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CONTENTS

FORWARD.....	6-7
<i>Davit Hovhannisyan</i> TRANSITIONAL PROCESSES IN “THE SYSTEM OF THREE SEAS”.....	8-16
<i>Benyamin Poghosyan</i> US FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE PRESIDENT TRUMP: MIDDLE EAST, EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND BLACK SEA REGIONS.....	17-42
<i>Tatevik Petrosyan</i> THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND THE “THREE SEAS SYSTEM”....	43-72
<i>Anna Gevorgyan</i> THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT AND IRAN’S REGIONAL POLICY.....	73-80
<i>Tatevik Mkrtchyan</i> CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND NEW CHALLENGES AND RISKS IN SYRIA: THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES FOR SECURITY OF RA AFTER THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH/ARTSAKH SECOND WAR.....	81-103
<i>Shushan Kyureghyan</i> CONFLICT OF INTERESTS OVER THE LIBYAN CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF ARMENIA.....	104-118
<i>Hayk Kocharyan</i> GLOBAL PROJECTS’ COMPETITION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA..	119-126
<i>Lasha Tugushi</i> THE ECHOES OF ARMENIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS IN GEORGIA ...	127-128
<i>Anush Brutian</i> RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS. CONTINUITY AND EXISTING PROBLEMS.....	129-144
<i>Василий Кузнецов</i> РОЛЬ РОССИИ И ТУРЦИИ В ФОРМИРОВАНИИ СИРИЙСКО- ЛИВИЙСКОЙ КОНФЛИКТНОЙ ОСИ ВОСТОЧНОГО СРЕДИЗЕМНОМОРЬЯ.....	145-158

FORWARD

This number of the Analytical Bulletin by the “Center for Culture and Civilization Studies” foundation (CCCS) presents the materials and proceedings of our Second International Conference – initially set to take place in September 2020 – dedicated to regional processes. The first conference focusing on the dynamics of regional security order – was held in 2017 and triggered the interest of researchers, analysts, and statesmen of various countries whose practice relates to security issues¹.

The 2020 conference did not take place due to understandable causes of the war and the pandemic. Nevertheless, even though we understand that the Second Karabakh War seriously affected the power structure of the region and undermined the already volatile regional stability, in strategic terms, it did not drastically change the objectives and motivations of the main actors involved, thus, after revisiting the already prepared contributions of the conference, we decided to publish them, believing that it will be appropriate and useful.

As in the case of the first volume, the conference was methodologically organized the following way: the CCCS researchers were assigned to analyze the regional policies of the United States, the Russian Federation, the European Union, China, Georgia, Turkey, Iran, and Armenia. The collective manuscript was then sent to experts from each of the mentioned countries for peer reviewing. Then, the researchers and diplomats from those countries were invited to participate in the conference and present their papers on the same issues.

Unfortunately, this working methodology was not possible to maintain in the scope of the 2022 conference “Armenia-Turkey Relations in the Context of Regional and Global Developments” due to the disruptions caused by the war and the pandemic. It was held online on March 28-29, though in no less vibrant and insightful discussions. The integrity of the methodology was also affected by the transformations in the politics of the selected countries. Just one example – the transfer of power in the United

¹ Analytical Bulletin, Regional and National Security Dynamics: Armenian-Turkish Relations, No.11, Yerevan, 2017.

States from Donald Trump to Joe Biden – has dramatically shifted the foreign policy of the White House. Due to this, the researchers and diplomats who had prepared their contributions based on the policies of Trump’s administration had to review and renew their work almost completely. This also affected the logic by which the researchers had been selected.

Nevertheless, we were able to successfully conclude this project thanks to the fruitful engagement of our team and new contributors. We should note that most of the contributions to this number are based on the System of Three Seas theory. It is one of the priorities of CCCS to further conceptualize and deepen the framework of the theory².

The team of CCCS extends its deep gratitude to our dedicated partner Eurasia Partnership Foundation and its entire staff led by Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan. We are also grateful to our international partners. Without their dedication, it would have been impossible to successfully complete this important project.

Davit Hovhannisyan
Volume Editor-in-chief

² See Analytical Bulletin, Three Seas System, No.9, Yerevan, 2016.

TRANSITIONAL PROCESSES IN “THE SYSTEM OF THE THREE SEAS”

*Davit Hovhannisyan*¹

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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.

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY UNDER PRESIDENT TRUMP: THE MIDDLE EAST, EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND BLACK SEA REGIONS

*Benjamin Poghosyan*¹

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Introduction

The current phase in international relations can be best characterized by one word—transition. The Post-Cold War order is rapidly disappearing, creating strategic ambiguity for all actors. The U.S. hegemony is over or close to over despite the fact that militarily Washington will be safely far out of reach for several decades to come. However, the growing national debt, the looming crisis in the Social Security and Medicare systems, uncontrolled migration, growing populism and partisan fighting does not bode well for the future of U.S. dominance. At the same time, no nation, be it China, Russia, India or Brazil, has the necessary resources or will to compete for the new world hegemony.

The absence of a world hegemon means that no state has the power to enforce the implementation of key international rules and norms. Regardless how one perceives the international principles—as balanced or biased—the rule-based order at least provides a minimal level of stability since the actors involved on the international stage have a clear understanding what may and may not be done. However, since the late 2000s the situation has changed. We are increasingly facing an international security architecture where key actors may easily break the norms and rules, and this will eventually bring us to a situation upon which no rules can be based.

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The election of President Trump sent shock waves through the United States' political establishment and surprised international relations pundits worldwide. Despite the apparent growth of the right-wing populist movements in different parts of the world, the culmination of which was presumably the BREXIT referendum held in June 2016, few if any could imagine that a real estate developer and reality TV star had any chance of defeating one of the most respected representatives of the US political establishment. The November 2016 elections had widespread implications on both American domestic and foreign policies.

President Trump's decision to denounce globalism created a situation where the so-called "vertical globalism" (Western-led efforts to spread a liberal international order all over the world through the promotion of democracy and a market economy) might be transformed into a "horizontal globalism" based on regional integration models covering vast territories of Europe and Asia, Africa and Latin America.

In this paper we will analyze President Trump's foreign policy in several key geographical areas and its implications. However, in order to better understand the significant changes in U.S. foreign policy ushered in by President Trump and make predictions for future developments, it is worth starting with an examination of Trump's foreign policy perceptions as well as of the ongoing debates within the foreign policy establishment itself.

Conceptual bases of American foreign policy prior to the election of President Trump

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War ushered in a plethora of studies arguing that a new era had arrived characterized by the United States' uncontested hegemony and the universal spread of the

liberal international order. If Francis Fukuyama was talking about “the end of history”, Zbigniew Brzezinski put forward the idea of the “American primacy and unipolar moment” in his famous book *The Grand Chessboard*.² Of course, not all intellectuals analyzing international relations viewed the future through such excessively rosy lenses. Samuel Huntington published his seminal work *The Clash of civilizations* in 1996, warning about a dawning era of conflicts based on civilizational differences. However, in general the U.S. foreign policy establishment, called “the Blob”, had rosy perceptions of the upcoming universal spread of the market economy and liberal democracy.

Thus, America’s Cold War era grand strategy of deterrence was replaced by the grand strategy of “liberal hegemony”, and U.S. policymakers have converged around the premise that Pentagon planners set forth in 1992—that the United States should maintain a military superiority so overwhelming that it would dissuade allies and rivals alike from challenging Washington’s authority.³ This strategy was first articulated in President Clinton’s national security strategy (“A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement”) published in July 1994.⁴ One of the key pillars of that strategy was the idea of “democracy promotion”. This idea remained central in updated versions of the strategy published in February 1995 and February 1996. Alongside the fight against terrorism, democracy promotion was among President George W. Bush’s

² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Basic Books, 1997).

³ Stephen Wertheim, “The Price of Primacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy>.

⁴ “A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement,” <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1994.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121219-500>.

2002 and 2006 key strategies for national security.⁵ Not all pundits were overwhelmingly supportive of that idea, however. Samuel Huntington, for instance, was adamantly opposed to a crusading form of democracy promotion as a core component of U.S. foreign policy. He argued that the principal responsibility of Western leaders was not to attempt to reshape other civilizations in the image of the West, which was beyond their declining power, but to preserve, protect and renew the unique qualities of Western civilization. He was certainly among the minority.

NATO and EU enlargement in the late 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s seemed to bring closer this dream of an entire planet governed by liberal democracies under the leadership of the uncontested U.S. hegemony. Meanwhile, the 9/11 terrorist attacks delivered the first blow to these ideas. Then came President George W. Bush's disastrous decision to invade Iraq, which unleashed chaos in that country and sent a wave of destabilization across the Middle East.

However, the real harbinger of the fundamental changes in the international security architecture was the 2008 world financial crisis. This was coupled with the astonishing economic rise of China and the growing assertiveness of Russia. Even before the 2008 economic crisis, Russian President Vladimir Putin shocked the Western audience in his February 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, which overtly criticized the U.S.-led unipolar international order. Meanwhile, resentment against globalization was slowly and steadily growing among the United States' so-called blue-collar workers. The incomes of middle-class Americans had not been growing in real terms since the late 1970s and the income gap was

⁵ "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," two versions: September 2002 and March 2006, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2002.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121337-027> and <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2006.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121325-543>.

widening between rural or core America and the cosmopolitan coastal cities.

All these developments brought about a clear understanding that the U.S. hegemony or “unipolar moment” had either disappeared or was on the way out. Fareed Zakaria was among the first to articulate this idea in his essay, “The Future of American Power”, published in *Foreign Affairs* in 2008 and in his book, *The Post American World*, published later that same year.

The beginning of this shift coincided with the election of President Obama in November 2008. During the Obama era, American foreign policy made some efforts to concentrate its focus on Asia and decrease its involvement in the Middle East. In October 2011, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton published the essay “America’s Pacific Century” in *Foreign Policy*, arguing that the future of politics would be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq.⁶ In line with this shift, U.S. forces left Iraq in 2011, and Washington, in cooperation with other four permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany, signed a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015. However, the so-called Arab Spring and the conflicts and chaos which followed in Libya, Syria and Yemen, as well as the establishment of the Islamic State caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq in summer 2014, brought the Middle East back to the forefront of the American foreign policy agenda. Simultaneously, the Ukraine crisis in 2014 triggered a confrontation between Russia and the West, compelling the United States to re-evaluate its European strategy and increase its military presence in Europe through the European Reassurance Initiative which was initiated in

⁶ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

June 2014 and later renamed as the European Deterrence Initiative.⁷ Thus, despite some deviations from the Clinton and George W. Bush era, “liberal hegemony” remained the cornerstone of President Obama’s foreign policy.

