerbaijan–Armenia conflict in Autumn 2020, viewing Azerbaijan regaining control over most of its occupied territory as a positive and stabilizing development in the region.

Back to the Future

When Joe Biden assumed the US presidency in 2020, there was initially an abrupt shift in US policy, in large part reflecting a return to more the more traditional post-Cold War policies practised during the Obama administration (2009–2017). Biden intended to readopt of a model of managed competition and cooperation with China, Russia, and Iran. The administration quickly dropped objections to the completion of Nord Stream 2, started talks to re-enter the Iran Deal, and rolled back tariffs on Chinese imports.

Most notably, in the summer of 2021, President Biden abruptly decided on the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. Following this action, the government of Afghanistan quickly collapsed. The potential for the expansion of US influence in South and the Central Asia evaporated as well. Further, the administration demonstrated scant interest in the South Caucasus or Central Asia. This portended a return to a diminishing US interest in the middle corridor. However, what the administration intended to do and the reality of what geopolitics demand quickly proved to be two very different things.

Changing Strategic Landscape: Before and After the Ukraine War

Several factors have come together to cause both Americans and Europeans to rethink how they think about this region in an era of great power competition. Meanwhile, Russia's protracted war in Ukraine, while raising regional tensions, also exposes the reality that – win, lose, or draw – Russia will require months and years to re-arm and re-equip before it can contemplate further significant expansion in the in post-Soviet space. In the wake of sanctions on Russia after the invasion of

Ukraine, an expanded European effort to improve energy security by diversifying energy sources became an imperative as never before.

To this extent, one significant project that matured despite the many concerns over regional stability was the SGC, which linked gas fields in Azerbaijan via a pipeline from the Caspian Sea to Georgia, Türkiye, and across the Mediterranean to Italy. This project proceeded despite regional challenges, as well as opposition by Germany and Russian efforts to thwart competition by funding environmental and political groups to obstruct competition. The US active engagement with the Italian government brought to fruition the final leg of the system, which is now operational.

In the near term, energy clearly will be a significant driver in the EU's external relations as Europe seeks to diversify energy sources. In July 2022, the European Union signed a deal with Azerbaijan to obtain additional gas via the SGC. Though the volume is a fraction of the amount needed to replace Russian gas, the deal is considered strategically important. The SGC has renewed interest in the Caucasus and Central Asia as potential sources of energy, global transport, and logistics, and potentially manufacturing and trade partnerships.

In the near term, energy clearly will be a significant driver in the EU's external relations as Europe seeks to diversify energy sources. In July 2022, the European Union signed a deal with Azerbaijan to obtain additional gas via the SGC.

In addition to the pipeline, regional logistics hubs continue to develop, including the modernization of the port of Poti in Georgia and the redevelopment of the port of Baku in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan also sees the middle corridor as of strategic importance and promotes regional integration as a priority.

In the following years, Türkiye will likely play an increasingly important role in the South Caucasus. In addition to its current bilateral relations, Türkiye will continue developing closer bonds with Georgia, a strategically important country for connectivity along the middle corridor. With the prospects for NATO and EU membership looking less likely in the near term, Georgia may well turn to Türkiye for the security guarantees and economic engagement it is not gaining at present. Türkiye has been a major investor in and supporter of regional efforts, and has also revitalized the Turkic Council, which includes Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan. In Central Asia, Uzbekistan appears most forward-leaning in seeing the middle corridor as a strategic advantage and an opportunity to further develop its role in energy, logistics, and manufacturing.

The interest of other stakeholders in engagement with the US, Europe, and, to some extent, South Korea and Japan in this region is growing. Japan, for example, has tested the middle corridor for shipping goods to ports in China, then railed across the Central Asia to Azerbaijan and trans-shipped across the Caspian Sea to Europe. The US is considering a regional hub of its International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) in Tbilisi, Georgia.³

China's effort to develop the middle corridor as part of the vast global "belt and road" network envisioned by Beijing met with scant success. Many regional partners were deeply sceptical of joint projects with the Chinese, witnessing the limited success of the Pakistan–China Economic Corridor and being distrustful of Beijing, which sought to control and dominate projects, often using its own workforce and materials. China, if anything seems to be less engaged in the Caucasus and Southern Europe, focusing more effort on expanding opportunities in Latin America and Africa.

At the same time, a new Iran Deal remains elusive. The regime will still be under significant sanctions, suggesting it is less likely that, in the near-term, Iran will make significant efforts to interfere with its northern neighbours.

Another factor that has changed the state of play and presented a new reality is Azerbaijan's success in the Second Karabakh War in 2020.⁴

Together, these developments leave more geopolitical "breathing spaces" for countries in the region to chart more independent policies.

A Path Forward

While the prospects for an East–West transport corridor look more positive, the likelihood of a North–South economic corridor (Russia to the Caucasus to Iran) looks increasingly less promising due to the continued political and economic isolation of Russia and Iran. Though

3 Dfc.gov, *Expanding trade and port capacity in Georgia*, available at: <https://www.dfc.gov/investment-story/expanding-trade-and-port-capacity-georgia> (accessed: September 30, 2022).

4 Coffey, L., "One Year After the Second Karabakh War, the US Needs to Increase Engagement in the South Caucasus", *The Heritage Foundation*, October 1, 2021, available at: <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/one-year-after-the-second-karabakh-war-the-us-needs-increase-engagement-the-south> (accessed: September 9, 2022).

the East–West corridor has made significant progress through a combination of public–private investments and management, largely without Chinese funds and influence, there are several issues, such as customs and border controls, data management, and lack of modernized infrastructure, that thwart efficient integration, making the route less economically competitive with the northern corridor across Russia or southern maritime routes. Nevertheless, the global demand for alternative transport and supply chains to mitigate disruptions makes the middle corridor attractive as an alternative means to get some goods to market. As a result, the route will continue to develop. However, a dramatic downturn in demand due to a global economic slowdown would negatively impact future efforts.

The middle corridor will likely continue to develop as an economic belt with increasing interest and support from the US and Europe, who see the potential for increasing the resilience of supply chains and energy supplies.

The middle corridor will likely continue to develop as an economic belt with increasing interest and support from the US and Europe, who see the potential for increasing the resilience of supply chains and energy supplies. In addition, both will see strategic benefits in a more stable and prosperous region, buffering global competition with China, Iran, and Russia. As China, Iran, and Russia are all overstretched strategically, and since the corridor is unlikely to be used as a means to isolate or contain any of these powers, it is more likely they will opt for cooperation and acceptance than competition.

That said, there is every expectation that all three will continue to use soft power and “grey zone” tactics to continue to try to influence the political alignment of the region to their advantage. Kazakhstan, for instance, will likely remain highly susceptible to Russian influence. Moscow will also continue to use its partnership with Armenia with a view to impacting Azerbaijan’s policy. Georgia continues to undergo political turmoil with political forces pulling in opposing directions: one pro-Moscow and the other pressing for continuing integration with the West.⁵

There are wild cards that could impact the path of regional progress. One is stable, effective, and focused governments that are able and willing

⁵ Carafano, J.J., “How NATO Can Avoid the Death Spiral on Europe’s Frontier”, *The National Interest*, November 8, 2021, available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/how-nato-can-avoid-death-spiral-europe%E2%80%99s-frontier-195887> (accessed: September 9, 2022).

to cooperate. Kazakhstan and Georgia are of particular concern. The Russian strategy of using occupied areas and Russian ethnic minorities in neighbouring states to expand its influence and control is likely to continue regardless of the outcome of the war against Ukraine. In particular, influence operations, military threats, and pressure on states such as Kazakhstan and Georgia are bound to increase.

Another is the impact of global inflation and productivity, which could significantly diminish the viability of the middle corridor as a logistics route. A recent assessment from the Pew Research Center finds that the world's forty-four most advanced economies are nearly all seeing a spike in inflation, stating "consumer prices have risen substantially since pre-pandemic times."⁶ The highest is in Türkiye at over 50 percent. US inflation was more than nine percent in June 2022: in contrast, in 2020, the US inflation rate was 1.4 percent. Further, slowing economic growth and, in some cases, recession is plaguing a number of industrialized economies. These developments could very well slow interest and investment in the middle corridor.

Yet another potential gamechanger is the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). This was launched in 2015 as a joint project of Central European nations to promote critical infrastructure development in the region. The goal was to create a regional development initiative that would operate on commercial terms and redress the region's chronic infrastructure shortfalls. If this initiative in Central Europe is a success and looks to extend beyond EU-member states and expand connectivity and integration, there is a potential to grow to a "four seas initiative" looking to bridge projects across the Caspian Sea.⁷

Finally, there is the issue of climate policy, which adjures the development of oil and gas. Oil and gas are crucial to generating the prosperity needed to advance national and regional development in the region. The war against Ukraine, the energy crisis and spiralling prices in Europe have prompted reconsideration and moderation of some of the most aggressive anti-fossil fuel policies. If, however, policies become

6 DeSilver, D., "In the US and around the world, inflation is high and getting higher", *Pew Research Center*, June 15, 2022, available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/06/15/in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world-inflation-is-high-and-getting-higher/> (accessed: September 9, 2022).

7 Official website of the Three Sea Initiatives, available at: <https://3seas.eu/about/objectives> (accessed: September 30, 2022).

more strident, that could significantly and adversely affect the region.

Trigger Points (In Lieu of Conclusion)

There are several developments to watch for that could well signal whether the middle corridor is going to continue to gain momentum as an area of strategic interest for the West – or not.

Military to military cooperation: The US currently provides limited security assistance and no military sales programme to Azerbaijan as a result of prohibitions dating to the early years of the conflict with Armenia. If those restrictions are lifted and Washington actively engages in helping Baku enhance its self-defence capabilities, that will be an important sign of deeper US commitment to security and stability in the region. Whether progress is made in this area will largely be determined not only by US–Azerbaijani bilateral relations, but by the how the administration handles an aggressive Armenian lobbying effort targeting the administration and Congress.

If those restrictions are lifted and Washington actively engages in helping Baku enhance its self-defence capabilities, that will be an important sign of deeper US commitment to security and stability in the region.

Three Seas Initiative: A successful expansion of the 3SI would bode well for the South Caucasus, if the 3SI receives a burst of support from the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment or a substantial role in the reconstruction of Ukraine. At present, there are too many unknowns in the G7 plan, including reconciling the need for energy security with ambitious plans for a rapid green energy transition, the governance structure and funding for the G7 initiative, and the counter-actions to be expected from China and Russia to thwart Central Europe’s consolidation with the West. Regional issues that increase instability, however, such as renewed conflict in the Balkans, could also impact the focus on and efforts towards 3SI. The deciding factor in how 3SI develops could well be how effectively the region engages with Washington, Berlin, and Brussels. The Central European nations need powerful strategic partners to jump start their initiative; for that to happen, however, Central Europeans will need to deliver a more coherent and collective effort and sustained and persistent presence on the initiative in all three capitals.⁸

⁸ Kim, A., “3 Seas Initiative Deserves Greater Attention, America’s Increased Strategic Support”, *The Heritage Foundation*, June 21, 2022, available at: <https://www.heritage.org/europe/commentary/3-seas-initiative-deserves-greater-attention-americas-increased-strategic-support> (accessed: September 9, 2022).

The Caspian region's great energy resources could play a significant role in helping Europe to loosen its dependence on Russia for oil and gas.

Black Sea Security: An increasing NATO role in Black Sea security and stability would be another indicator of further interest in linking to the middle corridor. The NATO Strategic Concept unveiled in Madrid in 2022 highlighted the necessity of strengthening NATO's forward defensive posture, particularly singling out the Black Sea.⁹ This development is unsurprising given

Russia's war on Ukraine. Without question, beyond energy, maritime transport, and geopolitics, regional security will be the number one driver of competition and cooperation in the Black Sea region. Among the other inescapable realities that the war against Ukraine confirms is that the Black Sea is definitely part of Russia's strategic priority, now and into the future. Dominating the Black Sea is part of Russia's "counter encirclement" strategy. Weakening NATO's strategic position in the region is also important for China's plans to expand its scope of influence in Europe and North Africa. It is clear that Türkiye will continue to try to steer a course maintaining a relationship with Russia and its good standing as a NATO member. This will most strongly be reflected in continuing what Ankara sees as its stewardship role in the Black Sea, with free and open access to commerce over the long-term after the Ukraine conflict resolves, one way or the other. The role NATO, in particular the US and its Central European allies, chooses to play will be key. If they move aggressively to ensure a free and open Black Sea, that will be a prerequisite to assuring a linkage to the middle corridor.

Transcaspian Gas Pipeline: Another important indicator will be foreign interest in investment in the Transcaspian Gas Pipeline. The Caspian region's great energy resources could play a significant role in helping Europe to loosen its dependence on Russia for oil and gas. Europe already imports oil and gas from the Caspian, but it desperately needs oil and gas from Central Asia, and the only practical, cost-effective means to achieve this end is transportation initiatives that connect the eastern and western shores of the Caspian while bypassing both Russia and Iran.¹⁰

9 Nato.int, "The Strategic Concept's Key Aspects", available at: <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/> (accessed: September 30, 2022).

10 Coffey, L., "A Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline: Start Small but Aim Big", *The Heritage Foundation*, May 20, 2019, available at: <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/trans-caspian-gas-pipeline-start-small-aim-big> (accessed: September 9, 2022).

Climate Policy: Look for a significant shift in US and European climate policy that takes a more realistic approach to gas and oil investments.¹¹ Europe needs more energy. The notion that a short-term fix of importing more oil and gas can be a stop gap to a transition to a continent powered by green energy is fanciful. For starters, renewable energies will never meet Europe's future needs. Further, no one is going to invest in more gas and oil infrastructure on the premise that these will be abandoned in a few years. There must be an opportunity to recoup their investments. Realistic investments in more oil and gas infrastructure are a prerequisite to more integration between the West and the middle corridor.

There are no guarantees that the US strategic interest in the region will be sustained over time. After all, in a region bordered by Europe, Russia, Iran, and Central Asia, lots of people get a vote in the future peace, security and prosperity of the neighbourhood. The reality is that the region and the wider circle nations that border the Caucasus would all benefit from a middle corridor that added to the value chain through the free flow of goods and services from East to West. It is project that should accommodate many interests.

11 Graziosi, S. and Carafano, J.J., "Europe still struggling through Ukraine crisis", *The Korean Herald*, April 27, 2022, available at: <https://m.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220425000858> (accessed: September 9, 2022).

Unpacking Türkiye-Russia dynamics in the Ukraine war and post-war situation in the South Caucasus

Natalia Konarzewska*

In recent years, Türkiye's relations with Russia have not been free from turbulence, but Ankara and Moscow have been able to maintain the relationship based on strategic calculations. The main aim of this article is to analyse how Türkiye's transactional relationship with Russia has functioned in the context of the recent conflicts in their neighbourhood: the war in Ukraine and the post-war security architecture in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan following the Second Karabakh War in 2020. This article argues that Russia's war in Ukraine creates not only risks for Türkiye, but also a wide range of opportunities to boost its economy and regional posture. In particular, Moscow's weakening military power gives Türkiye a chance to enhance its role in the post-war security architecture in the South Caucasus region.

Key words: Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Karabakh region,



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Introduction

Since Russia's war in Ukraine broke out on 24 February 2022, Türkiye has taken the side of neither protagonist and has mostly juggled relations with Moscow and Kyiv. Türkiye's policy towards the war in Ukraine has been focused on maximizing the benefits and mitigating the risks for its security and economy, which has been struggling recently. Ankara is engaged in the Russia–Ukraine conflict on multiple levels and strives to leverage its geopolitical position in the proximity of the theatre of war and at the crossroads of important energy and food export corridors. The latter has been particularly important as the war in Ukraine has caused major food and energy supply disruptions and cut-offs. As a result, Türkiye has been able to support Kyiv politically and militarily without severing ties with Russia and, unlike many Western countries, manages

Türkiye can position itself as a strategic go-between in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which has prompted Ankara to undertake diplomatic efforts to end the war and mitigate the large-scale food crisis that could have been a side effect of the conflict.

to continue energy cooperation with Moscow. Thanks to that, Türkiye can position itself as a strategic go-between in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which has prompted Ankara to undertake diplomatic efforts to end the war and mitigate the large-scale food crisis that could have been a side effect of the conflict.

The Ukraine war and Türkiye's relations with Russia have also had an important impact on the post-war situation in Karabakh region. Since the end of the Second Karabakh War (2020), Türkiye and Russia have become pillars of the security architecture in the South Caucasus; the region has become another geopolitical space involved in their transactional relationship, which is a mix of cooperation and competition based on pragmatic calculations. The military campaign in Ukraine, which did not go as planned, shifted Russia's attention away from the South Caucasus and exposed the country's various military weaknesses. Because Russia is a security guarantor of the Trilateral Statement of 10 November 2020, the resulting security vacuum might be filled by Türkiye, which will be further boosted by planned connectivity projects with Azerbaijan.

Diplomatic efforts

Türkiye is still able to successfully maintain an uneasy balance between Kyiv and Moscow, even though that initially seemed unsustainable in a mid-term perspective. In February, Türkiye strongly condemned

Russia's recognition of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk separatist regions¹ and subsequent military attack on Ukraine.² Ankara has also striven to simultaneously support Ukraine and not alienate Moscow, in an effort to position Türkiye as a mediator.

Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was one of the few world leaders to visit Ukraine just before the war broke out on 24 February 2022. Erdoğan came to Kyiv to sign a long-awaited free trade agreement between Ukraine and Türkiye, which had been negotiated for 12 years, and to conclude an important drone-manufacturing partnership, but these were not the only reasons. At that time, tensions between Russia and Ukraine were running high and observers were expecting that war could start at any time. Türkiye's President offered to organize a trilateral meeting with Russian and Ukrainian representatives under Türkiye's auspices to end the crisis. Türkiye's offer was not accepted then but, since the start of the conflict, Ankara has been able to bring the warring sides to the negotiating table on several occasions.³

Türkiye did not join Western sanctions against Russia but, a few days after the war broke out, Ankara closed the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits to Russian ships following a request from Kyiv. Even though, at first, Türkiye was reluctant to do this,⁴ ultimately, it exercised its right to limit the passage of warships through these Turkish straits, as mandated by the Montreux Convention of 1936. Additionally, in late April, Ankara closed Turkish airspace to Russian military and civilian planes flying to Syria for three months. This was the first time it had done so since 2015, when Russia intervened in Syria

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1 Reuters.com, *Erdogan tells Putin Turkey does not recognise steps against Ukraine's territorial integrity*, February 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-says-cannot-abandon-ties-with-russia-or-ukraine-media-2022-02-23/> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

2 DailySabah.com, *Turkey to continue support Ukraine's territorial integrity, unity*, February 24, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-to-continue-support-ukraines-territorial-integrity-unity> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

3 Konarzewska, N., "Turkey, Ukraine and Russia: The Illusion of Neutrality, *The Turkey Analyst*, March 4, 2022, available at: <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/681-turkey-ukraine-and-russia-the-illusion-of-neutrality.html> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

4 Reuters.com, *Turkey hasn't decided to close straits to Russian ships -Turkish official*, February 26, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-hasnt-decided-close-straits-russian-ships-turkish-official-2022-02-26/> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

in support of President Bashar Assad.⁵ This surprising policy shift was likely motivated by a desire to show solidarity with Türkiye's NATO allies in their efforts to deter Russia.

Ankara's position towards Russia is more assertive than many experts initially thought, but that does not mean that the authorities in Türkiye want to completely burn their bridges with Moscow. Türkiye's Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, criticized the 'hawkish' approach to sanctioning Russia displayed by some NATO members. Instead, he proposed a step-by-step approach which envisages that sanctions would be gradually lifted in parallel to the withdrawal of the Russian army from Ukraine.⁶

Initially, Türkiye's mediation efforts were not welcomed by Russia and were disregarded by the West but, eventually, Ankara persuaded officials of the warring countries to meet in Türkiye for peace talks.

As a result of this policy, Türkiye, unlike many other NATO countries, has not severed either political or economic ties with Moscow. This is despite criticism and pressure from Ankara's Western allies, which think that Türkiye, a NATO member, should fully align its Russia policy with those of its Western partners. Nevertheless, Türkiye's politicians still maintain a dialogue with Moscow, and Türkiye's and Russia's presidents have met on several occasions since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. However, this did not stop Türkiye's president appealing publicly to Russia to end the war in Ukraine 'by diplomatic channels' at the 2022 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit, which took place on 15–16 September in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, where Russia's President Vladimir Putin was also present.⁷

Türkiye's economic relations with Russia have been growing recently, despite Western sanctions and the economic turbulence caused by the war in Ukraine.⁸ For example, Türkiye's imports from and exports to

5 Voanews.com, *Turkey Closes Airspace to Russian Planes Flying to Syria*, April 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-closes-airspace-to-russian-planes-flying-to-syria-/6542319.html> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

6 Gostev, A. and Liklikadze, K., "Analysis: Erdogan Hoping Russian Invasion Of Ukraine Can Bolster Turkish Regional Power", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 30, 2022, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-erdogan-russia-regional-power/31828327.html> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

7 Euronews.com, *Turkey and India call on Putin to end war in Ukraine*, September 17, 2022, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/09/17/turkey-and-india-call-on-putin-to-end-war-in-ukraine> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

8 Kubilay, M.M., "The Ukraine war has upended Turkey's plans to stabilize the economy", *MEI@75*, March 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/ukraine-war-has-upended-turkeys-plans-stabilize-economy> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

Russia surged to \$4.4 billion and \$730 million respectively in July 2022. This is nearly twice as much as in July 2021, when Türkiye's imports and exports were \$2.5 billion and \$417.3 million and dollars. At some point this year, Russia even surpassed China as the main source of imported goods for Türkiye.⁹

The presidents of Türkiye and Russia recently stated that they want to upgrade bilateral economic relations, particularly in the fields of trade, energy, transport, agriculture, construction, and tourism.¹⁰ Ankara sees bolstering economic cooperation with Russia as beneficial because it might prop up Türkiye's struggling economy, which has been recently affected by skyrocketing inflation, a weak national currency (the lira), and a slowdown in GDP growth.¹¹ Increased imports of Russian hydrocarbons will not only ensure Türkiye's energy safety in the current time of a sharp energy crisis in Europe, but Ankara might also resell gas at a profit to European countries struggling with energy shortages. Experts claims that Moscow, which has been at economic war with the West since the February aggression in Ukraine, is using Türkiye to circumvent Western sanctions and, most likely, Russia's current plans of expanding economic ties are intended to further facilitate that. Moscow has already been 'reimporting' some sanctioned goods from the European market via Türkiye, and many Russian companies are seeking to re-enter the European market through Türkiye.¹²

As a result of such a balanced approach, Türkiye was able to bring Russian and Ukrainian representatives to the negotiating table. Initially, Türkiye's mediation efforts were not welcomed by Russia and were disregarded by the West but, eventually, Ankara persuaded officials of the warring countries to meet in Türkiye for peace talks. On 9 March, in the resort city of Antalya, Türkiye's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu

9 Moens, B., Aarup, S.A. and Tamma P., "Erdoğan walks a fine line as the Ukraine war's double agent", *Politico*, August 17, 2022, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-fine-line-ukraine-russia-war/> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

10 DailySabah.com, *Turkey, Russia agree to boost economic, energy cooperation*, August 5, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-russia-agree-to-boost-economic-energy-cooperation> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

11 Zgheib, N., "Turkey to see muted economic growth in 2022", *European Bank of Reconstruction and Development*, May 10, 2022, available at: <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2022/turkey-to-see-muted-economic-growth-in-2022.html> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

12 Özdemir, S., "Turkey and Russia: A partnership essential to both", *Deutsche Welle*, August 12, 2022, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-and-russia-a-partnership-essential-to-both/a-62790489> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

hosted a meeting between Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba. Bringing the warring sides together for the first time since Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February was a success in itself, but the meeting did not bring any visible progress towards peace.¹³ Subsequent peace talks, which were held in Istanbul in late March, were ultimately more productive, probably because the Ukrainian level of resistance and endurance had surprised Russia, which had to scale down its military objectives and walk back from plans to capture Kyiv and topple President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian government.¹⁴ But even though Kyiv and Moscow were able to agree on some issues, such as Ukraine's neutral status, the talks were stalled after Ukrainians revealed mass killings of civilians in the territories liberated from the Russian army.¹⁵

Türkiye, alongside the United Nations and Ukraine, was a signatory to the Initiative on Safe Transportation of Grain and Foodstuffs From Ukrainian Ports ('Grain Agreement') that was concluded on 22 July 2022 and unblocked Ukraine's three Black Sea ports for grain exports. The Russian representative, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, separately signed similar agreement with Türkiye and the UN.¹⁶ The deal was brokered by Türkiye and the UN, and was a substantial achievement in itself because it was the first time that the warring sides had arrived at any agreement, despite the fact that it was initialled separately, at Kyiv's request.¹⁷ The major aim of the deal was to create safe passage for cargo ships in the Black Sea, which both sides of the deal "committed not to attack", thereby unlocking exports of grain and sunflower oil

13 The Kyiv Independent, "Kuleba-Lavrov meeting ends with no result", March 10, 2022, available at: <https://kyivindependent.com/national/kuleba-lavrov-meeting-ends-with-no-result> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

14 Atlantic Council in Turkey, *Experts react: After Russia-Ukraine talks in Istanbul, is an end to war imminent?*, April 1, 2022, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/experts-react-after-russia-ukraine-talks-in-istanbul-is-an-end-to-war-imminent/> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

15 Ali, T., "Russia-Ukraine peace talks: Bucha atrocities have stalled negotiations to end war, Turkey says", *INews*, available at: <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/russia-ukraine-peace-talks-bucha-atrocities-negotiations-end-war-turkey-1561384> (Accessed: September 21, 2022)

16 Kabanenko, I., "Export of Ukrainian Grain Through Seaports: Opportunities and Risks," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 27, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/export-of-ukrainian-grain-through-seaports-opportunities-and-risks/> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

17 Euronews.com, *Ukraine and Russia sign vital grain export deal in Istanbul*, July 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/07/21/ukraine-russia-to-sign-turkey-brokered-grain-export-agreement-on-friday> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

from Ukraine, as well as goods from Russia, which would receive an exemption from Western sanctions and be shipped to world markets.¹⁸ Previously, safe passage through the Black Sea was impossible due to the war in Ukraine, which severely affected shipments of Ukrainian agricultural products. As a result, grain prices soared, which created huge problems, including shortages of certain products and even fear of famine in poorer countries. So far, the Grain Agreement has brought very good results: since July, Ukraine has been able to export around 8 million tons of agricultural products to Asia, Africa, Middle East and European Union.¹⁹ Russia is dissatisfied with the ‘Grain Agreement’ and wanted to withdraw from it in October 2022. However, Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was able to convince Moscow to return to the deal, which highlights Türkiye’s current role as a strategic bridge between Russia and the West.²⁰

Türkiye also acted as an intermediary in the biggest exchange of prisoners of war between Russia and Ukraine to date. Ankara, in cooperation with Saudi Arabia, brokered an agreement as a result of which, on 21 September, Moscow released 215 Ukrainian POWs including Mariupol’s Azovstal plant defenders and 10 foreign nationals who were held captive in Russia. Under the agreement, five leaders of the Azov Regiment, who were swapped in September, will remain in Türkiye until the war ends. They were exchanged for Viktor Medvedchuk, the Ukrainian pro-Russian oligarch and politician who is said to be “Putin’s ally”, and 55 Russian soldiers.²¹ Both Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Andriy Yermak, Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, highlighted the leading role of Türkiye’s president in this successful prisoner swap.²²

18 Ibid.

19 Kabanenko I., “The Ukraine Grain Agreement After Three Months: Moscow’s Blackmail, Boa Constrictor Tactics and Russian Gas”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-ukraine-grain-agreement-after-three-months-moscows-blackmail-boa-constrictor-tactics-and-russian-gas/> (Accessed: November 18, 2022)

20 Prokopenko, A., “Russia’s Return to Grain Deal Is a Sign of Turkey’s Growing Influence”, *Carnegie Politika*, November 8, 2022, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88349> (Accessed: November 13, 2022)

21 Dw.com, “Ukraine: Azovstal commanders among 215 soldiers released in prisoner exchange with Russia”, September 21, 2022, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-azovstal-commanders-among-215-soldiers-released-in-prisoner-exchange-with-russia/a-63198602> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

22 Ibid.; Romanenko V., “Recently liberated leaders of Azov Regiment will remain in Turkey until war’s end”, *Ukrainska Pravda*, September 22, 2022, available at: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/09/22/7368578/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

Arms supplies

The defence cooperation between Türkiye and Ukraine was burgeoning even before the current war with Russia started. They had been cooperating mainly in area of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) since Ukraine acquired Bayraktar TB2 drones in 2018 and established a joint venture with Bayraktar manufacturer Baykar Makina for the joint development of UAVs, guided munitions and aerospace engines. Türkiye has also been interested in transferring Ukraine's know-how, especially engine technology, to Türkiye's military equipment producers and defence projects.²³

The defence cooperation between Türkiye and Ukraine was burgeoning even before the current war with Russia started.

Türkiye's arms sales to Ukraine increased significantly in the first quarter of 2022. According to the Exporters' Assembly of Türkiye, arms exports reached \$59.8 million in the first three months of this year, which is an impressive rise considering that they totalled \$1.9 million in the same period last year.²⁴

More importantly, Türkiye eagerly supplied weapons to Ukraine just before the war when many countries rejected Kyiv's desperate pleas for military equipment. Türkiye's authorities did not reveal which weapons were sold to Ukraine, but defence analysts agree that Kyiv acquired a new batch of Bayraktar TB2 drones, guided munitions and possibly communications and targeting systems.²⁵ Also, in August 2022, Türkiye's Ministry of Defence delivered 50 used Kirpi vehicles, which are ambush- and mine-protected, and plans new deliveries in the future.²⁶

Nevertheless, Ankara publicly distanced itself from drone sales to Ukraine, insisting that the Bayraktar-TB2 UAVs were purchased by Kyiv under an agreement with their producer, Turkish private company Baykar Makina, rather than the government of Türkiye. This behaviour

23 Konarzewska, N., "Defying Russia: Turkey Boosts Ties with Poland and Ukraine", *The Turkish Analyst*, August 2016, 2021, available at: <http://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/671-defying-russia-turkey-boosts-ties-with-poland-and-ukraine.html> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

24 Osterlund, P.B., "Amid war fears, Ukraine stocked up on Turkish defence equipment", *Aljazeera*, April 12, 2022, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/12/amid-war-fears-ukraine-stocked-up-on-turkish-defence-equipment> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

25 Ibid.

26 Bekdil, B.E., "Turkey sends 50 mine-resistant vehicles to Ukraine, with more expected", *Defense News*, August 22, 2022, available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2022/08/22/turkey-sends-50-mine-resistant-vehicles-to-ukraine-with-more-expected/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

reflects the fact that Türkiye, which faces several vulnerabilities with regard to Moscow, does not want to anger Russia and is striving to maintain its special position as a mediator rather than an overt ally of Ukraine, especially as Russia has already been angered by the proliferation of Turkish drones close to its borders. Bayraktar TB2 UAVs were already successfully proven against Soviet/Russian-made weaponry in conflicts in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and North Africa, and have proved to be an asset for the Ukrainian army. In the current conflict with Russia, Bayraktar TB2 armed drones proved to be particularly successful against Russian surface-to-air missile systems.²⁷ This is because Russian air defence systems are not technically capable of intercepting drones produced in Türkiye. It is also debatable whether Russian electronic warfare systems, such as Krasukha-4, are able to counter these drones.²⁸ Analysts confirm that the Bayraktar TB2 can indeed be credited with destroying high quantities of Soviet- and Russian-made military hardware during previous conflicts in Syria, Libya, the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, and now in Ukraine. This has included T-72 tanks; multiple launch rocket systems: BM-27 ‘Uragan’, BM-30s ‘Smerch’, and BM 21-s ‘Grad’; and a number of surface-to-air missile systems such as different types of ‘Buk’, ‘Osa’, ‘Strela’, and ‘Pantsir’, among others.²⁹

Defence cooperation between Türkiye and Ukraine is continuing despite Russia’s protests. Baykar Makina decided to donate several Bayraktar TB2 UAVs for free to the Ukrainian army after people in Lithuania,³⁰

27 Kasapoglu, C., “A Dangerous Drone for All Seasons: Assessing the Ukrainian Military’s Use of the Bayraktar TB-2”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 16, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/a-dangerous-drone-for-all-seasons-assessing-the-ukrainian-militarys-use-of-the-bayraktar-tb-2/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

28 Axe, D., “Ukraine Reportedly Has 20 TB-2 Drones. They Might Not Matter In A Wider War With Russia”, *Forbes*, February 8, 2022, available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2022/02/08/ukraines-got-20-tb-2-drones-it-might-not-matter-in-a-wider-war-with-russia/?sh=26e75482353f>, (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

29 Mitzer, S., Kemal, D. and Janovsky, J., “Defending Ukraine – Listing Russian Military Equipment Destroyed By Bayraktar TB2s”, *Oryx*, February 27, 2022, available at: <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/defending-ukraine-listing-russian-army.html> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

30 Sytas, A., “Turkey’s Baykar donates drone for Ukraine after Lithuanian crowdfunder”, *Reuters*, June 2, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/turkeys-baykar-donates-drone-ukraine-after-lithuanian-crowdfunder-2022-06-02/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

The Second Karabakh War (2020) between Azerbaijan and Armenia clearly showed that Türkiye and Russia were the only external actors that could influence the outcome and shape the post-war order in the South Caucasus region.

