

Vicious Circle of the South Caucasus: Intra-Regional Conflicts and Geopolitical Heterogeneity

Vasif Huseynov*

This article looks into the causes and consequences of the variance in the foreign policy orientation of the three countries in the South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The article discusses, as manifestations of their foreign policy orientations, Armenia's alignment with the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Georgia's aspiration to join the Euro-Atlantic military and political structures, and Azerbaijan's commitment to a balanced approach through reinforcing its role within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Tracking the evolution of the status quo to the beginning of the post-Soviet independence of the three states, the article argues that regional ethno-territorial conflicts, combined with the intervention of external great powers in this process, has served as the causal variable behind the genesis of the region's geopolitical diversification. This situation, in turn, has aggravated the disputes between the regional states, expanded the gap between them, and significantly complicated the resolution process. Describing this process as the vicious circle of the region, the article poses the questions, what are the main characteristics of this vicious circle? And how does it affect regional peace and security? The analysis concludes that the territorial conflicts of the South Caucasus erupted from relatively similar conditions in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union in early 1990s, but their trajectories diverged markedly owing to a wide range of factors but, in particular, the foreign policy strategies of the respective states.

Keywords: South Caucasus, vicious circle, conflicts, geopolitics.



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Introduction

The South Caucasus, in spite of its relatively small geographic size, has obtained remarkable geopolitical complexity since the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991. The three internationally-recognized states of the region, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, have gradually developed largely contradictory orientations in foreign policy, opting to align with one of the often-conflicting geopolitical centres or not to align with any of them. Azerbaijan has sought to maintain a balanced approach in foreign policy and has avoided developing relations with one foreign power at the expense of the country's relations with others. In complete contrast, Armenia and Georgia have demonstrated clear-cut choices in their foreign policies by, respectively, joining Russia's regional military and economic integration projects as a full-member and, following suit in another form, by seeking admission into the Euro-Atlantic military and political structures.

The states of the South Caucasus region drew their external patrons into their conflicts with neighbouring states in order to strengthen their hands and leverage international pressure on their adversaries.

This geopolitical heterogeneity of the South Caucasus gained momentum as each side in the region's conflicts refused to make any concessions: either in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict that resulted from the occupation by Armenia of Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region and adjacent districts, on the one hand, or Georgia and its occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the other. The states of the South Caucasus region drew their external patrons into their conflicts with neighbouring states in order to strengthen their hands and leverage international pressure on their adversaries. Intervention in, and occasionally abuse of, these disputes by the extra-regional powers exacerbated the conflicts. As a result, the external dimension of the conflicts gradually transformed into a bigger obstacle to their resolution as relations between the involved external great powers worsened. The war between Georgia and Russia in the wake of the deterioration of Russia–West relations presents an apt example of this process.

This situation, described in this article as the 'vicious circle of the South Caucasus', has generated insurmountable impediments to the settlement of the territorial conflicts and thus keeps international tensions strained and prone to sudden escalation. This article is an attempt to explore the nature of this vicious

circle, oriented around two guiding questions: what are the main characteristics of the vicious circle in the region? And how does it affect regional peace and security?

The article differentiates two phases of the regional conflicts in the formation of the vicious circle. First, its breakout in the post-Soviet area, accompanied by military clashes and humanitarian tragedies; and second, the period that started with ceasefire agreements in the first half of the 1990s. The article concludes that the three territorial conflicts of the South Caucasus erupted from relatively similar conditions in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, but their paths diverged markedly in the second phase owing to a wide range of factors but, in particular, the foreign policy strategies of the respective states. While in the case of Georgia this led to the restart of military collusion in August 2008, Azerbaijan's restrained manoeuvres in foreign policy prevented the formation of a vicious circle and maintained a prospect for eventual conflict resolution.