President Trump’s foreign policy: offshore balancing in action?

President Trump was elected pushing forward his “America First” agenda. After assuming office, Trump made clear his disdain towards multilateralism and arms control agreements. Under his leadership, the United States withdrew from the Paris Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, and cancelled participation in the INF and Open Skies treaties. In December 2017 President Trump published his National Security Strategy, which was followed by the National Defense Strategy in 2018. The main idea circulated in these documents was the notion of great power competitions as the main defining feature of the international relations. Many experts argue that President Trump has no foreign policy doctrine and his actions are based on his naïve perceptions of geopolitics as a business where actions are made on the basis of transactional logic. However, President Trump, albeit inadvertently, rejected the “liberal hegemony” strategy and some of his actions are close to the new grand strategy of offshore balancing.

The term was initially used by Christopher Layne in his 1997 article, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy”, published in *International Security*.⁸ The same author articulated

⁷ “European Deterrence Initiative,” Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), February 2020, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2021/fy2021_EDI_JBook.pdf.

⁸ Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 22, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 86-124,

this idea further in his 2002 article “Offshore Balancing Revisited” published by *The Washington Quarterly*.⁹

However, the key developers of the strategy are the political scientists Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, who published their seminal article “The Case for Offshore Balancing” in the July/August 2016 issue of *Foreign Affairs* several months before Trump’s election.¹⁰

Stephen Walt then articulated this strategy further in his 2018 book, *The hell of good intentions: America’s foreign policy elite and the decline of U.S. Primacy*. Here, Walt harshly criticizes the “liberal hegemony” strategy pursued by the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations, arguing that that flawed strategy is the main culprit for the strategic mistakes and failures of American foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. Walt argues that the best option for the United States is to pursue “Offshore balancing”. The key pillars of that strategy are to eschew trying to remake the world in America’s image and to focus on upholding the balance of power in three key regions: Europe, East Asia and the Persian Gulf. The strategy relies primarily on regional actors to uphold local balances of power and commits the United States to intervene with its own forces only when one or more of these balances are in danger of breaking down.

Key patterns of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East

President Trump inherited the chaotic Middle East. Syria, Yemen and Libya were embroiled in their respective civil wars and were teetering on

https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/43144/Layne_Christopher_From_Preponderance_1997.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

⁹ Christopher Layne, “Offshore balancing revisited,” *The Washington Quarterly* 25 no. 2 (2002): 233-248, <https://doi.org/10.1162/01636600252820252>.

¹⁰ Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>.

the brink of becoming failed states. Iran had increased its influence in Iraq and Syria and de facto established a “Shia crescent” spanning from Iran via Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Meanwhile, Turkey had transformed itself from a U.S. client state into an assertive regional power seeking to dominate the Sunni Muslim world through its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite U.S.-led coalition efforts, the Islamic State was still controlling huge swaths of Syria and Iraq, and Russia had returned to the Middle East after some twenty-five years of absence. Let us briefly discuss President Trump’s policy on Iran, Turkey and Syria.

Iran

President Trump’s decision to pull out from the Iranian nuclear deal has significantly increased tensions in and around Iran. The return of this de facto “regime change” policy had profound implications on Iran and the Middle East. The assassination of Major General Qasem Suleymani by an American drone attack in January 2020 and Iranian retaliation strikes against U.S. troops deployed in Iraq brought the U.S.-Iran confrontation to a new level. Meanwhile, the Iranian economy is in steep decline with the sharp devaluation of the Iranian rial, and persistent large-scale protests in different regions (December 2017-January 2018, November 2019 and January 2020) have put additional pressure on the Iranian government. The rising prices of consumer products, water shortages and problems related to mismanagement are fueling the protests. The decision of some European companies, like Total and Maersk, to cease their activities in Iran has also exacerbated the situation. The U.S. strategy against Iran has multiple layers, and the economy is only one of them.

Washington is actively taking steps to cultivate an anti-Iranian regional alliance, putting Israel together with Sunni Arab powers led by

Saudi Arabia. The Tel Aviv-Riyadh cooperation is altering the decades-long security architecture of the Middle East. This cooperation will have a long-term impact on the Palestinian issue and the legitimization of Israel within the Arab world. Syria is one of the battlefields in the American struggle against Iran. The United States is effectively exploiting Israel's concerns about the growing military presence of Iran and the Tehran-backed paramilitary forces in Syria, especially along the Syria-Israel border. And Israeli military strikes against Iranian targets in Syria are part of the U.S. strategy to put pressure on Iran. Both Israel and the United States are demanding that Iran pull its military out of Syria. However, Iran is not likely to accept such demands, as this would mean squandering the Iranian achievements in Syria. Thus, the most likely scenario is a redeployment of Iranian and Hezbollah forces from the Syria-Israel border deeper into Syria and Israel's tacit acceptance of an Iranian military presence in other parts of the country.

Meanwhile, other signatories of the Iran nuclear deal are not in line with Washington. The UK, Germany, France and EU as an institution are struggling to keep the deal alive. Europeans are interested in investing in the Iranian economy and view the vast Iranian oil and gas resources as a source to increase EU energy security. The biggest irritation for the EU, however, is the United States' threats to use extraterritorial or secondary sanctions against European companies involved in Iran. Given the growing U.S.-EU tensions on trade, with a unilateral imposition of additional tariffs by the Trump administration, alongside U.S. demands on Europe to pay more for the American Defense Umbrella, the EU is increasingly concerned about the U.S. administration's new assertive policy.

Iran and the other five signatories of the Iran nuclear deal are interested in keeping the deal afloat. The EU has launched a special trade

mechanism, INSTEX, to seek to circumvent US sanctions.¹¹ However, given the tough US stance, it will be more and more difficult to keep foreign and especially European companies in Iran. The Iranian economy will continue its sharp decline, which in turn will stoke further domestic protests. Meanwhile, the U.S. maximum pressure campaign against Iran has weakened the positions of moderate forces led by President Rouhani. The conservative hardliners won a decisive victory in the February 2020 parliamentary elections and have significant chances to win the 2021 presidential elections.¹²

Turkey

President Trump inherited increasingly tense U.S.-Turkey relations. The gap between U.S. and Turkish interests in Syria, Washington's refusal to extradite the cleric Fethullah Gülen and simmering suspicions among the Turkish leadership regarding the possible involvement of the United States in the July 2016 military coup attempt made the task of normalizing bilateral relations a daunting one.

In recent years, many experts on Turkey have been arguing that Turkey was or is creating the conditions to make it a leading Middle Eastern and Mediterranean power. Turkey has moved from being a compliant member of the Western community to being an assertive power with the potential of shifting the strategic balance of the whole region. Whether or not this attitude was realistic in 2012 or remains so

¹¹ "EU mechanism for trade with Iran 'now operational'," DW.com, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-mechanism-for-trade-with-iran-now-operational/a-49407662>, last accessed 23 July 2022.

¹² Muhammet Kursun, "Iran: Conservatives win majority of seats in parliament," Anadolu Agency, 23 February 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/iran-conservatives-win-majority-of-seats-in-parliament/1741989>.

today, there is abundant evidence that this mindset is now pervasive among Turkey's elites.¹³

Meanwhile, the launch of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline and the start of the construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant has created additional economic bonds with Russia. Simultaneously, the delivery of S-400 air and missile defense systems, and the resulting expulsion of Turkey from the F-35 advanced military jet program, has brought Turkey-U.S. relations to a new level of crisis.

However, the United States understands that Turkey's geopolitical significance is far-reaching. Many of the major issues in European security—migration, Libya's civil war, confronting Syria's civil war, stabilizing the Balkans, defending the Black Sea, European energy security and, in particular, accessing the energy reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean—cannot be solved without dialogue with Turkey.

We believe that the key issue in U.S.-Turkish relations was the fate of the northern parts of Syria. Here, Turkey has two strategic goals: the prevention of the establishment of a de facto independent Kurdish entity in the northeastern section; and the preservation of its influence and military presence in northwestern Syria, which will allow Ankara to influence post-war Syrian geopolitics. Since Ankara regards the YPG (the Syrian Kurdish organization) as nothing more than a group of terrorists and an adjunct of the Turkish PKK opposition, it has resolved to use force to advance its interests. But it is not willing to clash directly with Russia. Likewise, Russia is equally reluctant to fight directly with Turkey.

Thus the U.S. decision to green light a Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria in October 2019 was a significant concession to Ankara.

¹³ Stephen Blank, "Is rapprochement with Turkey possible?" MEI@75, 15 May 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rapprochement-turkey-possible>.

This decision can be explained by President Trump's desire to fulfill his campaign promises to end the endless wars and bring American troops home. Another possibility could be the existence of a U.S. master plan to create tensions between Turkey, Russia and Iran and undermine the Astana process, and, most importantly, to drive a wedge into Ankara-Moscow relations and make Moscow sink down deeper into the Syrian crisis.

More recently, Turkey has postponed the activation of S-400 systems, the acquisition of which had caused enormous rancor in NATO and Washington, in particular.¹⁴ Prior to the sanctions, the thinking in Washington was that Turkey would activate these systems around late-April and the U.S. Congress would retaliate by imposing sanctions. This delay gave both Ankara and Washington more time to ponder the S-400 issue and search for alternatives to going to the brink.

The Eastern Mediterranean

In recent years the Eastern Mediterranean has been transformed into another hotspot of global geopolitics. The key sources of rivalry here are the recently discovered abundant energy resources, among them huge reserves of natural gas. In recent years, a U.S. oil company discovered a gigantic gas field off Cyprus's south coast. Experts assume that it may hold 227 billion cubic meters of gas—a find worth approximately forty billion euros. Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Turkey are vying for resources and transportation routes. Turkey argues that the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus has undeniable rights to extract natural resources near its shores. Meanwhile Cyprus, Greece and the EU reject the Turkish claims. In mid-2019 EU foreign ministers approved a new mechanism for

¹⁴ Diego Cupulo, "Delayed S-400 activation could offer chance for Turkey-US ties to warm," Al-Monitor, 21 April 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/s-400-delay-us-turkey-window-opportunity.html#ixzz6QIAIafk>.

sanctioning entities involved in unauthorized oil drilling in Cypriot waters and in late-February 2020 measures were imposed on two high-level officials from the Turkish TPAO company for being responsible for, or involved in, the planning, directing and implementing of offshore hydrocarbon exploration activities in the Eastern Mediterranean without the authorization of Cyprus.