Poland,³¹ and Ukraine³² raised millions of dollars to procure these drones; the money collected will instead be spent on humanitarian causes in Ukraine. Apart from that, despite the war, Baykar Makina still intends to pursue plans to build a drone production plant in Ukraine where its flagship product, the Bayraktar TB2 drone, will be produced. This will happen on the basis of an agreement that was signed between Türkiye and Ukraine during Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Kyiv on 3 February 2022. The deal foresees starting joint production of Bayraktar TB2 drones, which will be set up in a location in Ukraine alongside a training centre for pilots.³³ Russia reacted to this news very harshly: the Russian President's Press Secretary, Dmitry Peskov, publicly threatened that Russia might destroy any drone production plant set up by a Turkish defence company in Ukraine.³⁴

Türkiye's role in the post-Second Karabakh war order in the South Caucasus

The Second Karabakh War (2020) between Azerbaijan and Armenia clearly showed that Türkiye and Russia were the only external actors that could influence the outcome and shape the post-war order in the South Caucasus region. The war happened mainly because the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group – co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States – could not, for decades, work out any tangible resolution to the conflict. As a result, the South Caucasus became another region, alongside Libya

31 Anews.com, "Baykar donates TB2 drones to Ukraine after Polish funding campaign", July 28, 2022, available at: <https://www.anews.com.tr/gallery/economy/baykar-donates-tb2-drones-to-ukraine-after-polish-funding-campaign>, (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

32 Jankowicz, M., "A Ukrainian TV host crowdfunded \$20 million to buy Bayraktar drones. The company making them refused the money and said it'd donate the aircraft instead", *Business Insider*, June 28, 2022, available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/bayraktar-firm-refuses-20m-says-will-donate-drones-to-ukraine-2022-6?IR=T> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

33 Bekdil, B.E., "Turkey and Ukraine to coproduce TB2 drones", *Defense News*, February 4, 2022, available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/02/04/turkey-and-ukraine-to-coproduce-tb2-drones/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

34 The New Arab, *Putin aide says Moscow will destroy 'Turkish drone factory in Ukraine'*, August 10, 2022, available at: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/ukraine-russia-threatens-destroy-turkish-drone-factory> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

and Syria, where Russia and Türkiye share influence in a complicated system of cooperation and competition. Türkiye's stronger engagement with the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict coincided with its more robust regional policy and attempts to boost its influence across the Black Sea region and Central Asia, which has been reinforced by Ankara's growing technical and military capabilities.³⁵

Türkiye and Azerbaijan had a strong partnership before the war based on cultural and ethnic kinship, and robust political, economic, and social ties, which have been upgraded because of the unprecedented level of assistance that Türkiye gave to Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War. Among other support, according to Turkish military analysts, Türkiye transferred to Baku its domestically produced military equipment, including technically advanced UAVs and a complete warfare doctrine that was previously tested in Syria.³⁶ Experts agree that it was, specifically, the drones used by Azerbaijan's army, which proliferated across the battlefield and destroyed large quantities of Armenian military hardware, that largely contributed to Azerbaijan's military superiority in this war.³⁷

Russia did not get militarily involved in Second Karabakh War. Moscow rejected Armenia's appeals to send soldiers or equipment to Armenian forces in the Karabakh region on the grounds of the collective security rule of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and said that collective security guarantees encompass only Armenia's internationally-recognized territory.³⁸ This was because Russia preferred to play the role of mediator in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and shape the post-war reality in the region because that would give it leverage on both Yerevan and Baku, and would preserve Moscow's influence and interests in the South Caucasus. As a result,

35 Konarzewska, N., "Turkey, Russia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict", *New Eastern Europe*, No.1-2 (2021), January-March 2021, p. 84.

36 Kasapoglu, C., "Turkey Transfers Drone Warfare Capacity to Its Ally Azerbaijan", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 15, 2020, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-transfers-drone-warfare-capacity-to-its-ally-azerbaijan/> (Accessed: September 24, 2022)

37 Shaikh, S. and Rumbaugh, W., "The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense", *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, December 8, 2022, available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense> (Accessed: September 24, 2022)

38 Aliyev, N., "War in Nagorno-Karabakh Requires a Russian Balancing Act", *CACI Analyst*, November 10, 2020, available at: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13646-war-in-nagorno-karabakh-requires-a-russian-balancing-act.html>, (Accessed on September 24, 2022)

Moscow negotiated the 10 November 2020 trilateral statement and deployed 1,960 peacekeepers to what is now the Karabakh economic region of Azerbaijan to oversee its implementation.³⁹

Türkiye also took part in the peacekeeping process, but to a lesser degree. On 11 November 2020, Russia and Türkiye signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a Joint Russian–Turkish Centre for monitoring the ceasefire in Azerbaijan. The centre was opened in February 2021 in Qiyameddinli village of Azerbaijan’s Agdam District, and up to 60 troops from the Russian Federation and Türkiye, equipped with drones, were deployed to oversee the ceasefire. The centre was established in Qiyameddinli, a settlement that was won by Azerbaijan in the 2020 war, after months of negotiations. Moscow was against letting Turkish soldiers into the Karabakh region and proposed setting the centre up in the city of Ganja or the Barda district of Azerbaijan, which have better-developed infrastructure. In contrast, Azerbaijan and Türkiye

Russia has been visibly reluctant to let Türkiye into its perceived sphere of influence in the South Caucasus, but the current war in Ukraine has shifted its attention away from the region.

deemed it necessary for the centre to be located near the Karabakh region where Russian peacekeepers are deployed so that the centre would be able to fulfil its duties better.⁴⁰

Russia has been visibly reluctant to let Türkiye into its perceived sphere of influence in the South Caucasus, but the current war in Ukraine has shifted its attention away from the region. Owing to the severe manpower shortages that the Russian military has been experiencing in the war with Ukraine, Moscow pulled hundreds of experienced peacekeepers out of the Karabakh region to be sent to the Ukrainian front.⁴¹ It is clear that the war against Ukraine did not go as Moscow planned: first, the Russian army had to retreat from the Kyiv area and, in September, it suffered heavy losses in Kharkiv province. At the time of writing, in November 2022, the Russian army had suffered another serious setback, as it had retreated from the part of Ukraine’s

39 Bbc.com, “Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia sign Nagorno-Karabakh peace deal”, November 10, 2022, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54882564>, (Accessed: September 24, 2022)

40 Goble, P., “Joint Russian-Turkish Karabakh Monitoring Center Opens Amidst Fresh Controversy”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 4, 2021, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/joint-russian-turkish-karabakh-monitoring-center-opens-amidst-fresh-controversy/> (Accessed: September 24, 2022)

41 Cafiero, G., “Russia’s Challenges in the South Caucasus Amid the War in Ukraine”, *American Security Project*, September 8, 2022, available at: <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/russias-challenges-in-the-south-caucasus-amid-the-war-in-ukraine/> (Accessed: September 24, 2022)

Kherson province and the city of Kherson itself. This was the only regional capital that Russia had captured since its 24 February invasion of Ukraine; the province was annexed by Moscow in September 2022.⁴²

Russia's problems in Ukraine have created a vacuum in the South Caucasus, which presents an opportunity for Türkiye to increase its influence. Türkiye has already strengthened its relations with Russia and Ukraine in the Black Sea Basin as a successful mediator, as it is located close to the war theatre and has proved to be indispensable to both Kyiv and Moscow in some areas. This gives Türkiye a fair chance to negotiate a larger role for itself in the South Caucasus's security architecture, given that Russia is currently struggling to preserve its role as security guarantor in the Karabakh region.

Türkiye's posture in the region will be further enhanced when the transport corridor between the main territory of Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Armenia's southern Syunik Province is finally reinstated. This will give Türkiye a direct land connection with its strategic ally, Azerbaijan, and will facilitate contacts and ties with Turkic peoples inhabiting Central Asia. The link in question was specifically mentioned in the 10 November 2020 trilateral statement, which obliged Armenia to guarantee unimpeded overland traffic through it, which will be monitored by Russian border guards. The armistice also stipulated that transport infrastructure will be set up to ensure the functioning of the route.⁴³ Unfortunately, the transport channel between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan AR still has not been reinstated despite Azerbaijan's and Türkiye's efforts. This is because Baku and Yerevan have differing visions of how the transport link should function, therefore reopening this very important route remains in limbo.⁴⁴

Türkiye's posture in the region will be further enhanced when the transport corridor between the main territory of Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Armenia's southern Syunik Province is finally reinstated.

42 Euractiv.com, *Ukrainian troops reclaim dozens of towns from Russian control, close in on Kherson*, November 11, 2022, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/ukrainian-troops-reclaim-dozens-of-towns-from-russian-control-close-in-on-kherson/> (Accessed: November 13, 2022)

43 Socor, V., "Karabakh Armistice: Azerbaijani National Triumph, Russian Geopolitical Victory (Part One)", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, November 12, 2020, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/karabakh-armistice-azerbaijani-national-triumph-russian-geopolitical-victory-part-one/> (Accessed: September 25, 2022)

44 Silk Road Briefing, *Azerbaijan Talks Up Zangazur Corridor Amongst Armenian Concerns As Transit Trade Grows*, July 18, 2022, available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/07/18/azerbaijan-talks-up-zangazur-corridor-amongst-armenian-concerns-as-transit-trade-grows/> (Accessed: September 25, 2022)

Conflict between Russia and the West in the energy sphere, caused by the war in Ukraine, also opens new possibilities for Türkiye to leverage its strategic geopolitical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia and its growing ties with Azerbaijan and Central Asia's Turkic nations. Now, as EU member states seek to wean themselves off Russian hydrocarbons, Türkiye is poised to enhance its role as an energy transit state as an alternative to Russia. Türkiye will transit more Azerbaijani gas to Europe in line with the 18 July 2022 "Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy" with the European Commission, which commits Azerbaijan to increasing its natural gas flow to Europe to at least 20 billion cubic meters annually by 2027.⁴⁵ Kazakhstan also plans to expand its oil exports via the trans-Caspian route through the South Caucasus and Türkiye to Europe. Astana wants to export 1.5 million tons of its crude oil through the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline in 2023 and increase the volume up to as much as 6 to 6.5 million tons annually.⁴⁶ Most Kazakh oil is transported to Europe via Russia but, since Moscow has been ramping up pressure on Astana in connection with the war in Ukraine, Kazakhstan has decided to develop alternative transport routes bypassing Russia.

Conclusions

Türkiye continues its balancing act with Russia and Ukraine, despite the fact that it is defying the bipolar paradigm that has been reinforced in international relations since 24 February and has caused an international backlash. This is because Ankara tries to approach the conflict in Ukraine not only as a threat to Türkiye's own security interests, but as an opportunity to stabilise its geopolitical neighbourhood and increase its diplomatic weight as a successful mediator. This strategy has, so far, yielded some positive results, as Türkiye has been able to preserve relations with both Kyiv and Moscow, as well as to mitigate particular risks caused by the war in Ukraine.

Many recent events highlight the fact that Türkiye's successful balancing act has positioned the country as a strategic bridge between

45 O'Byrne, D., "Azerbaijan and EU agree to strategic energy partnership", *Eurasianet*, July 18, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-and-eu-agree-to-strategic-energy-partnership>, (Accessed: November 13, 2022)

46 Kumenov, A., "Kazakhstan starts exporting oil through Middle Corridor from New Year", *Eurasianet*, November 11, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-starts-exporting-oil-through-middle-corridor-from-new-year> (Accessed: November 13, 2022)

Russia, on one side, and Ukraine and the West, on the other. What is more, Türkiye has become indispensable for Moscow as it is the only remaining link to Europe for Russian companies and individuals, as well as for Russian natural gas after the Nord Stream gas pipelines were damaged in September 2022. Simultaneously, the expansion of energy transit routes bypassing Russia also enhances Türkiye's posturing *vis-à-vis* Moscow. Clearly, Türkiye–Russia dynamics are shifting in Ankara's favour, and Russia now has to compromise many of its interests in bilateral relations.

The above discussion points to the fact that Türkiye can now also enhance its posture in the Black Sea region and South Caucasus *vis-à-vis* Russia. Russia's reputation for military power has suffered a serious blow in Ukraine, and the war is consuming more and more resources, which casts doubt on whether Moscow is still capable of stabilising the situation in the Karabakh region. Türkiye could use this opportunity and its strategic partnership with Baku in the military sphere to expand its military foothold in the South Caucasus. Having said that, regional destabilization due to Russia's weakening posture is not in Ankara's interest; a shift in the regional balance in Türkiye's favour would be more advantageous.

The Possibility of a New Military Confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Assessment of Risks and Threats in the Short Term

Agil Rustamzade*

The armed forces of Armenia are still in a state of great turbulence after their heavy defeat in the Second Karabakh War (2020) against Azerbaijan. The military personnel of Armenia, as well as the whole nation, have experienced a deep psychological trauma, the consequences of which are unlikely to be overcome in the coming years. The purpose of the article is to identify the maximum limit of the capabilities of the Government of Armenia to restore and strengthen the defence potential of its armed forces in the short term. To that end, this article identifies the entire range of threats and risks that might stem from Armenia. In this context, the units of the Armenian army in certain areas of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, which is under the temporary control of the Russian peacekeeping contingent, are also considered part of the armed forces of Armenia.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Armenia, military threat, South Caucasus, Russia



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The state of the armed forces of Armenia

Since the war ended, the position of Minister of Defence of Armenia has seen several new appointments. Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's last appointment to this position was former Deputy Prime Minister Suren Papikyan, a historian by education, in November 2021. The attempt of the former Chief of the General Staff Onik Gasparyan, along with some high-ranking generals, to overthrow the current prime minister in February 2021 indicated strong friction and distrust within

In fact, the military leadership of Armenia was trained in Soviet, then Russian, military institutions that teach outdated tactics of managing troops, as a result of which it is difficult for them to master innovative tactics of warfare that require the knowledge of new reconnaissance techniques and precision weapons.

the military-political leadership of Armenia. This unsuccessful attempt by the military ended with the dismissal of Gasparyan, as well as most of the high-level military officers who supported him, from the Army.¹

This circumstance has only complicated the situation regarding combat readiness and morale in the entire army. It also affects the restoration of combat ability and planning for combat training of the troops. The frequent changes of defence leadership also change priorities and introduce uncertainty into plans for reforming and re-equipping the army.

In fact, the military leadership of Armenia was trained in Soviet, then Russian, military institutions that teach outdated tactics of managing troops, as a result of which it is difficult for them to master innovative tactics of warfare that require the knowledge of new reconnaissance techniques and precision weapons. Armenia's army, which was formed in line with the Soviet model, has not been reformed for many years.

The Armenian army is mainly armed with weapons and military equipment developed in the 1980s. The army is, in practice, not equipped with modern means of communication and intelligence. There are no high-precision weapons available to aviation, artillery, rocket, or artillery units. For example, even Armenia's Iskander-M missile system is armed only with obsolete 9M-723 missiles, the accuracy of which is 70–150 meters deviation from target. The only exception is

¹ Daily Sabah, "Military defiant as Armenian PM Pashinian dismisses Gasparyan for 2nd time", March 10, 2021, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/europe/military-defiant-as-armenian-pm-pashinian-dismisses-gasparyan-for-2nd-time> (Accessed: September 11, 2022)

the “Kornet” portable anti-tank missiles purchased during the 44-Day War, which are inferior to their analogues in terms of range, though not in accuracy.

In addition, outside statutory military relations, hazing (*Dedovshchina*) and suicide cases in the army are widespread.² Additional tension in relationships among servicemen is caused by a split in society due to the division of Armenians into their own and “Karabakh Armenians”.³ Owing to the cautious attitude of society after the defeat in the 44-Day War, the phenomenon of desertion from military service is becoming widespread.⁴ Low-paid military service is unattractive to the younger generation of Armenians, and it is problematic to attract servicemen to long-term service on a contractual basis.

The general state of affairs in the army of Armenia is rather difficult to assess, as the issue is not only re-equipment, but the restoration of the armed forces in general. In addition to the losses in weapons and military equipment during the Second Karabakh War, Armenia has wasted most of its ammunition for small arms and rocket-artillery systems. The 2021 defence budget expenditure intended for the purchase of weapons was mostly spent on restoring the stock of ammunition.

The true number and types of Armenian weapons and military equipment have always been purposefully hidden, and there are practically no reliable data in open sources. It is now even more problematic to quantify the remaining weapons and military equipment. However, an analysis of the losses of the Armenian army in terms of military equipment during the Second Karabakh War enables us to predict that the highest losses were suffered by the air defence forces and units armed with missile and artillery systems.⁵ In fact, air defence systems

The true number and types of Armenian weapons and military equipment have always been purposefully hidden, and there are practically no reliable data in open sources.

2 Mejlumyan, A., “Senior officers fired after spate of non-combat deaths in Armenian military”, *Eurasianet*, February 19, 2020, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/senior-officers-fired-after-spate-of-non-combat-deaths-in-armenian-military> (Accessed: September 11, 2022)

3 Report.az, *Mif ob armyanakh razveyalsya - oni begut dazhe iz Nagornogo Karabakha*, April 6, 2016, available at: <https://report.az/ru/analitika/mif-ob-armyan-razveyalsya-oni-begut-dazhe-iz-nagor/> (Accessed: September 11, 2022)

4 Lmahamad, A., “Armenian soldiers continue to go AWOL”, *Azernews*, October 5, 2021, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/184079.html> (Accessed: September 11, 2022)

5 Oryx, “The Fight For Nagorno-Karabakh: Documenting Losses On The Sides Of

were the most expensive type of weapons that Armenia lost during the war.

