
TRANSITIONAL PROCESSES IN “THE SYSTEM OF THE THREE SEAS”

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It is only in the historic moments of collapsing empires that the small sub-region of the South Caucasus has been realized as a united taxonomic entity. In reality, it has never existed as a whole, considering that it has never been connected by cultural, political or economic infrastructures. There is one key reason for this—the lack of value bases for consolidation. For the same reason, communication systems and channels are often disrupted, limiting the range of possibilities for the already rather complex processes aimed at achieving mutual understanding within the region. Adding to the objectively intricate nature of the situation is the fact that this sub-region is geographically situated in the center of the “System of the Three Seas” (the Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and South Caucasus) and therefore difficult to bypass, historically playing a key role in terms of transit routes and roads, uniting or dividing regions of more global significance from each other.²

It should also be mentioned that the South Caucasus is infested with conflicts and contradictions of various nature and scale, and this allows global and regional actors to have a significant influence on internal processes within the sub-region. For the System of the Three Seas, there are two major conflicts of actual significance: the Russian-Georgian conflict with the corollary Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, and the Armenian-Turkish conflict, of which the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is a constituent part.

One of the major consequences of such a state of affairs is that a number of intraregional infrastructures are either obstructed or are not functioning effectively, with the looming danger that they will stop working altogether.

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² The details about the “System of the Three Seas” can be found at <https://cccs.am/portfolio/2>.

Naturally, these circumstances boost the militarization of the sub-region, make the prospects of the success of any peace building initiative bleak and continuously fuel mutual hate and intolerance.

As a result, the sub-region of the South Caucasus is extremely susceptible to any type of disturbance or distortion of the balance in the global political system, irrespective of the nature of the disruptions and turbulences.

The closed borders both within the South Caucasus and with the neighboring countries is a substantial obstacle for the realization of global projects. This is the reason why the United States has attempted a number of initiatives aimed in particular at normalizing relations between Turkey and Armenia, the most noteworthy among these being the initiative concluded by the signing of the Zurich Protocols. Despite the facts that this initiative was under the direct supervision of the United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and that the representatives of almost all the major players participated in the signing ceremony, the initiative did not yield the desired result. The normalization process was stalled, and the Turkish side did not proceed with the ratification, resulting in the Armenian side’s withdrawal from the process.

Subsequently, the Democrats left the White House and Donald Trump—the son of Fred Trump, a prominent real estate developer accused on multiple occasions of profiteering as well as of maintaining an affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan—came to power.

There is a general consensus in the expert community that Donald Trump’s being elected as president in 2016 and staying in power for four years has had a tremendous effect on the global security system as this factor disrupted the newly emerging system of mechanisms of counterbalances and containment that had been gradually taking shape since the end of the Cold War and clearing many difficult hurdles along the way.

Even the former ambassador Robert Blackwill, who is one of the most prominent representatives of the right wing of the Republican Party and who wrote a famous report attempting to justify Donald Trump’s foreign policy, had to confess in the very report that Trump’s policy was hard to evaluate for a number of reasons: 1) decision making in the president’s administration

is chaotic and unpredictable; 2) the turnover of senior government officials has broken historic records; 3) coordination and cooperation between departments and divisions is sporadic or lacking altogether; 4) the president himself makes numerous statements which do not correspond to reality, either partially or fully, but probably represent only his own subjective view of the world. Blackwill mentions, for instance, that the *Washington Post* counted over nine thousand claims made by Trump that can be characterized as false or misleading—within only two years.³

As for the foreign policy initiatives that were either implemented or declared during the four years of the Trump presidency, it is evident that while the overwhelming majority of these initiatives have undermined stability around the world, in some cases even leading to chaos, overall, they have also failed to secure any tangible results. This assessment applies to the Iran nuclear deal, claims made to the NATO member states, relations with European allies, negotiations with North Korea, climate change initiatives and undertakings in the area of world trade. Although some are of the opinion that President Trump succeeded in infusing a breath of fresh air into the Arab-Israeli peace process, it is still too early to assess the consequences of these developments.

The main goal of President Trump's foreign policies was to resolve some, in his opinion, unnecessarily prolonged processes in as short a time and with as little preparatory effort and additional spending as possible, and, most importantly, without going into what were, for Trump, tedious details. This attitude was reflected in decisions he made such as withdrawing American troops from Syria, transferring the American Embassy to Jerusalem and making a controversial deal with North Korea.

However, Trump's most significant undertaking was enacting his decision to form new alliances in various parts of the world (e.g., the Arab NATO) and thereby restrain his old allies, each of whom, in his opinion, in one way or another exploited their status of being a U.S. ally. These "exploitations" were in various spheres, starting from security (the whole

³ Robert D. Blackwill, "Trump's Foreign Policies Are Better Than They Seem," Council Special Report No. 84, Council on Foreign Relations, April 2019, https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/CSR%2084_Blackwill_Trump.pdf.

burden of which in Trump’s opinion fell upon the shoulders of the United States) and ending with trade relations.