Shortly before that, on 2 January 2020, Greece, Cyprus and Israel signed a deal to build a 1,900km (1,180 mile) subsea pipeline to carry natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean's rapidly developing gas fields to Europe. The countries aim to reach a final investment decision by 2022 and have the pipeline completed by 2025 in order to help Europe diversify its energy resources.¹⁵

The Libyan conundrum has added much uncertainty to this puzzle. The struggle between the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), which controls the capital Tripoli, and the forces of the Libyan National Army (LNA), with its stronghold in Benghazi has been escalating since April 2019 when LNA forces led by the retired field marshal Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive to capture Tripoli. Meanwhile, in an apparent bid to strengthen its positions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey signed a military memorandum of understanding with the GNA in November 2019, sent Libya Turkish military consultants and modern weaponry including UAVs, and deployed there thousands pro-Turkish fighters from Syria. Even more important for Turkey was the accord signed with the GNA on a maritime boundary demarcation, which significantly expanded the Turkish zone of maritime sovereignty. In spite of the fact that Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and France denounced this maritime deal, Turkish military support

¹⁵ Angeliki Koutantou, "Greece, Israel, Cyprus sign EastMed gas pipeline deal," Reuters, 2 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-cyprus-israel-pipeline/greece-israel-cyprus-sign-eastmed-gas-pipeline-deal-idUSKBN1Z10R5>.

allowed the GNA to repel Haftar's attack on Tripoli and expel his forces from the Western parts of Libya.

However, the situation remains fluid, as on 16 May 2020 the EU condemned the drilling and exploration operations of the Turkish drill ship *Yavuz* that had been drilling off Cyprus since April, and Egypt has announced an anti-Turkey alliance including Greece, Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates and France to confront Turkish moves in Libya and the Mediterranean. In a joint statement, the five-party alliance said it will focus on confronting Turkish moves in the territorial waters in Cyprus, where Turkey has been carrying out "illegal" excavations in the part of the Mediterranean under Cyprus's sovereignty, and it condemned Turkey's escalated violations of Greek airspace.¹⁶

Libya was also one of the key sources of the 2015 migration flows to Europe, which triggered a migrant crisis and contributed to the rise of right-wing populist forces in the Continent. Thus, from a Turkish perspective, control over large swaths of Libyan territory may give Turkey additional leverage in its relations with the EU. Turkey has been effectively using the refugee issue to pressure the EU in Syria, threatening to "open the gates" and repeat the 2015 situation.

The Eastern Mediterranean was not a top foreign policy issue of President Trump's administration, as its main focus was China. However, given the resurgence of great power competition, the United States is concerned about the growing Russian influence in the region. Russia has firmly anchored itself in Syria and gaining another point of influence may significantly strengthen Moscow's positions. Meanwhile, the United States views the regional developments as a part of its strategic relations with

¹⁶ George Mikhail, "Egypt announces international anti-Turkey alliance," *Al-Monitor*, 25 May 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/egypt-anti-turkey-alliance-libya-mediterranean-waters.html>.

Israel and Turkey. Unsurprisingly, in August 2019 the United States participated in the first 3+1 (Cyprus, Greece, Israel and the United States) energy ministerial summit held in Athens. In a joint statement, the ministers and the United States reiterated their full support and solidarity for the Republic of Cyprus in exploring and developing its resources in its Exclusive Economic Zone and expressed their concern with recent provocative steps underway in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁷ Meanwhile, in parallel with acting against Turkish interests in the issue of Cyprus, the United States was supportive of Turkey's activities in Libya, seeking to use Turkey as a tool to counter Russian influence there and undermine a possible Russia-Turkey Libyan deal. Moscow and Ankara made efforts to decrease tensions during a meeting between Putin and Erdoğan in Ankara on 8 January 2020, and the leaders of the conflicting sides were later invited to Moscow to hold negotiations under joint Russian-Turkish mediation. However, these efforts, as well as an international conference on Libya held in Berlin in late January 2020 did not bring any results.

The Black Sea

The Black Sea region is one of the key regions defining the main parameters of European security. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and NATO's enlargement, Russia's positions were significantly weakened since three littoral states—Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria—were NATO member states while Ukraine and Georgia were overtly striving for Euro-Atlantic integration. The balance of power was strategically altered in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea. Since then, Russia has significantly increased its military presence in the Crimean Peninsula.

¹⁷ Elena Becatoros, "Greece, Cyprus, Israel, US pledge to boost energy cooperation," *The Times of Israel*, 7 August 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/greece-cyprus-israel-us-pledge-to-boost-energy-cooperation/>.

The United States and NATO seek to counter Russia by developing a “forward presence” in the Black Sea region. On land, this presence is built around the Romanian-led multinational brigade in Craiova. In the air, several Allies have reinforced Romania’s and Bulgaria’s efforts to protect NATO airspace. In the Black Sea, NATO is active with more ships and more naval exercises, which means more NATO forces, and more exercises and training under Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast (in Romania), which became fully operational in June 2017.¹⁸

Meanwhile, it should be noted that Turkey seeks to maintain a balance between Russia and NATO, hoping to come to terms with Russia on the issues of Black Sea security in order to effectively transform the Black Sea into an area controlled jointly by Turkey and Russia. Thus, Turkey rejects Romania’s calls for an increased NATO presence in the Black Sea.

Another key development affecting the geopolitics of the Black Sea is the launch of the Three Seas Initiative. The initiative is a flexible political platform, at a presidential level, launched in 2015. The current Three Seas Initiative has its ideological basis in twentieth-century Polish geopolitical thought associated with the figure of Józef Piłsudski. Piłsudski’s Intermarium strategy envisaged the creation of a multinational and multicultural confederation to include Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Moldova, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Finland was also expected to join this structure. Józef Piłsudski believed that the creation of this kind of confederation would affect the balance of power in this region by leveling the influence of both Germany and Russia. Another attempt to implement a project integrating

¹⁸ “NATO’s military presence in the east of the Alliance,” NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm, last accessed 23 July 2022.

the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was the concept of Jerzy Giedroyc and Juliusz Mieroszewski. In 1974, the two researchers published an article in *Paris Culture* about the inseparable relationship between the independence of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine.¹⁹

The Three Seas Initiative includes the twelve EU Member States located between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The Dubrovnik Summit in 2016 opened the dialogue under the aegis of the Three Seas Initiative, and it was followed in 2017 by the Warsaw Summit, where the twelve Three Seas Initiative states were joined by U.S. President Donald Trump. In Warsaw, President Trump expressed his unambiguous support for the idea of this structure and the implementation of projects proposed by participants of the summit. In Bucharest, a joint declaration on development was adopted that takes into account the most important projects and plans for their implementation. The summit in the Romanian capital was also significant for two other reasons. Namely, Germany gained the status of an observer state, which may mean that Berlin is interested in the Three Seas Initiative and is ready for constructive actions. Moreover, the declaration adopted in Bucharest established the “Three Seas Investment Fund”, from which will be allocated funds for the implementation of joint projects.

The third summit was hosted by Romania, in Bucharest, in September 2018; the fourth summit was held in Slovenia in June 2019; the fifth summit was held in virtual format in Estonia in October 2020; the sixth summit took place in July 2021 in Sofia; and the seventh summit was held in Latvia in June 2022. The United States views the Three Seas

¹⁹ Wiktor Możliński, “The Three Seas Initiative – An aspect of contemporary geopolitical competition for dominance in Europe, *Ante Portas* 2(13) (2019): 45-60, http://anteportas.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AP.XIII_Mozgin.pdf.

Initiative as a key point of leverage for countering China's growing influence in the region through the 17+1 format (which includes China plus the seventeen states of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe) and the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as a way to check Russia's growing assertiveness. Meanwhile, this initiative can also be viewed also in the context of the struggle within the EU between the so-called New and Old Europes.

In any case, the Trump administration perceived the Black Sea region as one of the hotspots of great power competition in the world and was resolute in protecting the United States' vital national interests there.

Conclusions

U.S. foreign policy between 2017 and 2020 may be characterized by several key patterns—unilateralism, disdain for international institutions and an emphasis on emerging great power competition. There was also a sense of inconsistency and chaotic changes of people in key positions—President Trump's administration had four national security advisors over a four-year period. Meanwhile, despite the president's seemingly favorable attitude towards the leaders of Russia and China, his administration pursued tough policies in both directions. New and sweeping sanctions were imposed on Russia, including on such vital economic projects as Nord Stream 2, and a trade war was launched against China. The United States has also provided lethal weapons to Ukraine and Georgia, seeking to bolster their positions vis-a-vis Russia. In the Middle East, the United States' overarching aim was the containment of Iran though the administration sometimes teetered on the brink of a policy of regime change. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the United States was seeking to foster the launch of new gas pipelines to boost Europe's energy

diversification and prevent Russia from gaining an additional foothold in Libya. In Eastern and Central Europe, the United States was supporting the establishment of the Three Seas Initiative, viewing it as a bulwark against the growing influence of both Russia and China in the region as well as a foothold for American interests.

However, during the Trump administration the main foreign policy goal for the United States was the prevention of China's future growth, as Beijing was perceived as the top long-term threat to the country's vital national interest of securing America's unrivaled positions on the Asian continent and beyond.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on Armenia. Armenia registered a 7.6% GDP decline, and the tourism sector, one of the pillars of Armenia's economic growth (up to two million tourists visiting Armenia in 2019), was also ruined. However, the biggest crisis for Armenia in 2020 was the war in Nagorno Karabakh, where Armenia suffered a humiliating defeat. As a result of the war, the Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) Republic lost 8,500 square km of territory. The remaining part of Artsakh (3,000 square km) was transformed into a de facto Russian protectorate where Russian peacekeepers are deployed for the initial period of five years, until November 2025. The war extended the border with Azerbaijan by over 500 km, which creates serious security problems for the Armenian population living in the border regions. The 12-13 May 2021 and 16 November 2021 incursions of Azerbaijani troops into Armenian territory in the Syunik and Gegharkuniq provinces indeed laid bare the problems currently faced by the Armenian state.

The election of President Biden may reinvigorate the U.S. involvement in the South Caucasus based on the "America is back" notion.

However, it should be noted that the South Caucasus is not a top priority for the United States. Given the transition of the world order from the “unipolar moment” towards a multi-polar or polycentric architecture, the United States has to recalculate its involvement in the different regions, focusing its attention on vital areas such as the Asia-Pacific region.