Meanwhile, by analysing the number of units and military hardware involved in the Armenian Armed Forces' military exercises, it is possible to understand the quantity of weapons and military equipment that survived the war. Despite significant losses in equipment and personnel, Armenia is trying to restore and increase the combat readiness its army. For these purposes, occasional military exercises are carried out with the involvement of all branches of the armed forces and taking into account some of the lessons of the Second Karabakh War.⁶

In the post-war period, the protection of a new section of the state border with Azerbaijan (adjoining the liberated territories), a length of 450 km, is also a new task for Armenia. The protection of that conditional and unspecified section of the inter-state border, which is essentially a new "line of contact" in an area with difficult mountainous terrain without appropriate infrastructure, has created additional overstretch for Armenia's armed forces. The engineering and technical works performed by Armenia's army on the border do not meet modern defensive standards, therefore the problem with the shortage of military personnel was eased by mobilizing reservists for a period of three month.⁷

All the above-mentioned factors suggest that Armenia's army, which is experiencing problems with management, logistics, and a lack of military equipment, weapons and military personnel, has a limited combat capability for conducting large-scale hostilities. The leadership of Armenia also understands this; that is why they quickly launched the process of reforming the army.

Armenia And Azerbaijan", September 27, 2020, available at: <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2020/09/the-fight-for-nagorno-karabakh.html> (Accessed: September 11, 2022)

6 Sputnik Armenia, "Armyanskiy spetsnaz otrabotal nastupatelniy boy v khode masshtabnykh ucheniy", September 17, 2021, available at: <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/20210917/armyanskiy-spetsnaz-otrabotal-nastupatelnyy-boy-v-khode-masshtabnykh-ucheniy-33387485.html>; Ministry of Defence of Armenia, "The final stage of the military exercise was held in the 5th military unit", March 20, 2021, available at: <https://mil.am/hy/news/9107> (All accessed: September 11, 2022)

7 Iravaban.net, "For the first time since 1994, a three-month period has been set for the training of reservists: Armen Avtandilyan", August 24, 2021, available at: <https://iravaban.net/en/346668.html> (All accessed: September 11, 2022)

Armenia's ability to increase the potential of its armed forces

Armenia's military budget for 2023 is planned to be more than \$1.2 billion (501 billion drams), a 47% increase over the 2022 budget that was set at \$754 million.⁸ A large proportion of that budget was to be directed to the maintenance of the Armenian armed forces, including purchasing military equipment, vehicles, communication systems, weapons, and ammunition, as well as ensuring the supply of modern medical equipment, food, fuel, and lubricants, and maintaining barracks and technical property to ensure the combat capability, military training, and retraining of medical personnel.⁹

Meanwhile, it is not yet entirely clear how Armenia will be able to pay off its military debts to Russia for previous weapons purchases, both before and during the Second Karabakh War. The post-war reconstruction and development of the armed forces of Armenia as a whole depends on the financial and economic capabilities of the country. However, Armenia is a poor industrial-agrarian country, and most large Armenian enterprises are owned by Russian companies. According to a 2022 report of the National Statistical Committee of Armenia, the poverty level among the population is 27%.¹⁰ And according to data from the Ministry of Finance of Armenia, Armenia's national (government) debt rose to \$9.226 billion by the end of 2021, an increase of \$1.257 billion (15.8%) over the previous year.¹¹ The burden of public debt will definitely also burden the state's budget allocations for the defence sector.¹² Consequently, the economic potential of

The post-war reconstruction and development of the armed forces of Armenia as a whole depends on the financial and economic capabilities of the country

8 Mejlumyan, A., "Armenia promises big boost in military spending", *Eurasianet*, September 29, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-promises-big-boost-in-military-spending> (Accessed: September 30, 2022)

9 Badalyan, N., "Armeniya v 2022 godu vydelit na voyennyye raskhody bolshe, chem v 2021-m, no menshe, chem na obsluzhivaniye i pogasheniye pravitelstvennogo dolga", *Finport Armenia*, October 12, 2021, available at: https://finport.am/full_news.php?id=44850&lang=2 (Accessed: September 30, 2022)

10 World Bank, "Armenia", *Poverty & Equity Brief*, October 2022, available at: https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/current/Global_POVEQ_ARM.pdf (Accessed: October 30, 2022)

11 Hetq.am, "Armenia's national debt hits \$9 billion; 60.8% of GDP", January 31, 2022, available at: <https://hetq.am/en/article/140592> (Accessed: September 11, 2022)

12 Badalian, N., "In first month of 2022, Armenia increased its public debt by almost \$60 million", *Finport Armenia*, February 14 2022, available at: https://finport.am/full_news.

Armenia will, in the short term, make it difficult for this country to allocate sufficient financial resources for its military needs, which is necessary to achieve military parity with Azerbaijan.

Another factor strongly influencing the development potential of the armed forces is demographic factors. One of the most dangerous threats facing Armenia is its current demographic problems and their long-term consequences. According to the latest data from the World Bank, the population of Armenia has been steadily declining since 1990. As of early 2021, the population is about 2.9 million, the birth rate is about 1.6%, and the population is slowly falling. Since 1990, the population has continued a steady decline, to 2.957 million in 2020. Owing to the unfavourable economic situation, the population preferred to emigrate to other, more economically favourable countries. Although the net migration indicator was positive for the three years from 2018 to 2020 (that is, more Armenians entered the country than left), the situation changed dramatically in 2021.¹³ According to official data, in the first three quarters of 2021, 103,000 more people left Armenia than arrived. This is about 3% of the country's population. The largest wave of emigration occurred in the first quarter of 2021, when the net population decline amounted to almost 64,000 people.¹⁴ However, it should be noted that the registered population in Armenia also includes those who live abroad. Thus, a large number of labour migrants working in Russia, who generally return to Armenia for a few weeks in winter, are still included in the statistics for the registered population. Given the negative demographic dynamics, the armed forces of Armenia be unable to increase personnel numbers in the short term.

The military-industrial complex of Armenia is a set of research and manufacturing enterprises that develop and produce various systems and weapons for government agencies. There are a number of areas in which Armenia has preserved, and is developing, the scientific production base inherited from the Soviet Union. This includes the production of mortars, air and ground drones, optical and thermal imaging and laser

php?id=45526&lang=3 (Accessed: September 11, 2022)

13 Interfax, "Demograficheskiye problemy Armenii: Depopulyatsiya i rasistskaya politika", October 19, 2020, available at: <http://interfax.az/view/816896> (Accessed: September 11, 2022)

14 Mejlumyan, A., "Out-migration in Armenia increasing", *Eurasianet*, February 10, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/out-migration-in-armenia-increasing> (Accessed: September 11, 2022)

systems for various purposes, some types of radar stations, and electronic warfare systems. In addition, there is sufficient capacity in Armenia for the production of ammunition for small arms and mortars.¹⁵ Taking into account the difficulties of delivering military equipment from Russia, joint service centres have been created in Armenia for the maintenance and repair of military equipment. The private sector is also actively developing; for example, ten private companies are involved in the development and production of drones in Armenia.¹⁶

However, systemic problems such the lack of technology, sufficient funding, industrial capacity, and highly specialized personnel hamper the growth of the capabilities of the military-industrial complex of Armenia. Moreover, the production of even medium-altitude drones requires possession of or access to modern materials and all kinds of complex systems relating to aviation, reconnaissance, high-precision weapons, GPS satellite navigation, and control systems. Without these technologies, drones lose their capabilities, efficiency, and survivability in combat conditions. Certain difficulties in the production of drones are associated with the strong politicization of the arms market and the reluctance of developed countries to share their technologies. Currently, the production of modern military drones with the specified equipment has been mastered by countries such as the United States, Israel, Türkiye, and (partially) China. Therefore, in the short term, the Armenian military-industrial complex is not expected to produce modern high-tech weapons and military equipment.

However, systemic problems such the lack of technology, sufficient funding, industrial capacity, and highly specialized personnel hamper the growth of the capabilities of the military-industrial complex of Armenia.

Furthermore, the frequent change of the army leadership make planning the purchase of weapons for the armed forces uncertain. At the moment, there is no reliable and complete information on the volume and types of weapons that Armenia purchased in 2021. The only confirmed

15 Sputnik Armenia, “VPK Armenii naladil seriynoye proizvodstvo voyennoy produktsii – Arshakyan”, November 16, 2022, available at: <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/20221116/vpk-armenii-smog-naladit-seriynoe-proizvodstvo-voennoy-produktsii--arshakyan-51369292.html> (Accessed: November 30, 2022)

16 Sputnik Armenia, “The number of UAVs produced in Armenia does not meet the demand of the army” (translated from Armenian), September 15, 2021, available at: <https://armeniasputnik.am/20210915/hajastanum-artadrvozh-atsnery-banaki-pahanjin-chen-bavararum-khachaturjan-33306501.html> (Accessed: November 30, 2022)

information is about the acquisition of four counter-battery radar systems from India, in the amount of \$40 million, in late 2020.¹⁷ The contracts, concluded pre-war, for the supply of Tor-2MKM anti-aircraft missile systems and weapons for the Su-30SM aircraft were also fulfilled.¹⁸ Although Armenia signed a contract with Russia in August 2020 for the modernization of its old Su-25 aircraft,¹⁹ the status of this is currently unknown.

Meanwhile, in January 2022, the Armenian Air Force received four Mi-8MTV-5 transport helicopters²⁰ and it is interested in purchasing Russia's cutting-edge Ka-52M and Mi-28NE attack helicopters²¹ and additional SU-30SM aircraft.²² At the same time, based on images obtained from social networks, it can be assumed that the Russian-made "Orlan-10" light intelligence UAVs are in use by the Armed Forces of Armenia.²³ Russia also failed to rule out the possibility of delivering Russian-made Orion UAVs to Armenia.²⁴ Moreover, unhappy with the

17 Strakes, J., "Armenia's New Swathi Radar and Defense Imports from India: Eurasian Geostrategy or Technology Interface?", *Ponars Eurasia*, February 16, 2022, available at: <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/armenias-new-swathi-radar-and-defense-imports-from-india-eurasian-geostrategy-or-technology-interface/> (Accessed: November 30, 2022)

18 Sputnik Armenia, *Armeniya-2020: Su-30 i Tor-M2 obespechat zashchitu neba i absolutnoye prevoskhodstvo v vozdukh*, December 12, 2019, available at: <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/20191221/Armeniya-2020-Su-30-i-Tor-M2-obespechat-zashchitu-neba-absolyutnoe-prevoskhodstvo-v-vozdukh-21499190.html> (Accessed: November 30, 2022)

19 Arka.am, "Armenia signs contract with Russia to repair and modernize its Su-25 strike aircraft", August 24, 2020, available at: https://arka.am/en/news/society/armenia_signs_contract_with_russia_to_repair_and_modernize_its_su_25_strike_aircraft/ (Accessed: November 30, 2022)

20 Stein, M., "Armenia acquires Russian Helicopters as part of armed forces modernization", *OEW*, March 19, 2022, available at: <https://www.oew-online.com/?p=5350> (Accessed: September 30, 2022)

21 Tass.ru, "UAE, Armenia, Kazakhstan eager to buy Russian Ka-52M, Mi-28NE combat helicopters", November 22, 2021, available at: <https://tass.com/defense/1364521> (Accessed: September 30, 2022)

22 VPK Novosti, "Armeniya mozhet zakupit' v RF do 16 istrebiteley Su-30SM – predstavitel' Minoborony", February 20, 2019, available at: https://vpk.name/news/250590_armeniya_mozhet_zakupit_v_rf_do_16_istrebitelei_su30sm__predstavitel_minoboronyi.html (Accessed: September 30, 2022)

23 Armenian Military Portal, "The calculation of the multifunctional reconnaissance unmanned complex 'Orlan-10' of the Armed Forces of Armenia" (translation from Russian), May 1, 2021, available at: https://t.me/military_arm/7019 (Accessed: September 30, 2022)

24 Tass.ru, "Russian-made drones may be delivered to Armenia", April 7, 2021, available at: <https://tass.com/defense/1275203> (Accessed: October 30, 2022)

delay in planned Russian arms deliveries,²⁵ Armenia is searching for new weapons suppliers. In this context, there are news stories circulating that Armenia has concluded a new military deal with India to purchase artillery, rocket systems, and drones.²⁶

Given that Russia and Armenia are involved in the Joint Air Defence System and the Armenian segment of this system suffered significant losses during the war, certain supplies may, in the future, also be expected in this area. Russia is currently re-equipping with S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems.²⁷ Accordingly, a small number of surplus S-300 systems may well be delivered to Armenia at the cost of their modernization or repair. Meanwhile, the 102nd Military Base of Russia, located in Armenia, and the 5th Army Corps of the armed forces of Armenia are part of the Joint Group of Forces of Russia and Armenia in the Caucasus collective security region. Thus, some weapons and military equipment may be transferred by Russia to the army corps to restore its combat readiness.

However, there is an important nuance. The Second Karabakh War showed that the point is not the quantity of equipment and weapons, but in their effectiveness. In modern wars, the side with the best intelligence

The Second Karabakh War showed that the point is not the quantity of equipment and weapons, but in their effectiveness. In modern wars, the side with the best intelligence systems and precision weapons systems wins.

systems and precision weapons systems wins. The best example is the high-precision Israeli Spike-NLOS missile, with a range of 25–30 km, or Turkish Bayraktar drones with MAM-L guided munition (range 18 km), also used by Azerbaijan in that war. The side that is armed with such missiles will destroy military equipment at a greater range than can the enemy's fire weapons. Russia itself, as a main supplier of weapons to Armenia, is also currently beginning to develop and test modern high-precision weapons, but it will take years for these systems to be put into service as fully-fledged weapons.

25 Armenpress, “Problema, k sozhaleniyu, ne reshena: Pashinyan o nepostavke oruzhiya v Armeniyu”, November 11, 2022, available at: <https://armenpress.am/rus/news/1097082.html> (Accessed: September 30, 2022)

26 Khodanian, K., “Armenia in Search of Modern Weaponry”, *Massis Post*, October 30, 2022, available at: <https://massispost.com/2022/10/armenia-in-search-of-modern-weaponry/> (Accessed: October 30, 2022)

27 Veonnoe Obozrenie, “Shoygu anonsiroval perevooruzheniye dvukh polkov VVO na S-400 do kontsa goda”, September 17, 2020, available at: <https://topwar.ru/175200-shojgu-anonsiroval-perevooruzhenie-dvuh-polkov-vvo-na-s-400-do-konca-goda.html> (Accessed: October 30, 2022)

Nevertheless, the Armenian government envisages a process of long-term army reform, which includes the purchase of new types of weapons, personnel training, and transformations in the management sphere. To this end, the Armenian authorities plan a reduction in the term of compulsory military service from the current two to one and a half years, as well as increasing the number of contract servicemen. In particular, it is planned to rebuild the Armenian army by using the Russian model of the armed forces as a basis.²⁸

As part of the reform process, it is proposed to strengthen the role of the Minister of Defence.²⁹ Currently, the post of defence minister is largely of an administrative and “civilian” nature, while the Head of the General Staff is subordinate to him only from a purely formal point of view. Strengthening the institution of the defence minister implies a certain expansion of his powers and the transfer of very specific functions, including military ones. However, at the moment, due to Pashinyan’s distrust of the military, a civilian, Suren Papikyan, has been appointed to the post of defence minister. At the same time, there are two systemic problems inhibiting the reforms. The first issue is that Armenia needs colossal expenditures for the purchase of modern weapons. The second issue is staff-related problems. Obviously, the training of highly qualified military personnel is closely related to ongoing problems in the educational and social spheres. Armenia currently has virtually no financial and human resources to switch to a fully volunteer army without a simultaneous sharp reduction in the size of the armed forces.

An important element in the upcoming transformations, according to the plan of the Armenian leadership, should be the strengthening of the Joint Group of Forces of Russia and Armenia.³⁰ At present, this grouping includes units of the 5th Army Corps of Armenia’s Armed Forces and the 102nd Russian Military Base in Armenia.

28 Mgdesyan, A., “Sokrashcheniye kolichestva i sroka sluzhby: armyanskuyu armiyu gotovyat k miru ili voyne?”, *Verelq*, June 1, 2021, available at: <https://verelq.am/ru/node/90066> (Accessed: October 30, 2022)

29 Sputnik Armenia, “Glava Genshtaba vs stanet pervym zamministra oborony: parlament Armenii odobril proyekt”, July 7, 2022, available at: <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/20220707/glava-genshtaba-vs-stanet-pervym-zamministra-oborony-parlament-armenii-odobril-proekt-44845328.html> (Accessed: October 30, 2022)

30 RIA Novosti, “Pashinyan predlozhit usilit Obyedinennuyu gruppirovku voysk Rossii i Armenii”, March 28, 2021, available at: <https://ria.ru/20210328/voyska-1603199915.html> (Accessed: October 30, 2022)

Possible risk and threat scenarios

All of the above-mentioned factors indicate that, owing to a number of restrictions, in the short term, Armenia's armed forces will be unable to achieve a sufficient level of combat readiness to challenge Azerbaijan's army. Nevertheless, the absence of a peace treaty between the two countries and the revanchist desires among the population of Armenia and ethnic Armenians living in the Karabakh region, where the Russian peacekeeping contingent is temporally located, create threats and risks for both Azerbaijan's army and the civilian population according to four possible scenarios. Moreover, the internal political situation in Armenia indicates that these scenarios can arise either with or without the authorization of the political leadership of Armenia.

Scenario 1. Armed conflict at the border: tensions between military units on the as-yet unmarked border between the two states can be considered a local threat. Actions of divisions of the Armenian army may lead to various conflict situations. One of these attempts took place on November 2021 in the Garagol (Black Lake) area when a unit of the Armenian army established positions on the road behind the lines of the Azerbaijani army.³¹ Another took place on 12–14 September 2022, when Armenian sabotage units started to mine Azerbaijani units' supply roads and resorted to large-scale military provocations in the border districts of Azerbaijan (Dashkasan, Kalbajar, and Lachin).³² There is also the possibility of intensification of the activities of snipers, operators of anti-tank systems, and kamikaze drones against the military personnel and the military equipment of Azerbaijan.