The article consists of two sections in addition to the introductory and concluding parts. The following section looks into the origins of the vicious circle, which the article argues to have emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The second part sheds light on the characteristic elements of this circle. This part also attempts to analyse the implications of the synthesis of the regional and external factors in the conflicts of the South Caucasus for peace and security in the region. The article ends with a concluding part that sums up the main arguments of the previous two sections.

Collapse of the Soviet Union and Formation of the Vicious Circle

During its existence, for over seventy years, the Soviet Union was a major unifying factor in its territories, although not always peacefully, as it blocked nationalist sentiments and separatist initiatives. As it disintegrated in the early 1990s, not only did the republics that once constituted the Union gain independence, but also autonomous entities within some of them strove to seize the opportunity and become independent. This situation particularly affected the South Caucasus and led to the emergence of at least three major conflicts in the region. South Ossetia and Abkhazia

warred against the central government in Tbilisi and, in the southern part of the region, another armed conflict broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan as the former waged a full-scale war to separate the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Azerbaijan.

The hostilities reborn with the disintegration of the Soviet Union affected Georgia dramatically as they pushed forward two wars with ethnic minorities and a civil war. The country's conflicts with its ethnic minorities have a history dating back centuries before the Soviet era. Georgia's structure in the Soviet period similarly contained the seeds for a potential war as it caused disputes even during this period. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, along with Adjara, had autonomous status within Soviet Georgia until the fall of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, while Abkhazia and Adjara had the status of Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), South Ossetia had a lower level of autonomy called Autonomous Oblast. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing political turmoil in the region encouraged the local authorities in these areas to launch an independence movement. The nationalistic rhetoric of the Georgian leaders of that time, in particular that of then president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, caused alienation of those ethnic minorities, which was used by third parties to propel conflicts. Georgia reached volatile ceasefire agreements with its breakaway regions, South Ossetia and

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Abkhazia, in 1992 and 1993, respectively, which brought the Russia-led peacekeeping troops of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) into the region.¹

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¹ Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Routledge, London 2005, pp. 334-342.

districts. As in the case of the conflicts in Georgia, a ceasefire agreement was possible through Russian mediation. After the loss of around 30,000 people and displacement of up to a million, Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a ceasefire agreement in 1994, although this is broken almost every day, albeit limitedly.

The Russia-brokered ceasefire agreements in the three conflicts of the South Caucasus put an end to the period that can be classified as the first phase of the conflicts in the post-Soviet era, a period marked by violent clashes and massive human losses. It was followed by a period in which the ceasefire agreements, although broken frequently, stayed in force. This second phase of the conflict has been crucial as it could transition to a sustainable peace if handled prudently, or to a renewed escalation. This is also a period in which the geopolitical extension of the regional conflicts started to develop.

As the successor of the Soviet Union, Russia was involved in the conflicts of the region from the very beginning. The separatist forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia relied on Russian help to put forward their agenda and prevail over the Georgians. Compared with the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, Russia’s involvement in these two conflicts was dramatically higher.² The geographic proximity and ethnic linkage with South Ossetia through North Ossetia made Russia hypersensitive to the post-Soviet developments in Georgia.³

Having reached a ceasefire agreement with Azerbaijan through Russia’s assistance, Armenia also relied on Moscow to preserve the status quo and consolidate its control over the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. This is the reason why, unlike Georgia and Azerbaijan, Armenia did not quit the Collective Security Treaty, but instead reinforced its military alliance with Russia by becoming a fully-fledged member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) when it was established on 14 May 2002. Although it has never been tested, Article 4 of the CSTO stipulates that, “If one of the Member States undergoes aggression, it

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2 Gerrits, A. and Bader, M. “Russian patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Implications for Conflict Resolution,” *East European Politics*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2016, 297-313, available at: [tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2016.1166104](https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2016.1166104) (Access date: July 8, 2020).

3 Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, *op. cit.*, pp.157-160.

will be considered by the Member States as aggression to all the Member States of this Treaty”.⁴

Russia’s alignment with Abkhazians and South Ossetians on the one side, and with Armenia on the other, confronted Azerbaijan and Georgia with a dilemma. They would have to either look for other external powers to balance Russia’s influence in the region or pursue a neutral foreign policy, seeking, *inter alia*, to neutralize Russia’s role in their conflicts. This turned out to be a decisive moment in the second phase and determined the future development of the conflicts.