Russian-U.S. relations

Russian-U.S. relations have reached their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Different factors have played a role here—the Ukraine crisis, the Russian military intervention in Syria and alleged Russian interference in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections. According to strategic documents published by the Biden administration, the United States perceives Russia, along with China, as a key adversary. The Russian threat is significant in such fields as cyber-security and hypersonic missiles. Meanwhile, the United States is not interested in seeing the further growth of Russia-China relations, and the U.S. administration has sought to stabilize its relations with Russia. It seems that the Biden-Putin summit of June 2021 and the decision to launch a dialogue on strategic stability and cyber-related issues prove the United States intended to stabilize relations with Russia. However, the 2022 war in Ukraine completely ruined U.S.-Russia relations, with the US providing tens of billions of U.S. dollars in economic and military support to Ukraine to support its fight against Russia and rallying the EU and other American allies to impose tough sanctions on Russia.

Turkish-U.S. relations

Turkish-U.S. relations are currently in a crisis. The Turkish leadership has serious suspicions about the possible U.S. involvement in the July 2016

military coup attempt. The United States' support for the Syrian Kurds in northeastern Syria and the rejection of Turkish demands to extradite Fetullah Gülen are other reasons for the significant decline of the U.S.-Turkey relations. For its part, the United States viewed the Turkish decision to buy Russian S-400 systems very negatively. In response, the United States expelled Turkey from the F-35 program and applied sanctions on Ankara. At a strategic level, Turkey decided to pursue a more independent foreign policy approach and bid farewell to the role of being a U.S. junior ally.

Meanwhile, Turkey remains a key NATO ally and plays a critical role in the Middle East, the Black Sea region, Afghanistan and Central Asia. The agreement between the United States and Turkey which allowed Turkey to manage the Kabul airport after the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan is additional evidence of Turkey's significance for the United States. Regardless of the political future of President Erdoğan, Turkey will continue to pursue its policy of establishing itself as a relatively independent regional player. There will be no return to the Cold War kind of relationship between the United States and Turkey. The two sides will occasionally experience friction, but Turkey will remain a NATO member and the United States will allocate a significant role to Turkey in its Eurasian policy.

Infrastructure

Since 2016, Armenia has been making an effort to launch the Persian Gulf-Black Sea multimodal transport corridor, which will connect Iran with Europe via Armenia, Georgia, the Black Sea, Bulgaria and Greece. This corridor has the potential to be included either in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, as an alternative route for China to reach Europe via Iran and the South Caucasus, or in the International North-South Transport Corridor.

This project envisages connecting India with Northern Europe via Iran and Russia circumventing the Suez Canal, but one of its routes could also pass-through Iran, Armenia, Georgia and the Black Sea.

To facilitate Armenia-Iran transport infrastructure, Armenia has launched the construction of a North-South highway to connect the Armenian-Georgian and Armenian-Iranian borders. The new 555km highway should connect the Bavra crossing point at the border with Georgia to Meghri, located on the Armenian-Iranian border. Unfortunately, as of July 2022, only twenty percent of the highway is ready. The Yerevan-Gyumri section will be finished by the end of 2023, and no timetable exists for constructing the Yerevan-Meghri section.

Meanwhile, Armenia is putting effort into increasing green energy usage in its energy balance. A critical element of this strategy is the construction of solar power plants. Currently, construction of a 55-megawatt solar power plant is underway in Mets Masrik (Gegharkunik region). Furthermore, the construction of a 200-megawatt solar power plant should be launched in the Aragatsotn region by the end of 2022.

Russian-Chinese relations

Russia and China have established a truly comprehensive strategic partnership. The two countries have a very similar worldview, which is the backbone for their partnership. They firmly believe that the United States and the West in general are in relative decline, and the unipolar moment of the 1990s and early 2000s, marked by absolute U.S. hegemony, is over. The world is entering a multipolar era, where both Russia and China will be among the crucial poles. Moscow and Beijing argue that the United States seeks to contain Russia and China to prevent their growth and secure its global hegemony.

Russia and China reject the West's claims about the universality of liberal democratic values and refute its attempts to use democracy and human rights-related issues as a pretext for interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. The Russia- China strategic partnership has been accelerating since late 2014, and this has been due in part to the U.S. and EU sanctions imposed on Russia because of developments in Ukraine. The key motto of Russian-Chinese bilateral relations is "Not always with each other, but never against each other." On 4 February 2022, Russia and China signed a joint declaration during President Putin's visit to Beijing. The 2022 war in Ukraine and unprecedented sanctions imposed by the West on Russia will most probably bring Russia and China closer to each other.

Russian-Turkish relations

Russian-Turkish relations can be characterized as simultaneously cooperative and competitive. On a strategic level, Russia is satisfied with Turkey's efforts to pursue more independent foreign and security policies since, from the Kremlin's point of view, it diminishes U.S. influence in several critical regions, namely the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Russia and Turkey have agreed to compartmentalize their relations and not allow disagreements in one region to impact other areas negatively. In the South Caucasus, Moscow and Ankara have also succeeded in coming to terms regarding the region's future, and their competition and even confrontation in other regions, such as Libya or Ukraine, does not harm their cooperation in the South Caucasus. This approach was confirmed during and after the 2020 Karabakh war.

EU-Russia

The European Union joined the United States in its response to the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and also imposed sanctions on Russia. Since then, bilateral

relations between the EU and RF have nose-dived. In March 2016, the EU agreed on five guiding principles for its relations with Russia: the full implementation of the Minsk agreements; closer ties with Russia's former Soviet neighbors; strengthening EU resilience against Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on specific issues such as counterterrorism and support for people-to-people contacts. While new EU members, such as Poland, Romania and the Baltic States, called for a tougher policy against Russia, the European heavyweights, especially France and Germany, argued for the necessity of launching a dialogue with the Kremlin. The president of France, Emmanuel Macron, has been pushing this idea forward, stating many times, including during his meeting with the Russian president on 7 February 2022, that there could be no European security without dialogue with Russia. Macron believed that dialogue with Russia is necessary in order to realize the idea of "European strategic autonomy", which gained momentum during the Trump presidency. Prior to the 2022 war in Ukraine, Germany supported economic, especially energy, cooperation with Russia and rejected any attempts by the United States or others to prevent the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline construction. In June 2021, the European Commission published a new report on EU-Russian relations, and it put forward three main principles: push back, constrain and engage. However, the 2022 war in Ukraine resulted in a complete rupture of EU-Russian relations, and the EU has adopted six packages of economic sanctions against Russia as of June 2022.

Turkey-EU

Turkey's EU membership bid is dead, and both Ankara and Brussels well understand this. Turkey's growing assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean, its encroachments into EU member Cyprus's territorial waters and its military involvements in Libya, Syria and northern Iraq have

created complications for bilateral relations between Turkey and the EU. And President Erdoğan's tilt toward authoritarian rule further exacerbates the situation. At the same time, the EU needs Turkey's cooperation to prevent the additional flow of migrants from the MENA region into the EU. In the long-term perspective, the sides may arrive to the solution of elevating Turkey-EU relations and granting Turkey some special status in the European Union short of full membership. The recent idea of President Macron on establishing a European political community may be useful in this context.

China-EU relations

From the late 2010s, the EU has found itself increasingly caught up in the U.S.-China strategic rivalry. Growing economic connections with China makes it difficult for the EU to rally behind the United States and fully embrace the U.S.-China cold war. The geographical remoteness of the South China Sea, Taiwan straits and other potential flashpoints between the United States and China permit the EU to worry less about China's rising influence in Asia. The U.S. warnings about the Chinese intention to achieve hegemony in Asia do not create panic in the EU. Nonetheless, the EU, being a value-based organization, does have concerns about the situation surrounding human rights in China, particularly with regard to abuses in Xinjiang and Tibet. In March 2021 the EU joined the United States, Canada and UK in imposing sanctions on several Chinese officials for human rights abuses. However, it is becoming difficult for the EU to disentangle its concern for human rights issues from the benefit it receives from economic cooperation with China. China retaliated to the abovementioned sanctions against its own officials by imposing sanctions on several EU officials, including five members of the European Parliament. Then, in response to this, the EU

Parliament overwhelmingly voted to freeze the ratification of the EU-China investment agreement, which was preliminarily agreed upon in December 2020. The EU will resist the United States' attempts to push the EU into the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, but as a part of the Euro-Atlantic community, the EU cannot keep a neutral balance.

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND THE “THREE SEAS SYSTEM”

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The first historical evidence of the Silk Road was founded in the “*Records of the Grand Historian*” (太史公書/史記) written by Sīmǎ Qián (司馬遷), who is considered the father of Chinese historiography. The three volumes of this work describe early Chinese history with an excellent emphasis on Xīān, the city in China from where the Silk Road began. Later, in 1877, it was Baron Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen, a German traveller, geographer and scientist, who first introduced the term Silk Road (“Seidenstraße” and “Seidenstraßen” = “Silk Road[s]” or “Silk Route[s]”).² It was mentioned that the caravan was crossing the territory of today’s China, India, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Armenia, Georgia and Turkey but that the main route changed from time to time because of political developments, climate change and wars.

The old Silk Road arose during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). It helped connect the eastern and western markets of Central Asia and reached the Caucasus and Europe. China was exporting silk, jade, spices, and cotton and importing gold and precious metals. The Silk Road functioned during the time of the Roman and Byzantine Empires, but later, the old Silk Road acquired its first cracks because of the Crusades and Mongols’ achievements in Central Asia.

In 2013, during his speech at Nazarbayev University, Chinese President Xi Jinping first suggested that China and Central Asia cooperate to build a Silk Road Economic Belt. The announcement was, in fact, the impetus for the New Silk Road. The Silk Road Economic Belt has six

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² Dr. Georg Von Boguslawski, *Verhandlungen, Der Gesellschaft Fur Erdkunde, Herausgegeben im auftrag des vorstandes* (Berlin: 1877), 11-114, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hw29g2&view=image&seq=112_

economic corridors which are covering a significant energy and resource-rich part of the world:

1. The New Eurasian Landbridge,
2. The China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor,
3. The China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor,
4. The China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor,
5. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and
6. The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor.³

Later, during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Indonesia, Xi announced a plan to create the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The main aim of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is to boost infrastructure connectivity throughout Southeast Asia, Oceania, the Indian Ocean and East Africa. These two Silk Roads combined in the very famous Belt and Road Initiative. Different scholars and politicians are inclined to believe that China’s rise and the Belt and Road Initiative combined are the most vivid evidence of Beijing’s willingness to spread its global economic and political influence.