Scenario 2. Risk of missile or artillery strike: Unlike its other weapons systems, the operational tactical missile systems of Armenia have lost a smaller part of their strike potential. As a result of an escalation of the border conflict or provocation, Armenia's armed forces could launch rocket or artillery strikes on the positions of Azerbaijan's troops or cities, civilian settlements, and infrastructure. The missile systems of

31 Caliber.az, "Kak azerbaydzhanskiy spetsnaz vzyal v okruzheniye boleye 50 armyanskikh voyennykh", November 10, 2021, available at: <https://caliber.az/post/36897/> (Accessed: October 30, 2022)

32 Mod.gov.az, "Armenian armed forces committed large-scale provocations in Dashkasan, Kalbajar and Lachin directions", September 13, 2022, available at: <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/armenian-armed-forces-committed-large-scale-provocations-in-dashkasan-kalbajar-and-lachin-directions-42330.html> (Accessed: October 30, 2022)

Armenia are of obsolete variants and have low strike accuracy and, in the case of a possible strike targeting a military facility, it could deviate from the target and hit civilians as well.

Scenario 3. Threat of terrorist acts: Several non-governmental military organizations are now operating in Armenia and engaged in the training of volunteers in various military specialties. These radical organizations could, due to various circumstances, resort to active subversive activities against Azerbaijan's military personnel and civilians, as well as critical infrastructure facilities. This scenario is also possible in the areas of the Karabakh region that are under the temporary control of the Russian peacekeeping contingent. There is already a precedent for this scenario; on 13 November 2021, a hand grenade was thrown from a passing car at a post of Azerbaijani servicemen in the vicinity of city of Shusha.³³

Scenario 4. The risk of a large-scale cyberattack on vital infrastructure: Throughout 2020, several Armenian hacker groups were active in cyberattacks on Azerbaijan's public websites. According to the Special Communication and Information Security State Service's report, Armenia carried out large-scale cyberattacks on Azerbaijan during the Azerbaijani army's anti-terrorist "Revenge" operation in August 2022 against illegal Armenian armed gangs in certain parts of Azerbaijan's Karabakh region (where the Russian peacekeeping contingent is temporarily deployed) that had intensively fired on Azerbaijani units' positions.³⁴ The special cyber unit established within the Ministry of Defence of Armenia or its hacker groups, can inflict cyber-strikes on the infrastructure facilities of Azerbaijan.³⁵

33 Kavkazskiy Uzel, "Po vashemu eto mir?", November 14, 2021, available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/blogs/83785/posts/51378> (Accessed: October 30, 2022)

34 Zohrabov, F., "Azerbaijan talks Armenian cyberattacks", *Trend*, November 23, 2022, <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/3672626.html> (Accessed: November 30, 2022)

35 Razm.info, *MO Armenii sozdayot kiber-podrazdeleniye*, October 28, 2014, <https://razm.info/ru/5403> (Accessed: November 30, 2022)

Peace-building in the South Caucasus through the Eastern Partnership: What is the new role for the EU?

Gvantsa Davitashvili*

Acknowledging the increasing security challenges in Eastern Europe, this article aims to analyse the European Union's (EU) policy vis-à-vis the South Caucasus states in the framework of the Eastern Partnership. The author argues that the EU's external governance toolbox has had a limited overall impact on conflict resolution in the South Caucasus countries. Meanwhile, recent developments in Ukraine have increased the political responsibility and engagement of the EU and its Member states with respect to acting to protect its founding values as the Russian Federation irreversibly threatens regional and global security. This article concludes that the EU has revised its European integration framework towards Georgia, taking into consideration the increasing security challenges in the region, and has initiated a 'European membership perspective'. With regard to the normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the EU's expanded role as a mediator of this process is considered to be a contribution of the EU to peace-building.

Keywords: The EU, Eastern Partnership, Normative Power, European Integration, Russia, Peace, South Caucasus.



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Introduction

The aims of the EU's foreign and security policy across the world include a concern for the peace-building process in the South Caucasus, although the framework of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) programme has never contained a clear-cut goal for resolving conflicts in the countries of that region.¹ The ongoing war in Ukraine is irreversibly changing the security architecture of Europe and the foreign and security policy agenda of the EU. Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine is posing hybrid threats to Europe and Eastern European countries. This indefensible act of aggression of the Russian Federation also has implications for the security issues of the South Caucasus countries, and can open the door to unique and historic prospects for the EU to deepen and strengthen its relations with the countries of this region.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the increasing peace-building role of the EU in the South Caucasus. Thus, this article aims to respond to questions about the extent to which the EaP framework envisaged security threats in the South Caucasus, and how the EU currently sees and designs its role in the region as an actor in the peace-building process.

Methodologically, the article analyses the EU's strategic documents regarding the EaP, as well as bilateral and multilateral frameworks of cooperation between the EU and the South Caucasus countries since the introduction of the EaP initiative. The EU's 'normative' and 'civilizing' power explains the Union's limited capacity to engage with and impact on the conflicts in the region. However, this article shows the shift in responsibility of the EU from acting as a stabilizing actor to increasing its impact on the peace-building process. The aggressive war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine is analysed in the context of the EU's reconsideration of its security-providing and conflict-preventing power with respect to the EaP countries.

The EU's normative power in its foreign policy

Promoting the founding values of the EU and maintaining peace constitute the primary objectives of the Union according to Article 3.1.

¹ Treaty on European Union (2008) Consolidated Version of the Treaty of Lisbon, 9 May 2008, Official Journal of the European Communities L C 115/13, Article 21.

of the Treaty on the European Union. The legal basis for the Union's external action is provided by Article 21 of the Treaty on the European Union:

The Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.²

Guided by its internal situation of peace, the EU, through different frameworks of cooperation approaches its neighbourhood and provides external governance as a projection of its internal policies.³

The nature of the EU, as a power in world politics, is controversial and debated in theoretical and practical discourses. In EU scholarship, it is mostly argued to be a 'civilian power', a 'civilizing power' and a 'normative power'.⁴ Although the EU expects to act as a 'normative' and 'civilizing' power beyond its borders, from an effectiveness perspective, this perception is a self-portrait by the EU.⁵

The unique nature of the EU provides extensive possibilities for interpreting the means and boundaries of its actions. It is evident that the EU, as a global actor, is seeking to be a presence in third countries and, through its 'Europeanisation' mechanisms, to achieve peace, prosperity and security.

The EU designed foreign policy instruments for approaching the Eastern European countries according to the objective of stimulating the process of security and stability while, in fact, providing only a modest actual impact concerning security.

2 Ibid.

3 Lavenex, S., "EU External Governance in 'Wider Europe'", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 11 (4), 2004, pp. 680–700.

4 F. Duchêne, "Europe's Role in World Peace", in R. Mayne (ed.), *Europe Tomorrow: Sixteen Europeans Look Ahead*, London, Fontana, pp. 32–47; Hill, C., "European Foreign Policy: Power Bloc, Civilian Model – or Flop?" in R. Rummel (ed.), *The Evolution of an International Actor*, Boulder, CO, USA, Westview, 1990, pp. 31–55; Manners, I., "Normative Power: a contradiction in terms?", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40 (2), 2002, pp. 235–258.

5 Schimmelfennig, F., "Europeanization beyond the member states", *ETH Zurich*, paper for Zeitschrift für Staats- und Europawissenschaften, Center for Comparative and International Studies, 2010; Schimmelfennig, F., 'Europeanization beyond Europe', *Living Reviews in European Governance*, Vol. 10 (5), 2015.

The responsibility of the EU to act as a value-based actor has increased due to the immense threats in its Eastern neighbourhood.

The responsibility of the EU to act as a value-based actor has increased due to the immense threats in its Eastern neighbourhood. These include the former territorial conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine, and the Russian occupation of territories in Georgia. It is evident that the EU has revised and reconsidered its role and engagement in Eastern Europe. The EaP, the decisive tool of the EU, encompasses all Eastern European countries including those of the South Caucasus. The values of the EU are implicit in this instrument and through it have strengthened the bilateral and multilateral relations of the countries concerned. However, peace, a founding value of the EU, has not been achieved in Eastern Europe and a rapprochement of the vision of the EU and an upgraded framework of cooperation are required.

The Eastern Partnership: Efficiency of the EU's strategic documents

The primary objective of the EaP was to extend and intensify relations with Eastern European countries that were initially developed through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).⁶ The EaP Joint Declaration of 2009 states that this partnership aims at accelerating 'political association and further economic integration between the EU and interested [Eastern] partner countries'.⁷ The EaP aimed at upgrading the contractual relationships between the EU and Eastern countries through the introduction of cooperation with the objectives of (a) political association and (b) gradual economic integration into the internal market of the EU.⁸ Pursuant to this aim, the EaP sought to support political and socio-economic reforms in the partner countries, and to facilitate their alignment with the EU.⁹

Lavenex argues that the ENP could be defined as a process of 'external projection of internal policies'.¹⁰ The EaP, as a logical continuation

6 Wolczuk, K., "Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Eastern Partnership amongst the partner countries' political elites", *Eastern Partnership Review*, No. 5, Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, December 2011.

7 Council of the European Union, "Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit", May 7, 2009, p. 6.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Lavenex, S., "EU External Governance in 'Wider Europe'", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 11 (4), 2004, p. 689.

of the ENP, is methodologically similar to the previously existing discourse of external governance and the EU toolbox. However, it is the implication of increased differentiation and local ownership that is especially relevant for the South Caucasus countries. The EU approach is founded on a presumption of the value-based transformation of its neighbourhood, which it achieves by admitting states with financial and technical resources and pressuring governments to pursue reform-oriented, inclusive local processes.¹¹

The initial partner countries of the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova) share common legacies. However, significant differences appear not only geopolitically, but also in their preferences vis-à-vis the EU, especially in the countries of the South Caucasus.¹² Belarus suspended its participation in the EaP in 2021 and the EU has progressively imposed restrictive measures against that country due to the election results. In addition, the EU imposed measures on Belarus due to its actions contrary to international law and called on it to stop collaborating in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.¹³ Belarus is an exceptional case of the EU's negative conditionality because of the use of sanctions against this neighbouring country. In contrast, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova benefited from being 'front runners' in this partnership framework and are considered 'associated trio' countries after signing Association Agreements (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement (DCFTA) in 2014.¹⁴ The South Caucasus is not a homogeneous region, which is clear from the foreign policy priorities of the countries concerned. In addition, the EU's foreign policy tools, including those on security issues, reveal the existence of a common political framework with regard to Eastern Europe that, in itself, does not exclude differentiation

11 Börzel, T. A. and Pamuk, Y., "Europeanization subverted? The European Union's promotion of good governance and the fight against corruption in the Southern Caucasus", *Kolleg Forschergruppe (KFG) Working Papers Series The Transformative Power of Europe*, Vol. 26, April 2011.

12 Wolczuk, K., "Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Eastern Partnership amongst the partner countries' political elites", *Eastern Partnership Review*, No. 5, Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, December 2011.

13 European Council, "EU relations with Belarus", August 9, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/> (Accessed: November 5, 2022).

14 "Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part", Official Journal of the European Union L 261, Brussels, August 30, 2014.

and tailor-made solutions. Apparently, the common framework for partnership on security has not been developed due to the differentiated security perceptions.

In its strategic documents for the EaP, the EU recognised its role in the political and economic transformation of the Eastern European countries, including those of the South Caucasus, and established the objectives of (a) political association and (b) gradual economic integration into the internal market of the EU.¹⁵ However, neither bilateral arrangements (AA/DCFTA, institutional capacity building, visa facilitations agreement, and energy security) nor the multilateral track (Political Dialogue of the Heads of the States; four thematic platforms: democracy, good governance and stability, economic integration, and convergence with EU policies; energy security; and contacts between people) of the EaP considered a framework for dialogue on the security threats in the region. The EU did not take into consideration, within the EaP framework, the increasing imperialistic aspirations of Russia, thus neglecting its declared objective to reabsorb post-Soviet countries in its sphere of influence, although the EaP was initiated in response to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008.

The EU prioritizes rule-based convergence, thus the EaP framework does not directly address conflict resolution.¹⁶ The EaP domain does not provide any specific item dedicated to conflict, no flagship initiative addresses this issue, and no panel has been dedicated to conflict resolution or post-conflict normalization topics.¹⁷ Indeed, the term ‘conflicts’ appears in the 2009 Declaration of the EaP only in the general context of ‘the need for their earliest peaceful settlement based on principles and norms of international law’.¹⁸ The EaP’s 2011 Warsaw

15 Council of the European Union, “Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit”, May 7, 2009.

16 Wolczuk, K, “Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Eastern Partnership amongst the partner countries’ political elites”, *Eastern Partnership Review*, No. 5, Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, December 2011.

17 Council of the European Union (2011), “Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, Warsaw, 29-30 September 2011”, available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31798/2011_eap_warsaw_summit_declaration_en.pdf (accessed: November 10, 2022); Gogolashvili, K., “The conflicts in the South Caucasus and their impact on the Eastern Partnership”, *Eastern Partnership Review*, Vol. 9, December 2011, Tallin: Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership.

18 Council of the European Union, “Joint declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit”, May 7, 2009.

Declaration enshrines the EU's preferences regarding the security challenges in the Eastern neighbourhood and aims at supporting partner countries dealing with their security problems through good governance.¹⁹

The EU prioritizes rule-based convergence, thus the EaP framework does not directly address conflict resolution.

To sum up, the EaP initiative clarified the normative role of the EU in the South Caucasus. Despite the growing desire for political and economic cooperation, the EU did not express either its political willingness or the capability to deal with security issues and conflicts in the region. The EU has consistently supported the peaceful resolution of conflicts, but not to the extent of direct engagement.

Russia's stance

In contrast to the EU's peace-building objectives, the Russian Federation increased its claim to be presented in its neighbourhood as a major actor and a 'protector' and 'guarantor' of security. Initially, in the EaP initiative, the EU supported engagement with Russia as a partner. However, Russia was not included in the final document of the EaP 2009 through its own refusal. At the same time, the EU was accused by the Russian Foreign Minister of trying to widen its sphere of influence through the EaP.²⁰ The Russian Federation considered the introduction of the EaP unacceptable, while the EU was trying to convince Russia that the EaP was not a security project. Because no agreement was achieved between the EU and Russia regarding the prospective participation of the latter in the EaP project, that marked Russia's position as that of the 'out of the club' actor.

The territorial conflicts within the EaP countries are not only local challenges or issues on which the EU is providing help to its Eastern neighbours, but also an EU issue of how to deal with Russia.²¹ It is no longer in question that Russia's main foreign geopolitical objective is to restore governance over the post-Soviet countries and, with

19 Delcour, L., "The European Union, a security provider in the eastern neighbourhood?", *European Security*, Vol. 19 (4), 2010, pp. 535–549.

20 Schäffer, S. and Tolksdorf, D., "The Eastern Partnership – 'ENP plus' for the Europe's Eastern neighbours", *CAPerspectives*, No. 4, Center for Applied Policy Research, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, May 2009.

21 Popescu, N., 'Russia's Soft Power Ambitions', *Centre for European Policy Studies*, Policy Brief N. 11, Brussels, October 5, 2006.

respect to this objective, territorial conflicts have been found to be the most ‘effective tools’. Russia’s President Vladimir Putin declared that it was ‘certain that Russia should continue its civilizing mission on the Eurasian continent.’²² This explicitly, or at least implicitly, highlighted, more than a decade ago, the imperialistic ambitions of Russia. In supporting secessionist regions in its neighbourhood, the Russian Federation is hanging on to its decreasing influence in the region and resisting the increasing Euro-Atlantic aspirations of EaP countries.

The EU is coupled with NATO in the perception of Russia which, therefore, is coercively using mechanisms to block the further progress of EaP countries towards the EU. Russia believes that the instability of those countries would leave them no alternative but to

Most of the EaP partners consider that the policy framework does not accommodate security concerns, even though this initiative aimed to contribute to security and stability, in the long run, by establishing interdependence and value-based convergence between countries in the region.

join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).²³ Thus, Russia’s foreign policy agenda is based on giving strong impetus to its own integration project, the EEU, and, in a long-term perspective, aiming to establish unconditional ties with the post-Soviet countries.²⁴

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emphasise that the region has significant security concerns, which the soft measures offered by the EaP may not, by themselves, be capable of addressing.²⁶ There appears to be a mismatch in the agendas of the EU and its partner countries as, from the EU perspective, rule-based convergence is a *sine qua non* for progress in their relations, while partner countries desire to escape or weaken Russian dominance and

22 President of Russia, “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation”, Moscow, April 25, 2005, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> (Accessed: November 10, 2022).

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Boonstra, J., and Shapovalova, N., “The EU’s Eastern Partnership: One year backwards”, *Working Paper FRIDE*, Vol. 99, 2010.

26 Ibid.

restore territorial integrity through closer links with the EU.²⁷

To sum up, the EU was seeking to build bridges for peace in the region by promoting and exporting its internal values, economic prosperity, and democratic transitions to the countries of the South Caucasus by introducing the EaP as a regional cooperation framework. In contrast, Russia was ‘building walls’ between the territorial entities and peoples of the South Caucasus region.