Georgia had already made its decision in favour of the former option during the regime of Gamsakhurdia, who unsuccessfully attempted to draw the Western powers into his war over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia’s second president, pursued a more pragmatic foreign policy by developing friendly relations with Russia and concurrently seeking to get a seat in the Euro-Atlantic military and political institutions. Calling Russia Georgia’s ‘strategic partner’, Shevardnadze was also pursuing his country’s desire for NATO membership, although not as conspicuously as his successor. Mikhail Saakashvili, who came to power following the overthrow of President Shevardnadze in 2003, did not follow this cautious diplomacy. Abandoning the ‘strategic partnership’ with Russia, he mobilized all available resources to enter the EU and NATO as soon as possible that intensely irritated Russia and dramatically complicated the country’s conflict over the breakaway territories. The negative implications of this strategy for Georgia–Russia relations soared dramatically against the background of deteriorating relations between the West and Russia. Saakashvili erroneously believed that the EU and the US would stand with Georgia in a military clash with Russia over the breakaway regions. Tbilisi’s attempt to westernize the conflict exploded the fragile ceasefire, pushed the two countries into a military clash in August 2008, and ended with a tragic loss for Georgia.

In contrast to Georgia, Azerbaijan opted for a balanced approach in dealing with the surrounding power centres. Azerbaijan’s then

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, *International organizations: Collective Security Treaty Organization*, 2020, available at: <https://www.mfa.am/en/international-organisations/1> (Access date: July 8, 2020).

president, Haydar Aliyev, the founder of this approach in the country's foreign policy, sought to balance Russia and the West and reap maximum benefits from Azerbaijan's strategic location and from the export of the country's rich hydrocarbon resources. Thanks to Aliyev's strategy, Russia brokered the ceasefire agreement and withdrew its objection to Azerbaijan's deal with Western energy companies. President Ilham Aliyev chose to maintain this foreign policy course after he took over the presidency of the country in 2003.

However, there was still some uncertainty in this respect as Azerbaijan still had an eye on the Western bloc and occasionally declared its interest in deeper integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Georgia's experience on this path, which encountered troublesome challenges in the August War of 2008, was a wake-up call for the Azerbaijani government.

For some observers, following this event, Azerbaijan started to apply the principles of "Finlandization" in foreign policy more cautiously and more consistently.⁵ The Military Doctrine of the country, adopted in June 2010, did not list integration into the Euro-Atlantic community as a priority of Azerbaijan's foreign policy.⁶ Baku's subsequent decision to join the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in May 2011 was of symbolic importance in this context. This decision was meant to send a message to both Russia and NAM member Iran that Azerbaijan was not planning to ally with any geopolitical bloc, including the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Azerbaijan put a strong emphasis on its NAM membership and even took over its chairmanship for three years from 2019 in order to reinforce the image of non-alignment in global politics, among other objectives.⁷

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5 Valiyev, A. "Finlandization or Strategy of Keeping the Balance? Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy Since the Russian-Georgian War," *PONARS Eurasia*, Policy Memo No. 112, October 2010, available at: <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/finlandization-or-strategy-keeping-balance-azerbajians-foreign-policy-russian-georgian-war> (Access date: July 8, 2020).

6 RFE/RL, *Azerbaijan Adopts Military Doctrine at Long Last*, 9 June 2010, available at https://www.rferl.org/a/Azerbaijan_Adopts_Military_Doctrine_At_Long_Last/2066758.html (Access date: July 8, 2020).