In 2004, during his press conference after the Second Session of the 10th National People’s Congress, the then premier Wen Jiabao mentioned five key points when talking about China’s peaceful rise. These points give us a general idea of how Beijing understands its rise and how it plans to deal with it. He said,

1. “Firstly, in promoting China’s peaceful rise, we must take full advantage of the very good opportunity of world peace to endeavor to develop and strengthen ourselves, and at the same time safeguard world peace with our own development.
2. Secondly, the rise of China can only be based on our own strength and on our independent, self-reliant and hard efforts. It also has to be based

³ “Vision and Action on Jointly building Silk Road Economic belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” Ministry of FA PRC, March 2015, <https://www.beltandroad.gov.hk/visionandactions.html>.

on the broad market of China, the abundant human resources and capital reserves as well as the innovation of our systems as a result of reform.

3. Thirdly, China's rise could not be achieved without the rest of the world. We must always maintain the opening up policy and develop economic and trade exchanges with all friendly countries on the basis of equality and mutual benefit.

4. Fourthly, China's rise will require a long period of time and probably the hard work of many generations of Chinese people.

5. Fifthly, the rise of China will not stand in the way of any other country or pose a threat to any other country, or be achieved at the expense of any particular nation. China does not seek hegemony now. Nor will we ever seek hegemony even after China becomes more powerful.”⁴

Analyses of high-level Chinese officials' statements have helped us realize that concepts such as World Order and Coexistence/Peaceful Coexistence are interrelated. Premier Zhou Enlai was the first Chinese official to speak about peaceful coexistence, and his first speech related to this theme was in 1953 during the Non-Aligned Movement summit. On 1 January 1970, China restored peaceful coexistence as the primary theme of its foreign policy concept by officially declaring its willingness to establish or improve diplomatic relations with all countries, regardless of their social system, based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. These steps led to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence being written into the Chinese constitution in 1982. By considering the concept of Peaceful Coexistence, Beijing is concentrating its attention on cooperation rather than competition. The above-mentioned observation is true in the case of its relations with its southern neighbours with whom China has a conflict around the South China Sea. In this regard, we can insist that China encourages regionalism to maintain regional peace and security. This type of coexistence is widely accepted by the Middle Eastern and African countries trying to overcome the threat and dominance of the West. Tbilisi

⁴ “Premier Wen Jiabao's Press Conference at the Conclusion of the Second Session of the 10th National People's Congress (NPC) on March 14,” http://en.people.cn/200403/15/eng20040315_137493.shtml.

and Yerevan also share the Chinese understanding of coexistence because they want long-term peace in the Caucasus region. Moreover, because of the ongoing but unofficially announced war, Armenia is keen to be an apologist of non-interventionism, considering the Turkish willingness to wield influence and be involved in it.

In 2011, Beijing published a White Paper entitled “China’s Peaceful Rise” for the first time in its history. Moreover, it was the first time that the government used such word combinations as “peaceful development” and “harmonious world”.⁵ The message was that Beijing would act in the international world system by considering these concepts. When discussing China’s rise and its understanding of the international world order, Henry Kissinger underscored the view that “That’s the challenge. That’s the open question. It’s our task. We’re not good at it because we don’t understand their history and culture. I think that their essential thinking is Sinocentric. But it may produce consequences that are global in impact. Therefore, the challenge of China is a much subtler problem than that of the Soviet Union. The Soviet problem was primarily strategic. This is a cultural issue: Can two civilizations that do not, at least as yet, think alike come to a coexistence formula that produces world order?”⁶ It seems President Xi Jinping heard about the concerns of the United States, and, during his speech at a diplomatic conference in 2013, he told Chinese diplomats,

“We should present our policies to the outside world, acceptably tell China’s story, and speak out so that we are heard, and interpret the Chinese dream from the perspective of the aspiration of all people in all countries for a better life and regional prosperity and let the sense of shared destiny take root with our neighbours.”⁷

The West fears China’s rise. They are afraid of losing the influence they have achieved over the centuries. They are scared, as Kissinger noted, because they are not familiar with Chinese politics, culture and traditions.

⁵ “White papers, The State Council of the People’s Republic of China,” 2011, 11-16, http://english1.english.gov.cn/official/2005-08/17/content_24165.htm#2011.

⁶ Henry Kissinger, “The Interview: “Henry Kissinger,” *The National Interest*, 19 August 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-interview-henry-kissinger-13615>.

⁷ “Xi Jinping: China to Further Friendly Relations with Neighbouring Countries,” *Xinhua*, 26 October 2013, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-10/26/c125601680.htm>.

The West created and is still creating its own image of China, which is somehow different from reality. But Beijing must also help the world understand China's uniqueness. We must remember a significant connection between Chinese history and Beijing's current politics. As Zhang Weiwei, who is a professor at Fudan University and was also Deng Xiaoping's interpreter, writes in his book *The China Wave*:

“Some people think that the Western model represents the supreme ideal of mankind and all China should do is make an economic, social and political transition to the Western model. But, to my mind, if a civilizational state like China follows the Western model, the country will experience chaos and break up. ... China's rise is due to its model of development which the West does not endorse, but China is likely to continue to move along its own chosen path and become the world's largest economy with all its impact on the world at large.”⁸

The most important part of this text is the word combination of “Civilizational State”. It is indeed true that Beijing is inclined to believe that the People's Republic of China is a civilizational state. From this the conclusion could be drawn that civilizational states never claim political leadership but economic leadership remains a top priority. This thinking is at the core of the Belt and Road Initiative, which differs from the Westphalian philosophy. The massive infrastructural projects that Beijing aims to realize with the help of the New Silk Road are mainly directed towards reconnecting Europe with Asia and linking China to markets in Europe and beyond. The Chinese government will invest primarily in ports, railways, airports, highways, container trade and fiber optic cables, as well as energy projects such as the development of onshore and offshore oil and gas fields and energy infrastructures and the expansion of renewable energy sources. This is very attractive for the countries near the Caspian, Black and Mediterranean Seas, which had already been involved in the old Silk Road and had tasted its benefits. The primary outcomes of this cooperation could be new infrastructure construction, modernization of the trade sector, improved connectivity with China's booming market and so on. Based on

⁸ Zhang Weiwei, *The China Wave; Rise of a Civilizational State* Wcpc, 21 March 2012, 47-48.

the information mentioned above, it is evident that the Belt and Road Initiative starting from China will pass through Central Asia, the Caucasus and Europe. In this way, the crossroads will be of considerable importance by connecting East to West and North to South.

Years ago, before the official announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, China’s “Two Oceans” strategy concept had already appeared in the literature.⁹ According to this strategy, China aims to re-establish its control over its surrounding waters and end “The Century of Humiliation”. Kaplan believes that China’s pursuit of sea power is, first and foremost, an indication that its land borders are not under threat for the first time in ages.¹⁰ He underscores that China built The Great Wall during the 3rd century B.C to keep out Turkic invaders. Then, looking back over history through the mid-20th century, we can see that China was anxious about another invasion from the north, the Soviet Union. Analysts believe that, by implementing this strategy, the Chinese Navy would prefer to be a two-ocean power, giving China multiple access routes between the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. Here Beijing will ease its dependence on the Strait of Malacca.

Moreover, in the Pacific Ocean, China has the Taiwan issue and the South China Sea issue where Beijing cannot afford to permit any Western country to come near its borders. The famous Chinese analyst Yang Xue-Tong stated that China’s political interest in this region is not to compete with the United States and Japan for domination but to prevent the hegemony of either one. China’s cultural attractions in the Asian Pacific area are extensive, primarily in areas where overseas Chinese are concentrated.¹¹ Regarding the Indian Ocean, it is worth mentioning that China has a military base in Djibouti, a port in Pakistan and another in Sri Lanka. Thus, Beijing could never allow any instability in the oceans mentioned above. To have good shipping roads and stability in its coastal territories, Beijing has to

⁹ The Indian and Pacific Oceans

¹⁰ Abraham Denmark and Nirav Patel, “China’s Arrival: A Strategic Framework for a Global Relationship,” Center for a New American Security (September 2010), 50, https://lbj.utexas.edu/sites/default/files/file/news/CNAS%20China's%20Arrival_Final%20Report-3.pdf.

¹¹ “Analysis of China’s National Interest,” Minban Publishing House, 73, https://www.eapasi.com/uploads/5/5/8/6/55860615/yan_xuetong_book_final_draft.pdf.

protect its commercial fleets by its presence in the oceans. These two oceans are considered home to most of China's sea lines of communication. Approximately 80% of China's oil imports pass through these maritime regions. When we try to implement the "Two Oceans" strategy from Central Asia to Europe via the South Caucasus, we will collide with such a unique concept as the "Three Seas system". However, this concept continues. In 2015, during the CEE-China summit in Suzhou, the Chinese premier, Li Keqiang, laid out the concept of "Black-Adriatic-Baltic Seaport Cooperation" (Three Seas Port Cooperation). The Three Seas cooperation initiative then became an inseparable and essential component of the 16+1 format.

According to the current geography, Chinese oil imports pass through other countries' tankers and influence zones. Here, the safety of this oil is on the list of Beijing's priorities. The transportation of energy from Central Asia and Russia is of vital importance for China. But the energy cooperation developments with Russia and the Caspian region countries have different directions and internal logic. China's interest in Central Asia and the Caspian region is geographically normal. In terms of stable, reliable and practical cooperation with the region's countries and the formation of friendly relations, China has made full bilateral and multilateral diplomatic efforts. However, China is still trying to find alternative ways to bypass the earlier routes. The possible ways through which Beijing is today trying to link the country to Europe are via Kazakhstan, the South Caucasus and Piraeus. This route crossing the Caspian and Black Seas is a better, cheaper and quicker way than the Mongolia-Russia-Belarus route. In this way, Azerbaijan's interests somehow fit with the Chinese ones. The new corridor China offers could help Azerbaijan diversify its dependence on hydrocarbon. And Baku is trying to increase the country's importance with the help of new transport infrastructure investment projects. But this is also an excellent opportunity for China to use Azerbaijani territory on the way to Europe and use Caspian resources such as oil and gas.