In addition, Trump attempted to instill new meaning and content to relations with China, Russia and a number of other large nations, which again was not based on any substantial calculations and therefore failed.

Naturally, such a positioning in foreign policy, which derived from the deeply rooted aspiration to isolate (the building of the wall on the border being the perfect metaphor for this aspiration) and protect oneself not only from dangers but also from various clients, some of whom also had to be punished, could not have but led to the shock of the global security system, which was still in the process of taking shape and already rather strained.

The apparent indifference of the United States to the events unfolding in various parts of the world encouraged some of the states that suffer from imperial phantom pains to fill the voids. These developments were also felt in the sub-region of the South Caucasus, which is a playing field for competition between a number of global and regional projects.

The retreat of the American global project created a situation that facilitated attempts to push the West out of the competition for control of transportation and communication infrastructures and to abruptly redistribute zones of influence by re-exploiting idle infrastructures and organizing the export of strategic raw materials based on new agreements worked out by the regional players between themselves.

Essentially, the situation looks as if, while the adults were away, there was an attempt to “reorganize and refurnish” the house. It was exacerbated further by the COVID pandemic, considering every nation had to focus on its own domestic problems. Lockdowns, a sharp decrease in economic activity, the deterioration of living standards and various other domestic issues required a rapid response. Given all this, situations unraveling somewhere in a remote region could not have taken priority. In this light, it is even possible to comprehend Donald Trump’s position and state of mind when he stated that the issue of the Karabakh war could easily be resolved despite himself lacking even a rudimentary understanding of the situation on the ground there while clearly realizing the issues he was faced with at home in the United States.

The Astana format that was formed to find a resolution to the Syrian crisis with the participation of Russia, Turkey and Iran made it possible to achieve a certain success in terms of stability and security in that country although, in the process, Syria lost a significant share of its sovereignty and the territories that were not under the control of Damascus. One key issue, however, is that as a result of Trump's policy, the United States abandoned the Kurds. This issue was extensively covered by David Phillips in numerous articles and talks.⁴ A huge wave of emigration also started in Syria which led to the almost complete vanishing of its Christian communities. While Turkey and Russia were the parties to gain the most from these developments, the relations between these two parties also encountered major problems, the most apparent illustrations of which were the downing of the Russian jet and the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara. However, the cooperation agreements reached between Turkey and Russia not only in the fields of energy resources and military industry and supply but also in a number of areas of the System of the Three Seas made it possible to resolve the disputes. The operations of Turkey and Russia in Libya did not go smoothly either, in certain instances turning into a hybrid war, as was also the case in Syria. Issues of more long-term significance should not be disregarded either; for instance, the fundamental differences between the parties regarding the issue of Crimea.

It is clear that, realizing the inevitability of the continuous expansion of NATO, Russia's ruling elite attempted to take advantage of the deterioration in the relations between Turkey and the United States (as well as the ambition of Erdoğan's Turkey to restore its status as an independent player in the global political arena), hoping to wrest Turkey away from NATO or at least ensure an atmosphere of significant mutual mistrust. To

⁴ David L. Phillips is currently director of the Program on Peace-building and Rights at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights. Mr. Phillips is author of *From Bullets to Ballots: Violent Muslim Movements in Transition* (Transaction Press, 2008), *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (Perseus Books, 2005), *Unsilencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation* (Berghahn Books, 2005). He has also authored many policy reports, as well as more than one hundred articles in leading publications such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *Foreign Affairs*.

this end, Russia is ready to make certain concessions and to let its rival partner penetrate into zones and spheres previously considered zones of exclusively Russian interests.

This format characterized by Russian and Turkish experts as “competitive cooperation” was also applied in Nagorno-Karabakh, and, as a result, Russian troops eventually acquired the status of peace-keeping forces deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh. In return, Turkey acquired undisputed dominance in Azerbaijan as well as a military presence in the immediate vicinity of the Nagorno-Karabakh borders. These developments have led to the realization that the resolution of the issues that emerged as a result of “reorganization and refurbishing” is linked to new, far more intricate issues that threaten the core interests of the parties.

Russia and Turkey, as stated by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, have acted jointly in Nagorno-Karabakh, and it is due to their joint efforts that the current state of affairs and agreements have been reached and are still in place.⁵ However, a number of other circumstances with a significant effect on the situation have since changed completely. First of all, Joe Biden has been elected president of the United States, and he announced that the U.S.A. is back. Moreover, the Coronavirus pandemic has been gradually receding and states and societies returning to normal life.