What can the EU do for stabilization?

The geopolitically tense situation guided the EaP countries into a lose-lose situation that divided them between choosing European integration or engaging in the Russian-led EEU.²⁸ The EaP has been perceived in Moscow as a bold move, bearing the potential for a regional integration effect, as the AAs include sectorial chapters that, ultimately, imply a drastic shift towards the EU’s legal framework and integration into the internal market of the Union.²⁹

The EaP allows political flexibility, meaning that partners could avoid some actions and jointly agree on cooperation priorities. The concept of ‘joint ownership’, integrated early in the ENP, conceptualized a process in which shared values and common interests frame cooperation. However, the priorities and conditions for cooperation are determined bilaterally.³⁰ The EU incentives have influenced domestic changes in Georgia more than in Armenia and Azerbaijan, where the extent of the inclination and approaches towards the EU differs from that of Georgia.³¹

27 Wolczuk, K., “Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Eastern Partnership amongst the partner countries’ political elites”, *Eastern Partnership Review*, No. 5, Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, December 2011.

28 Delcour, L. and Kostanyan, H., “Towards a fragmented neighbourhood: Policies of the EU and Russia and their consequences for the area that lies between”, *Essay Thinking ahead for Europe*, Vol. 17, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, October 17, 2014.

29 Delcour, L. and Kostanyan, H., “Towards a fragmented neighbourhood: Policies of the EU and Russia and their consequences for the area that lies between”, *Essay Thinking ahead for Europe*, Vol. 17, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, October 17, 2014.

30 European Commission, *Communication from the Commission: European Neighbourhood Policy*, Strategy Paper, Brussels May 12, 2004.

31 Börzel, T. A. and Pamuk, Y., “Europeanization subverted? The European Union’s promotion of good governance and the fight against corruption in the Southern Caucasus”,

The ‘associated trio’: Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova

After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the EaP has proved to be a rather unsuitable instrument for the common neighbourhood of the EU and Russia. In the case of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, the direct connection between security issues and European integration was affirmed by the European Union through its readiness to accept new member states in the Union. Counterbalancing the increasing security threat in EaP countries is the irreversible Euro-Atlantic integration and the European perspective of these countries. The opinions of the EU institutions make it clear that the European integration of this ‘associated trio’ of countries (those that signed the AA with the EU)

After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the EaP has proved to be a rather unsuitable instrument for the common neighbourhood of the EU and Russia.

is the EU’s response to Russian aggression, together with the waves of sanctions with which the Union is addressing the Kremlin.

The AAs will be the most important instrument for bringing reforms on the domestic levels of the ‘associated trio’ countries, including Georgia.³² The

AAs are the longest and most detailed agreements of their kind and contain detailed and binding provisions for partner countries to align their laws and policies with the EU *acquis*, thereby signalling a shift from soft law to hard law commitments and, in this manner, exporting the EU’s extensive regulatory framework to the EaP countries.³³ However, regarding candidate status, the conditionality of the EU is the new transformative path as it is the most successful leverage mechanism of the EU, one that is capable of changing the security architecture in the ‘associated trio’ countries, including Georgia.

Georgia applied for EU membership after Ukraine and Moldova, in March 2022.³⁴ The associated countries had aspired to European membership since the initiation of the EaP. It is evident that the idea of Europe is related to democratic governance and democratic institutions.

Kolleg Forschergruppe (KFG) Working Papers Series The Transformative Power of Europe, Vol. 26, Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin, April 2011.

32 Petrov, R., “Challenges of the EU -Ukraine AA’s effective implementation into the legal order of Ukraine”, *EU External Relations Law*, 2021, pp. 129–146.

33 Delcour, L. and Wolczuk, K., “Beyond the Vilnius Summit: challenges for deeper EU integration with Eastern Europe”, *European Policy Centre*, Policy Brief, 2013.

34 European Commission, “Opinion on Georgia’s application for membership of the European Union”, June 16, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en (Accessed: November 10, 2022).

It pivots the responsibility onto the EaP countries to correspond with the EU's rules, norms, and standards, and to implement domestic reforms for European membership. The EU will use the policy of differentiation without exception. This implies that the methodology of Europeanization will be an integral part of this wave of enlargement. The countries of the 'associated trio' will, within the framework of the EaP, have to fulfil the conditions set by the European Commission at the local level.³⁵ Conditionality remains a key tool for this expansion. It is important for Georgia not only to have a European perspective but also to be granted candidate status in 2023 and not to backslide from the EU accession process. As an EU candidate, Georgia will play an important role in promoting peace in the South Caucasus.

In contrast to the EU's peace-promoting role, Georgia has tense political and economic relations with the Russian Federation and considers its northern neighbour as an immediate threat to its stability and development. Georgia has had its territories occupied and sees Russia as a threat and unreliable partner in trade and economic relations, and has had further negative experiences with Russian economic 'sanctions'.³⁶

The South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia

The EU's mediating role in achieving normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan is key to achieving peace in the

35 European Commission, "Opinion on Moldova's application for membership of the European Union, 16 June 2022", available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/opinion-moldovas-application-membership-european-union_en (Accessed: November 10, 2022); European Commission, "Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union", June 16, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en (Accessed: November 10, 2022); European Commission, "Opinion on Ukraine's application for membership of the European Union", June 16, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/opinion-ukraines-application-membership-european-union_en European Commission; "Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union", June 16, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en (Accessed: November 10, 2022).

36 Emerson, M. and Kostanyan, H., "Putin's grand design to destroy the EU's Eastern Partnership and replace it with a disastrous neighbourhood policy of his own", *Commentary Thinking ahead for Europe*, Brussels, Centre for European Policy Studies, September 17, 2013.

South Caucasus region, and more EU engagement is needed to advance the process. The EU has reshaped its relationship with Armenia and Azerbaijan through different contractual bases.

After Armenia joined EAEU, the initiation of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was an impetus to EU–Armenia relations.³⁷ In Armenia, cooperation with the EU had already been weakened and questioned due to Russian influence. Therefore, Armenia, has an unpredictable perspective with regard to European integration, and the future of its cooperation is dependent on whether

The EU's mediating role in achieving normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan is key to achieving peace in the South Caucasus region, and more EU engagement is needed to advance the process.

the country manages to effectively implement the EU and Armenia CEPA.³⁸ Legal convergence is the main track for Armenia's Europeanisation if it is to stay on a positive track of cooperation with the EU. At the same time, Armenia's deeply structured dependence on Russia imposes a threat to the relations of this country with the EU, including within the EaP. After a brief meeting with the President of Russia in September 2013,³⁹ Armenia's President Serzh Sargsyan agreed

to join the Russia-led EEU, despite the three years of negotiations on the conclusion of the AA and the DCFTA with the EU that were successful enough to initialize these agreements at the Vilnius Summit in November 2013.⁴⁰ The 'Armenian case' was part of a greater Russian campaign to dissuade Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine from signing AAs with the EU.⁴¹

The ongoing negotiations on a new EU–Azerbaijan comprehensive agreement result from several mutual economic and trade interests,

37 "The European Union–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), 2017", entered into force on March 1, 2021; European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, "In-depth analyses: EU relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan", available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/133502/EU%20relations%20with%20Armenia%20and%20Azerbaijan.pdf> (Accessed: November 10, 2022).

38 "The European Union–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), 2017", entered into force on March 1, 2021.

39 Gardner, A., "Armenia chooses Russia over EU", September 3, 2013, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/armenia-chooses-russia-over-eu/> (Accessed: November 15, 2022).

40 Emerson, M. and Kostanyan, H., "Putin's grand design to destroy the EU's Eastern Partnership and replace it with a disastrous neighbourhood policy of his own", *Commentary Thinking ahead for Europe*, Brussels, Centre for European Policy Studies, September 17, 2013.

41 Ibid.

including EU energy security and Azerbaijan's interest in increasing trade and transport relations with the EU.⁴² In July 2022, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen signed a memorandum of understanding with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev as part of efforts to augment the gas supply to Europe and replace the restricted supplies coming from Russia.⁴³ This is a historic momentum for engaging in multiple contractual arrangements supporting the trade and economic interests of Azerbaijan and Georgia. Azerbaijan has a unique and historic possibility to lead the most important economic projects and initiatives in the region. Mutually beneficial economic projects of Azerbaijan with the EU and Georgia are capable of serving for common prosperity and stability.

Mutually beneficial economic projects of Azerbaijan with the EU and Georgia are capable of serving for common prosperity and stability.

For this purpose, the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev visited Tbilisi in October 2022.⁴⁴ Georgia's Prime Minister Garibashvili noted that he is welcoming the initiative announced by President Aliyev in Prague to create a tripartite (Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia) discussion format.⁴⁵ Emphasizing that Azerbaijan is the 'most important strategic partner' of Georgia, Prime Minister Garibashvili said that, during the meeting, the two also reviewed such jointly implemented projects as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and the 'importance of the Middle Corridor' (aka the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route).⁴⁶

The role of Azerbaijan is increasing as a geopolitically important and pragmatic country.⁴⁷ Azerbaijan, as the leading economic actor in the

42 Brzozowski, A., "EU to mediate in Armenia – Azerbaijan hostilities as spectre of war looms", *EUROACTIV*, September 13, 2022, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/eu-to-mediate-in-armenia-azerbaijan-hostilities-as-spectre-of-war-looms/> (Accessed: November 15, 2022).

43 European Commission, "Statement by President von der Leyen with Azerbaijan President Aliyev", July 18, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/statement_22_4583 (Accessed: November 15, 2022).

44 European Commission, "EU and Azerbaijan enhance bilateral relations, including energy cooperation", press release, July 18, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_4550 (Accessed: November 20, 2022).

45 "President Aliyev visits Georgia", *Civil.ge*, October 24, 2022, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/512722>, (Accessed: November 15, 2022).

46 Ibid.

47 Dalakishvili, N., "Visit of Aliyev and its prospect results", *American Voice*, October 25, 2022, available at: <https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/ilham-aliev-irakli-garibashvili-azerbaijan-georgia/6804042.html> (Accessed: November 15, 2022).

Azerbaijan, as the leading economic actor in the region for the EU, also opens new windows for Georgia to intensify its trade and economic relations with the EU as a vital transit country.

region for the EU, also opens new windows for Georgia to intensify its trade and economic relations with the EU as a vital transit country.⁴⁸

Armenia's ambitions with regard to implementing CEPA increase the possibility of the country's modernisation, as the bilateral agreement between the EU and Armenia aims at legal convergence in many sectors, including the rule of law, human rights, the justice system, effectiveness of state institutions, etc.⁴⁹ Azerbaijan and the EU have increased their reciprocal trade and economic interests as, in July 2022, Azerbaijan signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the EU on a 'Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy' that is considered by the EU as a 'new chapter' in bilateral relations.⁵⁰ In addition, the EU and Azerbaijan are negotiating a new comprehensive agreement that will facilitate enhanced cooperation in a wide range of areas including economic diversification, investment, trade, and making full use of the potential of civil society, while underscoring the importance of human rights and the rule of law.⁵¹

To sum up, the advancement of bilateral relations creates an opportunity to converge on security issues as a pillar of the multilateral track of the EaP that envisages the engagement of all South Caucasus countries and the EU.

Conclusions

With the initiation of the EaP by the EU, the Union once again emphasized its 'normative' and 'civilizing' role in Eastern Europe. In

48 Ibid.

49 European Commission, "The EU and Armenia Comprehensive Enhanced Partnership Agreement enters into force", February 28, 2021, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/ip_21_782 (Accessed November 15, 2022); Khvorostiankina, A., "Europeanisation through EU External Agreements and the issue of 'constitutional identity': The case of the EU–Armenia CEPA", *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal*, Vol. 4, 2018; Collective Monitoring by Civil Society, "Report on the Analytical Findings of Monitoring Activities: EU–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement", 2021.

50 European Commission, "EU and Azerbaijan enhance bilateral relations, including energy cooperation", press release, July 18, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_4550 (Accessed: November 20, 2022).

51 Ibid.

employing this policy framework, the Union was seeking to balance Russian interests without emerging as a security guarantor and actor in its neighbourhood countries, including the countries of the South Caucasus. The intention of the EU's external policy can be explained from the perspective of the non-provocation of Russia. It could also be considered to have underestimated the Russian factor in the region. The potential for the collapse of this approach was signalled by the EaP partners, but was still not integrated by the EU into the initial framework.

Russia has been able to counter this process in Armenia, and remains an immense threat for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Armenia is more dependent on Russia, but Azerbaijan is rather more independent and its role in the region is emerging. Meanwhile, domestic processes and political polarization in Georgia obstruct it from receiving candidate status for EU membership and serve as a source for Russia to increase its influence in Georgia.

After the developments in Ukraine, it has become clear that the EU has revised and reconsidered its foreign security policy. The EU, in its European integration process, no longer sidesteps the security challenges in its Eastern neighbourhood. At the same time, the EU has demonstrated a capability to increase its role as a moderator in the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The bilateral relationship between the EU and Armenia continues with the aim of further deepening ties with this country. At the same time, Azerbaijan has close and growing economic and trade relations with the EU. In contrast, Georgia is an 'associated' country with a 'European perspective' that is striving for candidate status. The convergence of those perspectives serves as a resource for the stabilization and peace orientation of relations in the South Caucasus region through the multilateral track of the EaP. For this purpose, the EU should consider its decisive role as a security provider in the region and revise the framework of the EaP to integrate security issues as a new pillar of the partnership.

The Judicialization of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Will International Courts Contribute to a Lasting Peace in the South Caucasus?

Nurlan Mustafayev*

Following the so-called '44-Day War' in late 2020, Azerbaijan and Armenia lodged reciprocal legal actions before the International Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights, alleging various breaches of international law. These inter-state claims encompass three decades and several claims under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the European Convention on Human Rights. Consequently, the judicialization of the conflict has added a new dimension in Azerbaijan-Armenia relations that was absent in the past 30 years of peace negotiations. This article analyses the ongoing inter-state legal cases and their legal and political consequences for the parties and the South Caucasus region at large. The article argues that these international legal forums can partially answer some of the transitional justice issues, but not all matters arising from this three-decades-long conflict. Despite such limitations, however, these international legal cases will likely bring more legal accountability and a 'rule-based order' between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and in the South Caucasus region, in the future.

Keywords: Armenia, Azerbaijan, ICJ, ECtHR, International Law, Human Rights, War Crimes, Reparations, Peace, Negotiations



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Introduction

Following the 44-Day War, or Second Karabakh War, of late 2020, Azerbaijan and Armenia lodged reciprocal inter-state applications before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ). While these claims formally appear equivalent, they are qualitatively different in their material scope and the time horizons they cover. Azerbaijan accuses Armenia over the three-decades-long military occupation of its territory and continuous violation of the human rights of almost a million of its citizens who were displaced from 1991 to 2020. In addition to its diplomatic aims, Armenia seeks to represent the rights of ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan's Karabakh region and is primarily focused on alleged human rights violations arising from the 44-Day War.

In the post-conflict phase, in the absence of a final peace treaty, relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia continue on the diplomatic, military, and judicial fronts in parallel. The judicial process is a new element in this developing paradigm, and its effect on the overall process remains to be seen. However, these inter-state claims cover only part of the legal issues arising from the conflict and do not address other key issues such as reparations for war damages or individual criminal responsibility for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide committed during the conflict.

This article reviews the nature and content of these inter-state cases from legal and political perspectives and assesses their impact on the ongoing peace talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia. It argues that, regardless of the outcome, these inter-state cases will have tremendous legal and political consequences for both countries by building the groundwork for sustainable relations based on international law at the expense of the *realpolitik* that has characterized their relations over the past thirty years. Despite such positive impacts, the article also argues that the litigation has inadvertently created perverse political incentives inhibiting the negotiation and signing of a final peace treaty by, for instance, delaying political compromises for Armenia's recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Finally, the article provides recommendations for the content of a final peace treaty, proposing, for example, the creation of an inter-state compensation commission dealing with the compensation issues arising from the conflict and accepting the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ and the International Criminal Court (ICC) by both countries.