The main feature of the Caspian region, far from the major sea lines, is the competition for pipeline routes, which became evident after the operation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. In this mirror, the interest of the

Caspian countries in the diversification of supplies and the competition for Caspian resources has caused excessive rivalry, which is particularly acute with regard to implementing Russian and Western projects. The economic rationale for these programs includes the intertwining and interconnection of the South Caucasian and Central Asian energy sectors, which has led to the emergence of these two regions as a single entity in terms of geopolitical structural shifts. Under the framework of Belt and Road cooperation, China focuses more on the Central Asian countries, which are on the route bringing Caspian and Central Asian resources to China and can help transfer Chinese goods to Europe.

China is the world’s largest crude oil importer. In 2019, forty-three countries supplied crude oil to China. During the same year, only 44.8% of China’s total crude oil was imported from the Middle East, 15.3% from the Russian Federation, 25% from Africa, 4% from Kazakhstan and the rest from other countries.¹² The most significant success of the energy partnership is the construction of the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline (C.H.N.) and the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China gas pipeline (Trans-Asia Gas Pipeline [T.A.G.]), which are of paramount importance to China’s energy security strategy. The Kazakhstan–China oil pipeline is China’s first direct oil import pipeline allowing oil imports from Central Asia. It runs from Kazakhstan’s Caspian shore to Xinjiang in China. The channel is owned by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the Kazakh oil company KazMunayGas. The level of security of the two pipelines is comparable to the level of stability in the Central Asian region. All existing and potential challenges (possible inter-ethnic clashes, Islamic extremism, the threat of terrorism, etc.) could impact the security of the pipelines. The pipeline gives Kazakhstan an excellent opportunity to reduce its reliance on Russia. This type of policy is essential for Kazakhstan because it is landlocked and needs to make reliable connections with other regions. In this way, the most extensive Kazakh plan that could fit with the Belt and

¹² “Top 15 crude oil suppliers to China, World’s Top Exports,” World’s Top Exports, 28 May 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/top-15-crude-oil-suppliers-to-china/>; China-Africa co-operation promotes developments in Africa’s upstream sector; <https://www.offshore-technology.com/comment/chinese-investment-in-africa-oil-gas/>.

Road Initiative is the “Nurly Zhol” (Bright Path) Initiative. The main aim of this initiative is to modernize Kazakhstan’s road and railway networks.

The China-Central Asia natural gas pipelines, which run from the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan border via Kazakhstan to Alashankou in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, are essential. But the integration project, which is of massive importance to the countries’ foreign policy orientations, sometimes changes the directions and paths of the existing pipelines. One of the best examples was and is Turkmenistan with its gas exportation. After 2009 Turkmenistan was forced to shut down many of its natural gas production sites since the country could not export the gas. This was a wake-up call for the Turkmen government, and it started to speed up the process of diversifying their energy-exporting rounds. The outcome of this process was the Central Asia-China gas pipeline. The export agreement was signed in 2006, but the Turkmen government started reconsidering the signed agreement since Russia began to reduce imports. Since 2009, thanks to the implementation of the projects, the Chinese side has started to meet its energy demands, and the Turkmen side began stabilizing its budget revenues. The success of this enormous project forced the two sides to sign a new agreement.

This development proved to be a new obstacle for Russia, considering that the Russian Federation regards Central Asia as its backyard. The situation also became stressful for China because the pipeline crosses the territory of Kazakhstan, which is part of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. Thus, China and Turkmenistan constructed a new pipeline bypassing Kazakhstan and crossing Tajikistan to reduce their dependence on Moscow and Russia’s goodwill. The Chinese side has also promised military aid to Turkmenistan to safeguard the new pipelines in this unstable region. This pipeline game highlights the existing confrontation between Russia and China. China needs new resources to meet its growing demand and Turkmenistan needs money and a new market, but Moscow needs to maintain its dominant position in Central Asia. However, the ever-increasing Chinese investments in Central Asia have forced an increase in the regional countries’ reliance on Beijing. At the same time, Moscow understands China’s needs and will not push for confrontation with Beijing in the region

because any attempts by Moscow to block Chinese regional investments could challenge its dominance.

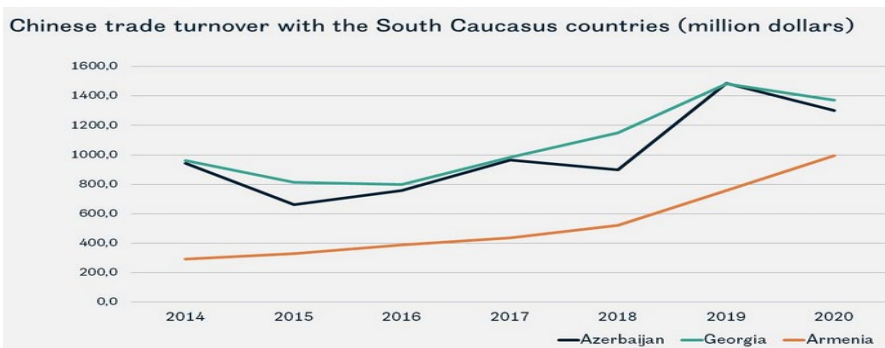
For Turkmenistan to export its gas to Europe, it needs a Trans-Caspian pipeline. Moreover, Azerbaijan also needs the help of Turkmenistan; otherwise, it will not possess the total capacity to serve as an alternative source to Russia. Hereof, the Trans-Caspian pipeline needs to be connected with the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline. As soon as the pipeline reaches Italy, it could be connected with other European countries. Moscow is against all these projects because implementing these pipelines will be an immediate threat to the Russian energy monopoly in Europe, and it will do everything to ruin these plans. In this case, Beijing will also be interested in implementing the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China because the Turkmen gas capacity is insufficient to supply Europe and China. Thus, any project implemented in the Caspian region should take into consideration the Chinese interests and the fact that Moscow can be expected to make a compromise to see Turkmen gas going to China rather than Europe.

China has learned a great deal from the Iraq war in 2003 and Libya’s civil war in 2011. For instance, China lost more than US\$10 billion (of which US\$4 billion was lost from railway projects alone) because of the Libyan war. These wars allowed Beijing to discover the shortcomings of geography and deliveries. The possible further growth of instability and the change in the balance of power in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf have necessitated adopting and implementing a preventive strategy in China. In this mirror, there is no other option besides diversifying energy supplies from the Middle East and reducing shipments by uncontrolled ships. The scarcity of oil and natural gas reserves and the rapid demand growth has led to a deepening dependence on imports. Since China will not soon attain an acceptable level of security for these ships, the diversification of import sources and pipeline transfer of Caspian energy will remain on China’s list of priorities. Moreover, the region’s high unemployment rates and poverty, the corrupt regimes of the Central Asian republics, rising Islamic fundamentalism and border and water disputes could be the main obstacles to the BRI’s Central Asian route. Hereof, Beijing should continue to adopt a

bilateral approach to dealing with the Central Asian countries, taking into consideration each country's specific interests.

With regard to the above issues, in the major crossroad of the South Caucasus can connect the Caspian Sea to the Black and Mediterranean Seas. The South Caucasus or Transcaucasia is a post-Soviet area where a massive vacuum of great power control arose after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Historically, the South Caucasus was surrounded by powerful neighbours. The historian Donald Rayfield has described the region as having to survive between empires throughout a long and complex history. The empires he is referring to were those of the Byzantines, the Seljuk Turks, the Persians, the Ottomans, most devastatingly, the Mongols, and finally, the Russians.¹³ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the regional countries re-established their independence. Today the region is a melting pot in which we see the accumulation of the interests of all key international actors: the European Union, Russian Federation, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, United States (The United States declared the Caucasus-Caspian region as a zone of their national interests.), Republic of Turkey, Islamic Republic of Iran and the People's Republic of China.

The European Union, Russian Federation, United States and People's Republic of China all have different levels of influence in the region. And the regional countries are trying to gain as much as possible from these big players, which all have their different integration projects. The European Union is considering the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program, hoping to promote



¹³ Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (Reaktion Books: London, 2013), 10.

democracy among its eastern partners. The Russian Federation wants to fill the vacuum created in the South Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this regard, the primary purpose of the U.S. policy in the region is to contain Russia's aspirations. As for China, we did not see any activation from Beijing's side until 2013 with the official announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative. Today, the P.R.C. appears as a neutral partner without any military and strategic intention in the region. Beijing has no vivid plan for a comprehensive economic integration project like Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) or the EU's Eastern Partnership program, which envisages democratic change. The most exciting aspect of these developments is that all of the integration projects include trade, transport and infrastructure networks. Even though the region is a new one for the P.R.C., and even though it has limited historical and geopolitical experience in the area, Beijing has already recognized its interests and formed a broad understanding of how the P.R.C. could be presented in the South Caucasus, and its interests and strategy are directly related to the geographic location of the South Caucasian countries. Beijing has developed its specific geopolitical style based on a cluster approach. At its core, the Beijing style is about developing cooperation with regional countries.

Source: China's General Administration of Customs (中华人民共和国海关总署)

Considering that the South Caucasus and Central Asia are parts of the same geopolitical space, a change in the geopolitical balance of power in the Caucasus can directly affect the balance of power in Central Asia. The latter can also pose a threat to the BRI and China itself. Thus, if China ever starts to develop any hegemonic interest in the region at some point, Beijing should be ready to accept and answer to its new rivals: Russia, Turkey, Iran, the United States and the European Union. For now, however, cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the South Caucasian countries will remain in the spheres of economy and culture.

In contrast to the European Union, which is eager to see the region through the prism of democracy, and the Russian Federation, which wants to see its “Near Abroad” from the perspective of economic integration, the People's Republic of China is investing in the regional countries without demanding or changing anything. The first fruits of this strategy toward the region became evident during the presidency of Hu Jintao (2002-2012).

During these years, the Chinese government provided loans for modernizing local infrastructures. China became more interested in Georgia because of its wine production and in Armenia because of its copper and renewable energy. After the official announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, the regional countries became more important to China because they provided a good and easy route to Turkey, Iran, Russia and the European Union market. Thus, the regional countries are becoming transit corridors for transporting energy and goods from Asia to Europe.

At the same time, the regional countries' governments are offering new markets for Chinese goods. In 2019 China became the second-largest trade partner for Armenia and the third-largest for Georgia and Azerbaijan. From 2016 to 2020, bilateral trade between China and the Caucasus region doubled from US\$1.9 billion to US\$3.6 billion.