7 Huseynov, V., "Azerbaijan sets to take over the chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement", *New Eastern Europe*, 1 August 2019, available at: <https://>

Azerbaijan had to pursue its fight for the restoration of its territorial integrity against the backdrop of the adoption of non-alignment as the foreign policy course of the country and under the geopolitical constraints of its location. The facts that Azerbaijan did not attempt to westernize its conflict with Armenia in the way President Saakashvili attempted to and did not launch a military operation to liberate the occupied territories have prolonged the second phase of the conflict. This has a number of implications for the future development of the conflict.

Implications for Regional Security

The three territorial conflicts of the South Caucasus erupted from relatively similar conditions in the wake of the Soviet collapse in the early 1990s, but their paths diverged markedly owing to a wide range of factors, some of the major ones of which were discussed in the previous section. The Georgian leaders' mishandling of the ceasefire period by internationalizing their conflict and attempting to draw in NATO as a balancing force against Russia reignited the conflict and thus formed a vicious circle. This transformed the conflict from its original nature into a matter of Russia–West relations while also preserving the original hostilities. The breakout of another similar conflict in the region, the crisis in Ukraine, further complicated the geopolitical situation around Georgia. Consequently, the territorial conflicts in Georgia ended up in a stalemate on two levels: first, on the local level between the conflicting parties; and second, on the geopolitical level between Russia and the West.

The framework established with the ceasefire agreement of 1994, however, remains valid in the case of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. Unlike Georgia, Azerbaijan has downplayed its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and gradually drifted away from European integration as an objective of its foreign policy, and therefore the geopolitical nature of the conflict did not evolve into the confrontational phase seen in Georgia's conflict. By adhering to a balanced approach between the global powers, the Azerbaijani government sought to prevent the geopolitical escalation of its conflict with Armenia. This situation affected the evolutionary

neweasterneurope.eu/2019/08/01/azerbaijan-sets-to-overtake-the-chairmanship-of-the-non-aligned-movement%E2%80%A2 (Access date: July 8, 2020).

trajectory of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and prevented it from becoming a vicious circle as in the case of the conflicts in Georgia. The ‘incomplete evolution’ of the conflict has had a number of implications for its subsequent development and for the role of external powers.

Above all, unlike the conflicts in Georgia, the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict is not deadlocked on two levels. Although external intervention is also a factor in the case of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, it has not become a matter of Russia–West rivalry. In fact, there was the strong potential for the rapid emergence of a complete vicious circle in this conflict as well, thanks to Armenia’s alignment with Russia in military and other spheres. Had Azerbaijan followed its Euro-Atlantic aspirations in the way Georgia did, we would most likely now have a much more complex situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The troubled experience of Georgia in 2008 convinced the Azerbaijani leadership of the advantage of a balanced approach, which eventually led Azerbaijan to full membership of the Non-Aligned Movement in 2011.

As the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is not deadlocked at the geopolitical level, a breakthrough in the foreseeable future is more attainable compared with Georgia’s conflict. This is often reflected in two aspects. On the one hand, the two conflicting parties, that is, Armenia and Azerbaijan, sometimes make initiatives for downscaling military confrontation, thereby generating hope for a breakthrough.⁸ Although these initiatives have failed to deliver a lasting positive outcome over the last three decades, there is at least an internationally-mediated negotiation process and quest for a settlement. The conflict over Georgia’s breakaway regions is, in contrast, at a complete stalemate in the wake of Russia’s recognition of the ‘independence’ of the separatist entities. Although the representatives of Abkhazia and South Ossetia take part in the Geneva International Discussions co-chaired by the Organization for Security and Co-operation

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⁸ Huseynov, V., “New Hope for a Breakthrough in the Nagorno-Karabakh Deadlock?” *The Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, 6 April 2020, available at: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13611-new-hope-for-a-breakthrough-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-deadlock?.html> (Access date: July 8, 2020).

in Europe, the European Union and the United Nations, there are no negotiations between the conflicting parties for a peace agreement or on the status of the breakaway regions.⁹ The existing formats for negotiation between the sides, the Geneva International Discussions and the Prague Format, formerly known as Abashidze–Karasin talks, are only focused on the political, economic, trade, and similar types of issues between the sides and do not include negotiations on the future status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