Background

The 44-Day War¹ in late 2020 was not an isolated event but a continuation of the tragic inter-state armed conflict from 1986 to 1994 triggered by Armenia's territorial claims to Azerbaijan's Upper Karabakh region (the former 'Nagorno-Karabakh'),² a region populated by a majority of ethnic Armenians. A devastating war in the early 1990s resulted in Azerbaijan's heavy military defeat and Armenia's occupation of the Karabakh region and seven adjacent districts (the 'occupied territories'), and an overwhelming refugee crisis in Azerbaijan.³ The United Nations Security Council and UN General Assembly resolutions⁴ that called for the unconditional withdrawal of Armenian forces from the occupied territories remained completely disregarded by Armenia. The subsequent three-decades-long peace talks under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group failed to bring a peaceful resolution to the conflict, resulting in a 'no war, no peace' situation.⁵

Armenia's prolonged occupation witnessed an extensive and systematic violation of the human rights of Azerbaijani citizens, including the looting and transfer of extensive civilian infrastructure, public and private property, cultural heritage, and natural resources in the formerly

1 Socor, V., "Armenia's 44-Day War: A self-inflicted trauma", *The Jamestown Foundation*, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 3, January 6, 2021, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/armenias-44-day-war-a-self-inflicted-trauma-part-one> (Accessed: August 25, 2022)

2 Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Armenia, August 23, 1990, available at: <https://www.gov.am/en/independence/> [Preamble refers to the "joint decision of the Armenian SSR Supreme Council and the Artsakh National Council on the 'Reunification of the Armenian SSR and the Mountainous Region of Karabakh'" based on the December 1, 1989, resolution]; Sanjian, A., "The Armenian diasporan press on Mountainous Karabakh", *Entries of the Society for Armenian Studies*, 6 January 2021, available at: <http://entriessas.com/articles/armenian-diaspora> (Accessed: September 10, 2022)

3 See, e.g., De Waal, T., "The Nagorny Karabakh conflict in its fourth decade", *Carnegie Europe*, December 24, 2019, available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/12/24/nagorny-karabakh-conflict-in-its-fourth-decade-pub-80791> (Accessed: September 20, 2022); Gureyeva-Aliyeva, Y. and Huseynov, T., "Can you be an IDP for twenty years?", *The Brookings Institution*, December 2011, available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/12_idp_host_communities_azerbaijan.pdf (Accessed: November 30, 2022)

4 United Nations, Security Council Resolutions 822 (1993), 853 (1993), 874 (1993), 884 (1993); United Nations General Assembly Resolution 62/243 (2008)

5 Bryza, M., "Armenia-Azerbaijan ceasefire revives 'Basic Principles' and demonstrated Putin's continued sway", October 10, 2020, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/armenia-azerbaijan-ceasefire-revives-basic-principles-and-demonstrates-putins-continued-sway/> (Accessed: September 10, 2022)

Armenia's prolonged occupation witnessed an extensive and systematic violation of the human rights of Azerbaijani citizens, including the looting and transfer of extensive civilian infrastructure, public and private property, cultural heritage, and natural resources in the formerly occupied territories.

occupied territories.⁶ For instance, according to Human Rights Watch, about 750,000–800,000 Azerbaijanis became internally displaced persons (IDPs)⁷ and had to abandon approximately 150,000 private properties in the occupied territories.⁸ The UN estimated the total economic damage to Azerbaijan, including public and private property damage due to Armenia's occupation, at approximately US\$53.5 billion (US\$88 billion adjusted for inflation).⁹ In this context, Azerbaijan's inter-state application before the ECtHR mainly deals with the legacy of Armenia's occupation policies from 1991 to 2020, including the material and moral damage to the Azerbaijani IDPs.

Considering the jurisdictional limitation of the ICJ under the UN Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the ECtHR under the European Convention on Human Rights (European Convention), these inter-state claims only partially cover legal issues arising from the former Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict.¹⁰ For instance, other key issues arising from Armenia's occupation, e.g., an evaluation of complete damages and reparations for military occupation, are beyond the scope of this litigation, leaving them to a political agreement or local court actions.

Besides these legal platforms, the parties have the right to bring claims before the ICJ under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which both countries ratified in 1993. However, this is more relevant to Azerbaijan, considering the

6 BBC, "Who won the Karabakh War", March 28, 2021, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lsq8db5-8I&lc=UgxAkP50rq1_8vKEh8t4AaABAg (Accessed: September 20, 2022); "Report of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs' field assessment mission to the occupied territories of Azerbaijan surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh", March 24, 2011, available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/d/76209.pdf> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

7 Hrw.org, "Azerbaijan: Seven years of war in Nagorno-Karabakh", Human Rights Watch Report, December 1, 1994, p. 99, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/1994/12/01/seven-years-conflict-nagorno-karabakh> (Accessed: August 22, 2022)

8 Ministry of Internal Affairs of Azerbaijan, "Facts about the occupied territories of Azerbaijan", available at: <https://m.mia.gov.az/?/en/content/karabakh/> (Accessed: September 12, 2022)

9 United Nations, *Azerbaijan Human Development Report*, March 9, 2001, p.52, available at: <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents//azerbaijan2000enpdf.pdf> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

10 See, e.g., Heiko Krüger, *Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Legal Analysis*, 2010

Khojaly genocide¹¹ committed by the Armenian forces in 1992 remains uninvestigated and unpunished by Armenia, which is against the intent and purpose of the Genocide Convention.

Inter-state Cases before the ECtHR and the ICJ

ECtHR

In its application to the ECtHR, Azerbaijan accuses Armenia of material breaches of the European Convention for indiscriminate attacks on civilians as well as civilian and public property and infrastructure, including the use of ballistic missiles against civilian settlements;¹² executions, ill-treatment, and mutilations of combatants and civilians; the capture and continued detention of prisoners of war (POW); and the forced displacement of the civilian population in areas affected by the recent war, including the destruction of cultural and religious property in the de-occupied territories.¹³ Azerbaijan additionally alleges that Armenia has *continuously* violated the European Convention from 1991 to 2020 by occupying and displacing about one million Azerbaijanis from the occupied territories,¹⁴ including violating their property rights. In this regard, Azerbaijan's case is similar to the *Georgia v. Russia (II)* and *Ukraine v. Russia* cases before the ECtHR regarding continuing military occupation and massive violation of human rights.

Azerbaijan accuses Armenia of material breaches of the European Convention for indiscriminate attacks on civilians as well as civilian and public property and infrastructure, including the use of ballistic missiles against civilian settlements.

Armenia's claim is mainly focused on alleged human rights violations during the 44-Day War and protection of the rights of ethnic Armenians in the occupied territories who were allegedly displaced and lost access to their property in the latest war, including the property and

11 Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, New York University Press, 2003, pp.169–172

12 Hrw.org, *Armenia: Unlawful Rocket, Missile Strikes on Azerbaijan*, Human Rights Watch Report, December 11, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/11/armenia-unlawful-rocket-missile-strikes-azerbaijan> (Accessed: September 20, 2022)

13 Azerbaijan invokes Articles 2 (right to life), 3 (prohibition of torture), 5 (right to liberty and security), 8 (right to respect private and family life), 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), 13 (right to an effective remedy), 14 (prohibition of discrimination) of the Convention, Article 1 of Protocol No. I (protection of property) and Articles 2 (1) (freedom of movement) and 3 (2) of Protocol No. IV (prohibition of expulsion of nationals).

14 In addition to Upper Karabakh and seven adjacent regions, the occupied territories also include seven villages of the Gazakh district and parts of the Nakhchivan region of Azerbaijan.

infrastructure financed mainly by Armenian diaspora organizations in the settlement areas, which returned to Azerbaijani sovereignty.¹⁵ In this respect, a critical qualitative difference between the parties' claims is that Azerbaijan's application covers the continuing violations of human rights in the occupied territories from 1991 to 2020, and the scale of damages applies to almost a million Azerbaijani citizens.

The ECtHR is closely familiar with this conflict and has already developed a framework,¹⁶ espoused in *Chiragov and Others v. Armenia* and *Sargsyan v. Azerbaijan*, decided in 2015,¹⁷ and the just satisfaction judgments in the same cases in 2017.¹⁸ These cases will likely constitute the conceptual foundations for the ECtHR's approach to the admissibility and the merits of the current cases.

The ECtHR recognized Armenia's effective control over Azerbaijan's Karabakh region and seven adjacent districts in *Chiragov* and also in the cases of *Zalyan and Others v. Armenia*¹⁹ and *Muradyan v. Armenia*.²⁰ The ECtHR regarded Armenia's 'administrative practice' of continuous denial of access to the property and lack of due compensation as a violation of the property rights of six Azerbaijani Kurdish families displaced from the Lachin district in 1992. By extension, following the principles espoused in the *Chiragov*, *Zalyan*, and *Muradyan* cases, the ECtHR will likely reaffirm Armenia's effective control over the occupied territories and its responsibility for continuous denial of access to the property of a million Azerbaijani IDPs from 1991 to 2020 and other rights.²¹ However, the scope of the alleged violations

15 Sargsyan, L., "Armenia v. Azerbaijan: On the frontlines of the law", *EVN Report*, February 14, 2021, available at: <https://evnreport.com/spotlight-karabakh/armenia-v-azerbaijan-on-the-frontlines-of-the-law/> (Accessed: September 28, 2022)

16 Milanovic, M., "Nagorno-Karabakh cases", *Ejiltalk*, June 23, 2015, available at: <https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-nagorno-karabakh-cases/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

17 *Chiragov and Others*, App. No. 13216/05, Grand Chamber; Judgment 16 June 2015; *Sargsyan v. Azerbaijan*, App. No. 40167/06 Grand Chamber; Judgment 16 June 2015

18 *Chiragov and Others v. Armenia*, Grand Chamber; Judgment (Just Satisfaction) 12 December 2017; *Sargsyan v. Azerbaijan*, Grand Chamber; Judgment (Just Satisfaction) 12 December 2017.

19 *Muradyan v. Armenia*, App. No. 11275/07, 24 November 2016

20 *Zalyan and Others v. Armenia*, App. Nos. 36894/04 and 3521/07

21 Mustafayev, N., "Azerbaijan v. Armenia before the European Court of Human Rights: The protection of property rights in occupied territories", *Opinion Juris*, August 6, 2021, available at: <https://opiniojuris.org/2021/08/06/azerbaijan-v-armenia-before-the-european-court-of-human-rights-the-protection-of-property-rights-in-occupied-territories/> (Accessed: September 10, 2022)

of the European Convention in these inter-state cases is significantly broader. It extends to alleged mistreatment of POWs and the effects of the latest military operations, including using long-range artillery and ballistic missiles to target the population centres of Azerbaijan.²² These new issues will be at the intersection of the European Convention, international humanitarian law, and the laws of the war regarding this conflict, which will significantly stretch the interpretation of the European Convention in the context of international armed conflicts.

Notably, following the 44-Day War and after Azerbaijan liberated the occupied territories, significant new evidence emerged relating to Armenia's armed forces' entrenched presence (boots on the ground)²³ and the massive scale of destruction of civilian infrastructure, cultural heritage and private property in the occupied territories.²⁴ These facts were not available for the ECtHR's assessment when *Chiragov* was decided in 2008–2015.

The new evidence suggests that Armenia had positioned the majority of its armed forces and hardware in the formerly-occupied territories; this fact, discounted in *Chiragov*, indicates that Armenia not only had 'overall control' of the occupied territories but was in full-scale military occupation.²⁵ For instance, in the post-war period, field reports

Notably, following the 44-Day War and after Azerbaijan liberated the occupied territories, significant new evidence emerged relating to Armenia's armed forces' entrenched presence (boots on the ground) and the massive scale of destruction of civilian infrastructure, cultural heritage and private property in the occupied territories.

22 Mustafayev, N., "The Legality of Use of Ballistic Missiles on Cities: The Case of Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict", *EJIL: Talk!*, February 8, 2022, available at <https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-legality-of-use-of-ballistic-missiles-on-cities-the-case-of-armenia-azerbaijan-armed-conflict/> (Accessed: September 10, 2022)

23 Oryx, "The fight for Nagorno-Karabakh: Documenting losses on the side of Armenia and Azerbaijan", available at: <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2020/09/the-fight-for-nagorno-karabakh.html> (Accessed: September 10, 2022)

24 AzStudies, "Documenting destruction of Azerbaijani cultural heritage", December 19, 2020, available at: <https://azstudies-editor.medium.com/documenting-destruction-of-azerbaijani-cultural-heritage-16cff8f3648b> (Accessed: September 15, 2022)

25 Mustafayev, N., "Azerbaijan v. Armenia before the European Court of Human Rights: Revisiting the Effective Control Test after the "44-Day-War", *Opinio Juris*, April 8, 2022, available at: <https://opiniojuris.org/2022/04/08/azerbaijan-v-armenia-before-the-european-court-of-human-rights-revisiting-the-effective-control-test-after-the-44-day-war/> (Accessed: September 11, 2022).

by the *New York Times*,²⁶ the *Wall Street Journal*,²⁷ the BBC,²⁸ and Euronews,²⁹ and recent reports by international organizations,³⁰ have revealed that most of the formerly-occupied territories were stripped of all cultural heritage, private property, and civilian infrastructure during Armenia's occupation. The scale of such destruction indicates that these acts were not of a sporadic nature but rather a systematic attempt to make the occupied territories uninhabitable for the returning IDPs. Such significant evidence was unavailable for the ECtHR's purview in *Chiragov*, which could largely explain the limited approach to evaluating damages and just satisfaction.

This emergent evidence will add a new dimension to these inter-state cases and require a significant revision of the ECtHR's doctrine of state responsibility for military occupation, massive human rights violations in the formerly occupied territories, and just satisfaction under the European Convention.

ICJ

Concurrently with the ECtHR applications, the parties lodged reciprocal claims before the ICJ under the Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD),³¹ which intersects with international human rights law, humanitarian law, and the laws of war. The ICJ faces

26 Gall, C. and Troianovski, A., "After Nagorno-Karabakh war, tragedy, trauma, devastation", *The New York Times*, December 2020, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/11/world/europe/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-azerbaijan.html> (Accessed: October 25, 2022)

27 Simmons, A.M., "Azeris wrestle over return to abandoned towns, decades after first Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia", *The Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2021, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/azeris-wrestle-over-return-to-abandoned-towns-decades-after-first-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-with-armenia-11613400489> (Accessed: October 25, 2022)

28 BBC, "Who won the Karabakh War", March 28, 2021, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lsq8db5-8I&lc=UgxAkP50rqI_8vKEh8t4AaABAg (Accessed: October 25, 2022)

29 Euronews, 'Agdam', December 1, 2020, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMQFCKYOUuA&t=16s> (Accessed: October 25, 2022)

30 Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, "Humanitarian consequences of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan," December 13, 2021, available at: <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29483> (Accessed: November 30, 2022)

31 Application Instituting Proceedings (Azerbaijan v. Armenia), 23 September 2021, available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/181>, (hereinafter "Azerbaijan's Application"); Application Instituting Proceedings (Armenia v. Azerbaijan), 16 September 2021, available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/180>, (hereinafter "Armenia's Application").

unprecedented questions and a major test: how to interpret Armenia's ethnically motivated policies in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan from 1991 to 2020 under CERD? Unlike Uganda's occupation of Kenya and Russia's occupation of Georgia and Ukraine, Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijan involved strong "ethnic-national" component. These broad-based claims, with some novel aspects, will test the CERD's interpretation in this uncharted territory.

Azerbaijan and Armenia's applications are not factually or legally equivalent.³² Despite some similarities, a substantive difference between these cases lies in Armenia's alleged violations of CERD arising from its transformative occupation policies in the Armenian-occupied territories over the past 30 years. Azerbaijan raises four sets of claims under CERD relating to Armenia's campaigns of anti-Azerbaijani ethnic cleansing, cultural erasure, environmental depredation, and hate speech and disinformation. In this respect, Azerbaijan's application is not a response to Armenia's claims. It raises distinct claims under CERD, which is broader regarding the scope of alleged violations and the historical period that it covers.³³

Azerbaijan accuses Armenia of engaging in 'discriminatory acts' against Azerbaijanis on the basis of their 'national and ethnic origin' in Armenia proper and the Armenia-occupied territories in Azerbaijan from 1987 to 2020. It attributes this 'policy of ethnic cleansing and systematic violations of CERD' to Armenia's policy of discrimination on the basis of national or ethnic origin to achieve a mono-ethnic state. The origin of such a policy is Armenia's racist nationalist project, the so-called '*Tseghakron* ideology,' which excludes any place for ethnic Azerbaijanis in Armenia and Azerbaijan's Karabakh region.³⁴

32 Becker, M., "Well that didn't take long. After #Armenia initiated an #ICJ case against #Azerbaijan last week re #CERD violations, Azerbaijan said it would respond in kind. Yesterday, Azerbaijan filed its own case against Armenia, also under the CERD and also seeking provisional measures. 1/35", September 24, 2021, available at: <https://twitter.com/mabecker17/status/1441419333406584846> (Accessed: August 26, 2022); Wang, Y., "From warfare to lawfare under CERD: Armenia v. Azerbaijan and Azerbaijan v. Armenia", *Opinion Juris*, November 9, 2021, available at: <https://opiniojuris.org/2021/11/09/warfare-to-lawfare-under-cerd-armenia-v-azerbaijan-and-azerbaijan-v-armenia/> (Accessed: August 23, 2022)

33 Azerbaijan invokes Articles 2 (not to engage in act or practice of racial discrimination), 4 (ban propaganda on racial superiority or racial hatred), 5 (prohibit and eliminate all forms of discrimination and guarantee rights to everyone in its territory), 6 (investigate or punish acts of racial discrimination) and 7 (take immediate and effective measures to combat prejudices which lead racial discrimination).