At this stage, the main priority for Beijing is to deepen its economic ties with the regional countries and reduce pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic aspirations, a goal Beijing expects to attain through improving socio-economic conditions in the region. From this point of view, this policy is acceptable for Russia and Iran. For Moscow, China's strengthening of its position in the South Caucasus and deepening its ties with the North Caucasus is beneficial in case there will be any rapprochement between Turkey and the West. Moreover, such activity also helps to improve the region's socio-economic situation and with the fight against extremism. From Tehran's point of view, Beijing is a natural ally and a reliable partner against Turkey and the ideology of pan-Turkism. Naturally, Beijing takes advantage of having no historical and political presence in the region by distancing itself as much as possible from political problems, primarily avoiding attempts to resolve conflicts in the area. But this hardly means that Beijing is not making any statements regarding the various regional conflicts.

On the contrary, Beijing emphasizes the peaceful settlement of conflicts in the Caucasus. At any rate, we have yet to hear any comments about territorial integrity or the right to self-determination. One of the best examples of China's policy towards discord in the region could be the statement issued after the aggravation of the situation between the parties to

the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in June 2010. And this type of policy was still noticeable during the last Karabakh war, too. Beijing called on all parties to the conflict to be restrained and calm, indicating that China has a sufficiently clear position on how the conflict ought to be settled, which is only peacefully. One thing is clear here: Beijing does not want to be present in a conflict where Russia is involved.

The Trans-Caspian route is a possible route for the continuation of the BRI after it crosses Central Asia. After crossing Kazakhstan, the route would run through the Caspian Sea to reach the Caucasus, and there are new ports being constructed for that purpose. The first ones are the Baku and Aktau ports in Azerbaijan and the Anaklia port in Georgia (on the Black Sea). A railway will also help with exporting Chinese goods to Europe, namely the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. The significance of this railway is that it was constructed without any Chinese investment.

Furthermore, since 2018, the Chinese government has been financing several large-scale projects in Azerbaijan: an industrial park at Alyat Port (US\$1.5 billion), an integrated steel plant (US\$1.17 billion), a tire factory (US\$300 million) and a lead recycling plant. However, it is worth mentioning that Baku has no signed agreement with Beijing regarding free trade or industrial transfer. Turkey's presence in Azerbaijan also makes China a careful player in the country.

In 2016 Tbilisi decided to construct the Anaklia port, and the project was developed under the supervision of the Anaklia Development Consortium (ADC) and a joint Georgian-United States venture. But before this, the Georgian side hoped that China would become more interested in the port and could replace the Georgian-American developers. As we later saw, the contract for the construction and management of the Anaklia deep seaport was transferred to the Anaklia Development Consortium at the end of 2016 after numerous unsuccessful negotiations with Chinese partners. In December 2017, the ADC signed a long-term partnership for harbor cranes and was due to participate in the Anaklia development as an ADC subcontractor. It is planned for the port to become operational in 2022. The ADC General Director Levan Akhvlediani claimed earlier that the consortium had attracted US\$400 million in pledged loans from four

international financial development institutions: the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). But before providing the money, these banks want the Georgian government to underwrite their loans so that if the Anaklia port project is unsuccessful, the Georgia state budget should repay them. The banks want insurance for their risks in case of insufficient cargo for the port, which has unrealistically high forecasts, and delays in the construction of connecting railways and roads.¹⁴ Later it turned out that the Georgian government will begin procedures to cancel the investment agreement signed with the Anaklia Development Consortium on 3 October 2016 to build the Anaklia Deep Sea Port. Thus, Tbilisi is starting a search for a new partner to build the Anaklia Deep Sea Port. The advantages of the Anaklia port is that it will allow for the shortest route between Europe and Asia within the BRI, it will reach the capacity of handling 100 million tons of cargo annually, and it will also be equipped to accept the world's largest container ships.

Alongside these developments, Tbilisi is trying to raise the importance of the Poti port. The importance of Poti is that the city has the largest seaport in Georgia, motorways and railroad links to other countries and an industrial park that is a free trade zone with the EU, Turkey, Iceland, Norway and Lichtenstein. On 16 January 2017, the Georgian government sold 75% of its Poti Free Industrial Zone shares to the investor company CEFC China Energy Company Limited.¹⁵ According to the contract, the investor is to develop the territory intensively, and the Chinese company has invested less than US\$150 million over three years. In 2015 the Chinese side tested the effectiveness of communications between the Xinjiang province and the port of Poti through Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. Railway cargo loaded into

¹⁴ Analysis, "Anaklia new port: China probably wants it, Russia hates it, U.S. navy might use it, Georgia would benefit from it enormously," PortSEurope, 21 April 2019, <https://www.portseurope.com/anaklia-new-port-china-probably-wants-it-russia-hates-it-u-s-navy-might-use-it-georgia-would-benefit-from-it-enormously/>.

¹⁵ "Chinese corporation to purchase 75% of Poti Free Industrial Zone shares," Agenda.ge, 16 January 2017, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2017/91>.

China on 29 January arrived in Georgia on 6 February. And a large construction project was launched in Poti FIZ in early 2019.

Furthermore, a new marine terminal being built will admit vessels with 50 to 60 tons of freight-carrying capacity. At the initial stage, the OPIC Company (U.S.A.) plans to invest US\$50 million into this project. The intended length of the quayside is 650 meters (710 yards), and the harbor bottom will be deepened to 12-15 meters (13-16 yards) to admit large-capacity vessels. The overall cost of the project is US\$150 million. When the construction is completed, 250 new jobs will be created in the docks and 800 more in the supporting industries. The port's location is strategically important as it is one of the safest ways to transport Asian goods to European markets. At any rate, the last word belongs to China. Beijing will have to decide whether or not to invest in these ports because the risk of corruption is high and the infrastructure needs huge investments. Besides the ports, China is investing in Georgia's gas-to-electricity plant (US\$160 million) and the Mindeli coal mine in Tkibuli. In addition, the Chinese companies are investing in the country's longest tunnel, which is expected to be part of China's Eurasian rail network.

The second good option and other safe way of reaching Europe will be through connecting the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea by crossing the territory of Armenia, which is the continuation of Tehran's North-South corridor. The eastern part of the corridor will connect Iran with Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries. With the help of this corridor, the Chinese investors can use Armenia as a gateway to the market of the Eurasian Economic Union, of which Armenia is a member state and which contains 170 million Russian, Kazakh, Belarusian, Kyrgyz and Armenian consumers. To get to this point, it will be beneficial for both countries to agree on constructing an industrial park in Armenia. Another important point about this corridor is that it allows for bypassing the route through Azerbaijan and Turkey, with whom Armenia has closed borders.

Moreover, the corridor will link the country to the European markets. One segment of the North-South corridor linking the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea is the Southern Armenian Railway project. In 2012 the Armenian government signed a concession agreement with the UAE-based Rasias FZE

Company to construct the Southern Armenian Railway. The Southern Armenia Railway is anticipated to be a 316 km long electrified single-track railway, which will connect Gavar, near Lake Sevan, to the southern border of Armenia by Meghri. It will be integrated with the existing central railway system of the Republic of Armenia, operated by South Caucasus Railway CJSC and the operating railway system of Iran. In addition, the Southern Armenia High-Speed Road, to be constructed in Armenia's southern province of Syunik, is anticipated to be a 110 km expressway connecting the town of Sisian to the southern border of Armenia by Meghri.¹⁶

These two projects will be a part of the International North-South Transport Corridor, which will play a pivotal role in improving regional connectivity and driving economic growth along the corridor. The corridor will make it possible to shorten transportation routes between the Black Sea and Persian Gulf ports. These projects will help to foster regional trade and strengthen the Armenian economy. The concession terms stipulate specific periods for completing feasibility studies, engineering designs, project financing and construction, followed by a 30-year operating period, renewable by Rasia for an additional 20 years. To become the lead member of the development consortium, Rasia has successfully negotiated and recently signed framework and commercial agreements with China Communications Construction Company Ltd., one of the world's leading companies in railway, high-speed road, tunnel, bridge and port construction. Feasibility study works commenced on 31 December 2012, and the Chinese Ministry of Commerce has announced that the Southern Armenian Railway could serve as a key commodities transit corridor, carrying oil from Iran to Europe via Armenia and Georgia by crossing the Black Sea.

The other reasonable project could be the Meghri-Yerevan-Bavra highway, another part of the North-South Corridor linking the southern border of Armenia with its northern point. The Armenian government financed the project through loans from the Asian Development Bank

¹⁶ "A Dubai-based Investment company, Rasia, awarded \$3 billion railway and high-speed road projects in Armenia," Cision PR Newswire, 24 January 2017, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/dubai-based-investment-company-razia-awarded-3-billion-railway-and-high-speed-road-projects-in-armenia-188188411.html>.

(ADB) and the European Investment Bank. Chinese engineers are involved in constructing the Yerevan-Gyumri highway (SinoHydro, a Chinese state-owned consortium firm, took responsibility for constructing the road.) and the road is almost done. As a result of this road’s construction, the North-South route and connection between Armenia and Iran will be time-efficient. It will take less time than ever before to ship from any port in China to Europe via the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. Moreover, the road from Iran to Georgia via Armenia will now be easier and cheaper to use because Tbilisi and Yerevan have completed the Integrated Border Management Program across the Bagratashen-Sadakhlo Border Crossing Point. In 2013 the EU Eastern Partnership Program and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) launched a project on joint Armenian-Georgian border management, assisting both governments in reducing barriers to trade, transit and the movement of people, preventing smuggling and trafficking and increasing the professionalism of border and customs personnel and cooperation between Armenian and Georgian border agencies for border management.

The Belt and Road Initiative will give the regional countries expanded trade relations and ease their dependence on the Russian Federation. China will also increase investments in infrastructure. But we can still see some challenges here. Yerevan and Tbilisi need to be sure they will gain something from this initiative and not just serve as transit countries. As we have seen above, China provides military aid to Turkmenistan to safeguard the pipeline route in Central Asia. This kind of diplomatic game could be workable for the South Caucasus, where Armenia can take the lead to be the guarantor of the BRI’s South Caucasian route’s security. In this way, Armenia will also gain a lot. Yerevan can modernize and strengthen its army if it expands its military cooperation with Beijing.