On the other hand, Russia's approach to the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict is different from its approach to the conflict in Georgia. It is true that, having established a military base in Armenia and exerting significant influence over its political leadership, Russia is Armenia's closest ally and its guarantee of security and even of existence.¹⁰ To many observers, the conflict serves as a useful instrument for the Kremlin to preserve Armenia's dependence on Russia.¹¹ This is the reason why the occasional statements by Russian leaders about the prospects for a resolution and potential resolution formats of the conflict are taken by political experts with a grain of salt.¹²

However, the fact that the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict has not transformed into a matter of geopolitical confrontation in the way that the conflicts in Georgia have also affects Russia's engagement with this region. Russia plays a formal mediating role in the negotiation process and is even a co-chair of the main international mission to coordinate these negotiations, the OSCE Minsk Group. Russia does not seem interested in a military escalation and is not willing to recognize the illegal separatist

9 Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, (2020), "Geneva International Discussions," available at: <https://smr.gov.ge/en/page/26/geneva-international-discussions> (Access date: July 22, 2020).

10 Euronews, *Russia signs deal to guarantee Armenia's security*, 21 August 2010, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2010/08/21/russia-signs-deal-to-guarantee-armenia-s-security> (Access date: July 22, 2020).

11 Abushov, K., "Russian Foreign Policy Towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Prudent Geopolitics, Incapacity or Identity?" *East European Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 1, March 2019, pp. 72-92.

12 Rahimov, R., "Russian Foreign Minister Reignites Conflict Debate in Armenia, Azerbaijan," *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No. 61, 4 May 2020, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-foreign-minister-reignites-conflict-debate-in-armenia-azerbaijan/> (Access date: July 8, 2020).

regime established in Azerbaijan's occupied territories. Russia formally supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and the two sides are co-operating in a wide-range of spheres, including in the purchase of military equipment.¹³ This provides further grounds for arguing that it is still possible to reach a settlement in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, peacefully or militarily.

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Conclusion

This study on the main characteristics of the so-called vicious circle of the ethno-territorial conflicts in the South Caucasus and its implications for regional peace and security produced the following analytical results. It has been found that two phases can be differentiated in the conflicts between Georgia and its breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the one hand, and between Armenia and Azerbaijan, on the other hand. The breakout of these conflicts in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which was accompanied by violent clashes and humanitarian tragedies, was presented as the first phase; this ended with the establishment of Russia-mediated ceasefires by the mid-1990s. The second phase was considered to have started after this period but was handled differently by the conflicting parties. The attempt of Georgian leaders to westernize their conflict by drawing in the Euro-Atlantic bloc with a false hope that it would join Tbilisi's war against Russia ended the second phase and returned the parties to the situation at beginning of the 1990s. Hence, it is argued that a vicious circle was formed in Georgia's conflict with the breakaway regions and is not clear when, or if, it will be broken as presently there are no international negotiations whatsoever towards this end.

The article has revealed that there was also a high probability for the development of a similar scenario in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. However, the fact that Azerbaijan refused to westernize its conflict in the way Georgia's leaders did prior to the 2008 war and decided to pursue a balanced approach in foreign policy played a decisive role in the prolongation of the

¹³ TASS, "Putin says Russia, Azerbaijan building relations based on balance of interests," 27 September 2018, available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1023339> (Access date: July 22, 2020).

second phase. By joining the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and undertaking a leading role in this institution, Azerbaijan has reinforced its image as a non-aligned country in global politics and has sought to build friendly relations with Russia and other power centres. From this point of view, it has been argued that, unlike the doubly deadlocked conflicts in Georgia, Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia is not geopolitically deadlocked, though it seems to be so at the regional level. Having prevented the formation of a vicious circle in this conflict, Azerbaijan has succeeded in avoiding a dead end and preserved its chance to liberate its occupied territories and restore the territorial integrity of the country.