34 Azerbaijan's Application, para. 5.

On the factual aspects, Azerbaijan asserts that, between 1987 and 1994, Armenia's state-sponsored 'ethnic discrimination and cleansing' policy resulted in the expulsion of nearly one million Azerbaijanis from the territory it controlled, including more than 200,000 from Armenia and over 700,000 from the then-occupied territories. As a result of Armenia's violence against Azerbaijanis during the armed conflict, more than 30,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis perished. This includes the

In Azerbaijan's telling, Armenia continued its discriminatory policies against Azerbaijanis throughout the occupied territories from 1994–2020 by preventing a million Azerbaijani IDPs from returning home.

massacre of more than 600 Azerbaijani civilians in the town of Khojaly in 1992, which has been condemned internationally as an act of genocide.³⁵

In Azerbaijan's telling, Armenia continued its discriminatory policies against Azerbaijanis throughout the occupied territories from 1994–2020 by preventing a million Azerbaijani IDPs from returning home. As part of its occupation policy, Armenia simultaneously pursued an overarching policy of 'cultural erasure' in the occupied territories in an effort to remove any trace of Azerbaijani ethnicity or traditions by resettling Armenians in areas from which Azerbaijanis had been expelled, razing Azerbaijani districts, and renaming others with Armenian labels; looting and destroying Azerbaijani cultural heritage sites; and conducting propaganda campaigns denying and distorting Azerbaijani history, culture, and ethnic identity.³⁶

A novel aspect of Azerbaijan's application is that it considers Armenia's habitat destruction in the occupied territories as damage to its cultural heritage under CERD. For instance, it asserts that Armenia's environmental destruction has threatened the extinction of the *Xarı Bulbül* (Khari Bulbul), *Ophrys caucasica*, a flower representing peace for the Azerbaijani people and the official Azerbaijani flower of the Karabakh region.³⁷

Azerbaijan claims that, despite Azerbaijan's liberation of most of the occupied territories, Armenia's ethnic cleansing policy nonetheless continues by preventing displaced persons from returning to their homes, failing to disclose landmine maps, and fomenting hate speech and propaganda that stokes anti-Azerbaijani sentiment in Armenia.³⁸ The recent hostilities in late 2020, including indiscriminate attacks on

35 Ibid., para. 10.

36 Ibid., para. 11.

37 Ibid., para. 11 and 68.

38 Ibid., para. 17 and 18.

the major Azerbaijani cities of Ganja, Barda, Tartar, and others, resulted in civilian deaths and the execution and torture of POWs. Azerbaijan claims that Armenia has committed numerous war crimes motivated by ethnic hatred, in violation of CERD.

In addition to asking for various reliefs (e.g., positive measures to prevent racial discrimination),³⁹ Azerbaijan requests the ICJ to require Armenia to make full financial reparation for the harm suffered by Azerbaijan and its people for various CERD violations.

Unlike Azerbaijan's extensive set of claims that cover 30 years, Armenia's specific claims are mainly dedicated to the alleged CERD violations during the so-called 44-Day War in late 2020 and the post-war situation. In particular, Armenia alleges numerous violations of the CERD by Azerbaijan during the 2020 war directed at the ethnic Armenians in the Karabakh region.⁴⁰ Armenia further alleges that Azerbaijan subjected Armenian POWs and detainees to abuse and mistreatment, and has created a 'military trophy park' in violation of the CERD.⁴¹

These broad ranges of claims at the intersection of the CERD, international human rights law, humanitarian law, and the laws of war will require revisiting the ICJ's existing conservative approach. These cases may provide an opportunity for the ICJ to apply the CERD in prolonged territorial-national conflicts and transformative military occupation.

Parties' Goals and Strategies: Continuation of War through 'Legal Means'?

The parties' political strategies behind these inter-state claims and how a final peace treaty should look appear fundamentally different. These different approaches will likely stretch the current interpretations of the European Convention and CERD significantly.

It is apparent that Azerbaijan's primary goal is to achieve international judicial recognition of Armenia's three-decades-long military occupation and its massive human and material consequences. In Azerbaijan's view, the ICJ and ECtHR's recognition of such legal violations will create a considerable cost and prevent the repetition of the same aggression by Armenia in the

39 Azerbaijan's Application, para. 99.

40 Armenia's Application, para. 6.

41 Ibid., para. 7.

It is apparent that Azerbaijan's primary goal is to achieve international judicial recognition of Armenia's three-decades-long military occupation and its massive human and material consequences.

future. It could legally strengthen Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and block Armenia's indirect territorial claims to Azerbaijan's Karabakh region, and is one of the conditions contained in Azerbaijan's five principles for a peace treaty.⁴² Additionally, these legal cases will likely increase Azerbaijan's chance of obtaining significant reparations from Armenia for the massive destruction of civilian infrastructure and private property in the formerly occupied territories, which the UN estimates to be valued at about US\$88 billion.⁴³

Azerbaijan's unwillingness to bring these claims when Armenia had physical control over the occupied territories remains an interesting point. Arguably, this move was motivated by Azerbaijan's goal to not irreversibly damage the ongoing peace processes before 2020. However, such a postponed legal action has created a false moral equivalence between the two cases in the international arena, despite the cases being fundamentally different.

On the other hand, Armenia's political goal behind its legal claims is to achieve a 'Kosovo scenario' in Azerbaijan's Karabakh region. The expectation is that the ICJ and ECtHR ruling in its favour would potentially strengthen Armenia's political position on the right of secession of ethnic Armenians in the Karabakh region from Azerbaijan.⁴⁴ Although international law does not recognize exceptions to the principle of territorial integrity, in Armenia's view, the ICJ's finding of a violation of CERD could potentially keep its covert territorial claims to Azerbaijan's Karabakh region alive. This is one of Armenia's proposed six principles for a peace treaty.⁴⁵ Thus, Armenia's allegations are packaged to link all grievances to racial discrimination under CERD. This is likely to be one of the critical reasons behind Armenia's delay in starting negotiations on a peace treaty, which will likely contain Armenia's explicit waiver of any

42 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, No:117/22, "Head of the Press Service Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan Leyla Abdullayeva answers the media's question", March 14, 2022, available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no11722> (Accessed: September 25, 2022)

43 United Nation, *supra* note, 9.

44 Hetq.am, "Armenia's Foreign Minister: Rights of Artsakh Armenians remains issue in Azerbaijan", March 15, 2022, available at: <https://hetq.am/en/article/142256> (Accessed: September 25, 2022)

45 Jam News, "Armenia add six principles for peace talks with Azerbaijan", May 5, 2022, available at: <https://jam-news.net/opinion-from-baku-armenias-6-responses-to-5-proposals-of-azerbaijan-what-to-expect-next/> (Accessed: September 22, 2022)

territorial claims to the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.

In effect, the judicialization of the conflict has created contradictory political incentives. In the absence of the international courts' final judgments, the parties will be unable to make political concessions on specific contentious points on which they accuse the other party. On the one hand, the fact that Armenia is unwilling to agree to border delimitation or explicitly recognize the Karabakh region as part of Azerbaijan in a final peace treaty before the ICJ rules, as it expects, in its favour may keep its indirect territorial claim to the Karabakh region alive. On the other hand, Azerbaijan cannot give up its claim for multi-billion-dollars' worth of reparations claims as part of peace talks if the ECtHR finds Armenia to be in breach of the European Convention and obliges it to pay compensation to a million Azerbaijani IDPs.

In this author's view, these judicial processes will prevent the signing of a final and comprehensive peace treaty within the next ten years – the time, it is expected, it will take these international courts to make final decisions. This is a key, and often overlooked, reason why negotiations on a peace treaty do not produce any tangible results even on the basic issues, even though the armed conflict ended in 2020. Consequently, even if the parties sign a peace treaty within the next two to three years, it will likely not be comprehensive and will not touch on issues that are subject to ongoing litigation at this stage of the contentious relationship.

Regardless of the outcome, the court's decisions will significantly impact long-term Azerbaijan–Armenia relations and the South Caucasus region at large. The absence of enforcement of international law, particularly of the UN Security Council's resolutions, in this conflict has created a sense of unaccountability and legal nihilism in the region over the past thirty years. Unlike Iraq's invasion of Kuwait or Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Armenia did not bear any legal consequences for occupying Azerbaijan and disregarding the UN Security Council's resolutions for the past thirty years. This created perverse political incentives and led to the political belief that territorial conquest is sufficient for the acquisition of the legal title to that territory, and to not taking peace negotiations seriously. The climate of lawlessness in the region created a sense that politics was not limited by international law, but was driven by hard power and broader geopolitics. In this respect, these judicial decisions will likely increase political accountability, limit hard power, and impose a high cost for violating international law. This evolution will form the pillar of a new regional order and a new relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The existing and proposed principles for a potential peace treaty are necessary, but not sufficient, to address all the key issues arising from this conflict. In addition to the proposed five or six principles, the parties should establish an inter-state compensation commission authorized to award material and moral damages to almost a million Azerbaijani IDPs and thousands of ethnic Azerbaijani-Armenians who may have suffered property and livelihood damages. Although the ECtHR upheld the importance of such a commission in *Chiragov* and *Sargsyan*, no inter-governmental action has so far been undertaken. This has grave consequences for almost a million IDPs. The proposed mechanism, similar to the Iraq–Kuwait Compensation Commission, should be a part of a final peace treaty and should include broad authorities in line with the property and reparation rules of the United Nations and the Council of Europe.

Importantly, one of the guarantees of the sustainability of a final peace treaty would be for both parties to accept the ICJ’s compulsory jurisdiction regarding the peace treaty’s enforcement and to accede to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The availability of recourse to such international law could eliminate the current jurisdictional limitations of these forums and broaden the scope of inter-state claims. In this respect, these international judicial bodies will add a critical legal dimension to their fractured political relationship and create a balance between the parties, regardless of changing regional politics.

A final peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia will involve the national security of both parties, which involves political and military matters that go beyond what international law can realistically govern. In this respect, the judicialization of the conflict has already added a new formal dimension to the potential peace treaty, but it is unlikely to determine the treaty’s content.

A critical positive outcome of the judicialization process is that the parties will be cognizant of an international judicial action if either party breaches the peace treaty or international law. This will potentially eliminate the past legal unaccountability for gross violations of international law, in particular, military occupation and ethnic cleaning. The emerging new legal framework could mark a break from the past ‘Hobbesian’ political order and a move to a ‘Lockean’ reality based on international law: both between the conflicting states, and in the South Caucasus region at large.

BOOK REVIEW:

“Constructive Competition in the Caspian Sea Region”

REVIEWED BY **NAGHI AHMADOV**



“Constructive Competition in the Caspian Sea Region” by Agha Bayramov, Routledge, 2022, 202 pp.

Reviewed by Naghi Ahmadov

The collapse of the USSR radically changed the situation in the Caspian Sea region, and led to the emergence of new independent states, namely Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. This brought with it an active geopolitical struggle around the region. The reason for the intensification of geopolitical competition in the Caspian Sea region that is rich in hydrocarbon resources, according to multiple researchers, was a new version of the “Great Game”. With the increase in the number of regional players, new problems arose that required immediate solutions. The former legal regime, inter alia, no longer meets the new conditions due to the lack of provisions regulating the interstate ownership of the sea. Besides, while great powers are pursuing their own goals in the region, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in recent years have been increasingly showing their desire to free themselves from the excessive guardianship of external powers. That is all about the geopolitics of the Caspian Sea region, which has been discussed at length on the pages of the book under review. Moreover, given its strategic location, the Caspian Sea region has become a prime transport link between Europe and Asia due to the ongoing Russian-Ukraine conflict. The study of the geopolitical features of the Caspian Sea region is consequently becoming more relevant than ever at the present stage. Therefore, the book titled “Constructive Competition in the Caspian Sea Region” by Agha Bayramov is a timely work.

Dr. Agha Bayramov is a lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the University of Groningen and in the Institute of Political Science at Leiden University. His research interests lie primarily in the area of the geopolitics of energy in the Caspian Sea region, climate change and energy transition in the South Caucasus.

This book aims to shed light on the growing role of state and non-state actors in the Caspian Sea region. The author presents a novel and unorthodox interpretation of the Caspian Sea region. The author picks

out three case studies, namely the Caspian Environmental Program (CEP), the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC), and the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) to explore the peculiarities of relationships among littoral states in light of functionalism via social constructivism.

The book is divided into introduction and five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 critically examines the major theoretical and empirical works on the New Great Game in the Caspian Sea region. It also advances the alternatives to predominant perspectives. According to Dr.Bayramov, the current literature did not succeed merely including states and marginalizing the rest of the actors in the study of the New Great Game (p.18). By including companies, banks, financial institutions, and NGOs the author claims that he helped the New Great Game debate moving forward (p.18). From the theoretical standpoint, by persisting in orthodox and obsolete state-centric assumptions the existing literature has come to naught, hence dismissed today world's complexities, geopolitical tendencies, the consequences of globalization (p.23). At the same time, nearly all developments are empirically explained as part of this so-called New Great Game in the relevant literature (p.23).

Dr.Bayramov highlights that the concept of the New Great Game oversimplifies the dynamics of geopolitics, thereby overlooking the fundamental distinction between 19th and 21th centuries international systems (p.27). He rightly points out that relying wholly on the New Great Game paradigm to analyze the Caspian Sea region leaves numerous critical questions unanswered (p.31).

Chapter 2 suggests an alternative perspective to the New Great Game, specifically classical functionalism. The author briefly touches upon the classical functionalist assumptions of David Mitrany, Ernst Haas and Leon Lindberg, and coalesces their key points (p.39), as well as introduces a revision of functionalism via social constructivism (p.68). Dr.Bayramov, referring to Brent Steele, maintains that “the key component of a functional approach is that it can be employed across borders, across allegiances and identities, because it works towards the common needs of individuals, regardless of allegiance or group rivalries” (p.42). It is noteworthy that the author contends that “when something is framed as technical, cooperation is easier because it

changes people's tendency to view something within a power political zero-sum framework" (p.68). According to revised functionalism, by understanding the fact that 'regions are socially constructed and can be redefined', one can expound the reasons behind changing complex dynamics (p.70).

Chapter 3 presents the first case study – Caspian Environment Program (CEP) – through the lens of the revised functionalist perspective. The author acknowledges that some ecological problems which the Caspian Sea's environment suffers, such as fluctuation of water levels, land degradation, loss of marine biodiversity (p.70). He draws attention to the fact that environmental issues are largely beyond capacities of an individual state due to their scale and intricacies. Taking into consideration this point, the governments of the littoral states decided to set up the CEP as a regional umbrella program to facilitate sustainable cooperation in 1998 and this led to signing the Tehran Convention, the first ecological and legally binding agreement in 2003 (p.79). The author comes to a conclusion that shared environmental resources have served as a useful starting point for the present-day cooperation in the Caspian Sea (p.80). He brings out that the coastal states moved forward from discussing ecological issues to regional security issues step by step (p.100). He finds out that 'there is a parallel and complex interconnection between the agreement reached on the environmental protocols and the agreement reached on the legal status of the seabed' (p.103). Differing from European integration, the author is certain that the objective of the cooperation of littoral states, in particular Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is to secure autonomy and independence (p.104).

Chapter 4 depicts the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline as a case study and analyzes the three phases of the project: planning, construction and usage. Dr.Bayramov contends that 'the BTC is much more than a piece of energy infrastructure because it is the main impulse for interaction between international and regional actors' (p.111). The author rejects the scholars who support the idea that Russia, Iran and Armenia were trying to sabotage the project. On the contrary, he asserts that it was one of the BTC pipeline's key stakeholders, Georgia, who blocked the pipeline's construction

because of environmental issues (p.119). Besides, he explores in depth the technical, economic, and social challenges in the planning and construction of the BTC (p.126) and considers that disregarded material and non-material issues created barriers for the BTC project (p.120). From a revised functionalist perspective, the BTC has given to the coastal states ‘material integration opportunity as an alternative to naïve political integration path and regional conflict’ (p.126). Therefore, in his opinion, the BTC pipeline should be regarded as a way of bringing different actors together and enhancing their interaction scope (p.130).

The chapter 5, entitled “A new round in the Caspian pipeline game: The Southern Gas Corridor” emphasizes the economic, environmental and technical challenges of the SGC project. Calling the New Great Game literature’s explanation narrow and exaggerated, he examines the three phases of the SGC project through the lens of revised functionalism and contends that the project has faced challenges beyond and besides Russia, Iran, and China during these periods (p.145). Dr.Bayramov finds that ‘the changing dynamics and complex interconnection between different developments should be explained in order to understand the full picture in the Caspian Sea region’ (p.148). Based on the fact that China, Iran, and Russia are involved in this project, in his view, even if there is a ‘Great Game’, it is about constructive cooperation rather than destructive rivalry (p.163).

In the concluding chapter, the author once again castigates the New Great Game literature depicting it as superficial and less systematic and requests switching to ‘more cautious, synthetic, and analytical ways of discussing the Caspian Sea region’ (p.176). Debating the three interlinked case studies he exposes that the littoral states can cooperate on shared issues regardless of the existing conflicts, competition, and geopolitics (p.183).

Overall, this book, mainly focusing on cooperative competition, has found answers to the multiple unexplored questions and overlooked sides of the Caspian Sea region. The author has fully and fairly discussed the New Great Game narrative in comparison with revised functionalism. His work has revolved around three case studies; i.e., CEP, BTC and SGC. He has discussed in detail the historical events

and challenges behind the emergence of these projects. Its findings revealed that besides states that are involved in constructing the Caspian Sea region's politics, several non-state actors have also affected the regional dynamism, which is probably the most intriguing part of the book since this aspect has not been generally touched upon in relevant literature. Along with all the positive angles, this book needs an updated review particularly after Russian occupation of Ukraine. Moreover, the author does not seem to be fully in picture, when he explicitly pushes aside the claims about Russia's interventions to prevent the implementation of the above-mentioned projects. In any case, this work is engrossing and worthwhile for the general reader, as well as those students, scholars and policy makers who may be interested in geopolitics of the Caspian Sea region.

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