Additionally, there are indications of U.S.-EU relations normalizing, which in its turn means that the role of NATO will grow and the issues that

⁵ In an interview with the Kazakh news agency Tengrinews, Sergei Shoigu in particular stated, “We carry out very complicated, but effective work with the Turkish side. Joint work. It is complicated, because of intervention. Turkey being a NATO member is also an obstacle.... However, we manage to find solutions, for instance, the Idlib de-escalation zone. Generally speaking, the creation of de-escalation zones in Syria, in our view is a new word and new mechanism in resolving such conflicts. Our latest joint effort is, of course, Nagorno-Karabakh. It is not in any way a simple operation. That is how I would call it and not in any other way.” For the original interview in Russian, see “Interyju Shoigu. Sekret pro amerikantsev, Kazaxstan i ‘armija Turana”” (Shoigu interview. Secret about Americans, Kazakhstan and the ‘Army of Turan,” TENGRI TV, 17 March 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLo4P9Xgf2s&ab_channel=TENGRITV. For the interview as reported in the Russian press, see “Interview of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to the Kazakhstan Resource,” VPK, 19 March 2021, https://vpk.name/en/493323_interview-of-russian-defense-minister-sergei-shoigu-to-the-kazakhstan-resource.html.

emerged as a consequence of the actions of the Trump administration are already being resolved.

The Biden administration has expressed its readiness to return to the negotiations format on the Iran nuclear program within the format initiated by the Obama administration, which will dramatically lower the tension in the South Caucasus sub-region, too. Biden also canceled some of Trump's isolationist initiatives and withdrew some of his executive orders, increasing the level of predictability and stability thereby.

The growing military and economic power of China is assessed as posing the greatest threat to U.S. interests. Hence, in his China policy, President Biden aims to achieve a united front where not only the United States' European Allies but also a number of Eurasian countries, including Russia, Turkey and the countries of Central Asia, could play a key role.

In the given circumstances, agreements reached through, on the one hand, quite straightforward, but, on the other hand, long and difficult negotiations regarding the level and scale of the involvement of all the parties involved as well as about what they will get in return for their efforts and compromises are of the utmost importance.

What the nature of Russian-American and Turkish-American relations in the near future will be and whether the Russian and Turkish leaders will succeed in keeping U.S. and European influence out of the South Caucasus remains to be seen.

What changes will the Russian-Turkish programs undergo and how will the unblocking of the communications of the sub-region be carried out? Currently, from the perspective of the internal situation of the sub-region, the most important issue is the opening of various roads and routes, but up until this point there has been no clarity. It is unclear what agreements have been or will be reached and what the architecture of unblocking the sub-region will look like.

From this perspective, Turkey has already stepped forward, urging the formation of a cooperation and security platform involving the participation of six nations: Iran, Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. It is still unclear what Russia's stance on this proposal is, considering that it is doubtful that Russia would be especially enthusiastic about the rapidly

growing influence of Turkey in the South Caucasus, as it could swiftly pass into the North Caucasus (and of course the thorny Crimea issue is also part of the equation).

Iran’s position is not particularly clear either. Iran has a number of security concerns and cannot be indifferent towards the Turkish-Azeri demonstration of power in Shushi, the cultural foundation of which is Iranian.

In terms of Russian-American relations it is important to take into consideration the red lines of the Russian side while at the same time bearing in mind that Russia is assessed by American analysts as a disruptive but rapidly weakening and declining power.⁶ One such crucial red line is NATO’s further expansion and Ukraine’s possible membership in that alliance as these are developments that Russia perceives as dramatically curtailing its level of security and strategic influence in Europe. The armed conflict in Ukraine that started in 2014 is a stark indication of Russia’s readiness to defend that red line by all possible means and to contain the steps of the collective West in that direction.

This, too, is a set of crucial interconnected issues requiring negotiated solutions and it is essential here to determine whether or not the new administration of the United States is prepared to view the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, as a trustworthy partner. If so, then what is the United States willing to concede to prevent the further development of Russia-China cooperation. Finding a solution to this issue is critical for the United States, considering that Russia is poised to become the supplier of advanced technologies to China (as the latter is still unable to create them).

Naturally, all these events and processes have had and will continue to have their impact on the very turbulent situation in the South Caucasus. As mentioned above, the key issue that needs to be addressed—especially for Turkey and Russia, which, as a result of the Second Artsakh War, have significantly strengthened their military and political presence in the sub-region—is the unblocking of the South Caucasus. Borders and roads must be opened. However, the struggle around the conditions of unblocking them is

⁶ See, in particular, the U.S. intelligence report released in on 8 April 2021. It is available at https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/GlobalTrends_2040.pdf.

ongoing and will only intensify. Clearly, it is in the interests of the powers with global projects to recognize that their control over one of the most critical zones in the System of the Three Seas has diminished sharply and therefore to expect new developments along the Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Azerbaijani borders as well as in the North Caucasus and Georgia.

In our opinion, at the present moment, the Republic of Armenia should aim to actively and independently participate in all of the processes and negotiations regarding these issues, avoid all provocations that could draw it into any military operations and endeavor to understand the actual contradictions that exist between all the parties in the arena.