The other way to reach the European market is the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, which, combined with the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, is a door to connect Asia with Europe. It was in 2007 in Marabda (a city in the south of Georgia) when the presidents of Georgia, Turkey and Azerbaijan presented a new transportation project. In other words, this railroad came to replace the Kars-Gyumri-Tbilisi railroad, which had not been operational

since 1993, when Turkey, because of the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan, closed the border with Armenia in support of the Azeris in the war. On 20 October 2017, in Baku, the new railroad was inaugurated by Georgia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkey and Azerbaijan. The first test run was carried out in 2015 from Lianyungang (northern China) via Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. The international investors engaged in constructing the route were the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development. At first, the foreign investors proposed Armenia be engaged in the initiative, but Armenia was later left out of the project because of the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The capacity of the BTK to carry passengers and cargo is expected to increase threefold in two decades. Turkey undertook various projects, including the Eurasian Tunnel, the third Bosphorus bridge (the above-mentioned Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge) and Istanbul Airport.

The Middle East has become interesting to Beijing because of the growing market for Chinese commodity exports and infrastructure investment opportunities it represents as well as its susceptibility for regional instability. Considering that millions of Muslims live in the western part of China and some of them have connections with jihadist groups, China sees a threat to its sovereignty. However, Beijing still considers the Middle East as the bridge between Asia and Europe within the framework of the BRI. The latest developments show that the withdrawing of the United States from the Middle East is giving Saudi Arabia, Israel and other Middle Eastern countries space to build their relations with the People's Republic of China. Turkey is a newcomer to the Belt and Road Initiative compared to the other Middle Eastern countries. Within the framework of the initiative, Turkey's claims rest on implementing the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor, also known as the Middle Corridor. It is projected that the corridor will start from China and pass through either Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan followed by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Later, it will cross the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan and reach Turkey via Georgia. Considering that the corridor will mainly focus on roads and railways, the main goals of the corridor will correspond with the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor. But as we can

see in the Turkish initiative, Iran is excluded. Excluding Iran will lower the risks of implementing the corridor, considering the U.S. sanctions on Iran, and Turkey is not keen to see a powerful and growing Iran. Its main goal is to use the BRI function effectively as a trade and infrastructural investment hub between China and Europe. The corridor is also an excellent opportunity for Ankara to develop its eastern side and bring Chinese investments to Turkey although Ankara will continue to diversify its energy suppliers.

Overall, implementing this initiative and its connection with the BRI requires all involved countries to have and cooperate for a solid institutional base. Today China's significant investments are directed toward mining and energy projects while, for entering the Turkish market, Beijing is taking into account the development of Kumport. This port is Turkey's third-largest container terminal. Situated on the European side of Istanbul, the port is a gateway to the Black Sea region and Europe. China's main concern regarding Turkey's involvement in the initiative is the country's economic situation and security. The main points of concern with the potential to limit Chinese investments in Turkey could be the attempted coup d'état in 2015, conflicts in the southeastern periphery, the weakening of the Turkish currency and Ankara's support to the separatist Uyghurs. This last issue is increasing tensions between China and Turkey.

For its part, Turkey is worried about China's growing good relations with the Republic of Cyprus, notably in the energy sphere. Despite all these tensions, however, Turkey still recognizes that China is a good source of money and investments. Thus, one of the significant steps taken by the Turkish side was to recognize the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM, a Muslim separatist group in Xinjiang) as a terrorist organization. Despite these obstacles, China invests in Turkish energy, logistics and infrastructure because the most realistic way to reach Europe is through Turkish territory. Ankara is well aware of this and uses it to its own advantage by working to attract Chinese FDI into its tenuous economy. As regards the ports which will help China reach the European market, these are considered to be Mersin, Candarli and Filyos. Still, China needs to make considerable investments here since the Piraeus port in Greece is already under construction. The Piraeus port will be a gateway for Chinese goods to

Europe. It is the most cost-efficient port through which China could access the European market and narrow the distance between China and Europe. On 11 February 2019, the Piraeus Port Authority and the North Adriatic Sea Port Authority signed a Memorandum of Understanding between Piraeus and the Ports of Venice and Chioggia to strengthen cargo flows.¹⁷ And China has invested in constructing a high-speed railroad from this port to Western Europe through Belgrade and Budapest. This railroad will be a time-efficient route for transporting goods from the Suez Canal to Western Europe.

Meanwhile, Ankara is demanding more Chinese investments in Turkey's transportation, energy and mining sectors. Without offering profitable tenders to Beijing, Turkey's willingness to connect its Middle Corridor project with the BRI is not unanimously acceptable to Beijing. The main challenge for China is Turkey's membership in NATO and Ankara's willingness to be integrated with the EU. China's experiences with the Sinop nuclear power plant tender in 2013 and the air defense system in 2015 also give Beijing new cause for doubt about involving Turkey in its new projects.

The last stop for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), a new trade link between China and the Afro-Eurasian space, is the Mediterranean Sea. Considering the importance of the Mediterranean, China is building and modernizing its most important ports, such as those in Israel, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria and Greece. The trade route from Mediterranean ports to the European market depends profoundly on the security and political stability of the Middle East and Africa. Today, China is "the world's factory", and the starting point of international shipping routes is transporting most of its goods by ship. Along these lines, Chinese ports are considered to be some of the busiest ports globally, and Beijing is deeply engaged in the construction and reconstruction of ports around the world. With the help of the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSC), China invests considerable amounts in maritime projects in the Mediterranean Sea. Such projects are being implemented in the Port of Tangiers in Morocco; the Port

¹⁷ "Signing of a Memorandum of understanding between Piraeus and the ports of Venice and Chioggia to strengthen the cargo flows," Piraeus, 11 February 2019, <http://www.olp.gr/en/press-releases/item/4290-signing-of-a-memorandum-of-understanding-between-piraeus-and-the-ports-of-venice-and-chioggia-to-strengthen-the-cargo-flows>.

of Cherchell in Algeria; Port Said, Alexandria and the Suez Corridor project in Egypt; the Port of Piraeus in Greece and the ports of Ashdod and Haifa (China has the right to manage the Port of Ashdod for forty-nine years.) in Israel. The economies of these Mediterranean countries are weak or slowing down. Therefore, Beijing has chosen a soft power approach focusing mainly on increasing economic and commercial ties under the Belt and Road Initiative framework.

So, why have ports traditionally been the key to Europe? The ports on the Adriatic were once the most important ones for the development of European commerce. But today, the fast-developing ports are in the south of the Mediterranean, and they serve as essential linkages between the Middle East, Africa and Europe. This creates a situation where Italy and Greece are the ones needing investments. China is dealing with the Mediterranean countries individually, and the best example is Italy. Dozens of reasons why China chooses Italy for its investments is covered in the relevant literature. Perhaps the main reason which emerges is because of Italy's superior maritime technology, which fits in with China's five-year plans to modernize its military arsenal. In this regard, exchange and cooperation between Tsinghua University and the Italian universities has risen significantly. Italy ranks third as a recipient of Chinese direct investment after the United Kingdom and Germany. Italy hopes these investments will create new opportunities to reinvigorate its economy. In this way, Beijing is eager to access Italy's port infrastructure and has an interest in Italian assets. The Italian economy has completely changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and stock prices have plummeted. There is a risk that the Italian companies will pass into foreign hands on this mirror. As Valbona Zeneli and Michele Capriati mention in their article in *Diplomat*, during the previous Eurozone crisis, Chinese investment, mainly through acquisitions of Italian companies, rose from 100 million euros in 2010 to 7.6 billion euros in 2015.¹⁸ They predict the same could happen during this crisis.

¹⁸ Valbona Zeneli and Michele Capriati, “As Italy reels, Chinese companies might sense an opportunity to buy up more Italian brands on the cheap,” *The Diplomat*, 18 April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/is-italys-economic-crisis-an-opportunity-for-china/>.

The Vado Gateway is Italy's most crucial development in port infrastructure and is the result of a 450-million-euro investment. With a share of 50.1%, APM Terminals has invested 180 million euros in the project (43 million provided by project financing). The Chinese COSCO Shipping Ports has a 40% share, and Qingdao Port International has a 9.9% share.¹⁹ The Italian ports can accommodate Ultra-Large Container Ships of up to 19,000 TEU capacities without any physical restrictions. The COSC and Huawei Marine Networks installed the "Hannibal" cable linking Tunisia to Italy in 2009. The project was implemented and moving forward. The company then installed another cable connecting Libya to Greece in 2010. These actions caused those European Union countries fearing the P.R.C. would use these submarine cables to gather intelligence to voice their concerns. Their worries intensified after Sri Lanka formally handed over its southern port of Hambantota to China on a 99-year lease, which helps China monitor all traffic through the port of Hambantota. The Chinese investment policies in the European Union, mainly those connected with the BRI, are criticized by the European Union countries, which claim that China is financing unnecessary and unsustainable projects, making European countries dependent on China's geopolitical interests. They insist on the fact that all European countries should obtain authorization from the European Union. As different research has underscored, Pakistan, Laos, Mongolia, Montenegro, Tajikistan, Djibouti and Kyrgyzstan are the losers of such policies. In research circles, China's form of diplomacy is referred to as "debt-diplomacy". Considering all these developments, we could conclude that the relations between China and the European Union are worsening. The conflict peaked when the two sides exchanged mutual sanctions and the European Commission decided to freeze implementation of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investments (CAI). After this, France and Germany announced their plans to play a more significant role in the South China Sea disputes.

¹⁹ Cristina Gazzia, "Opening of Vado Gateway set to transform logistics in northern Italy," APM Terminals, Lifting Global Trade, 12 December 2019, <https://www.apmterminals.com/en/news/news-releases/2019/191212-vado-gateway-opening-set-to-transform-logistics-in-northern-italy>.

All these misunderstandings between the two giants started in the early 2000s when the EU recognized China as a fast-growing power and began to call for more equal rights in terms and investments. For its part, Beijing has been building its relations with the EU in the context of U.S.-China and U.S.-EU. relations by trying not to push the EU toward the United States. The problem is that Beijing creates its European policy through the prism of U.S.-China relations when they should treat the EU as a serious actor and a player that can significantly influence China’s fundamental interests. (The United States and EU see China’s rise differently.) As a result, we can see a contradiction; on the one hand, the EU wants to do business with China to help its post-pandemic and post-Trump era economy return to normal, but, on the other hand, there are concerns about human rights issues. Beijing’s relations with some member states are excellent (taking into account China’s support during the Eurozone crises), and these are eager to receive Chinese investments. However, we should not forget that these countries are also strategically connected with the EU, and there is the issue of a single market. After all, we have a situation where the EU countries have different interests and policies. The Eastern European countries such as Greece, Romania and Bulgaria are more open to accepting Chinese investments than Germany or Belgium, which are exporting goods to China. These factors make finding a standard and uninterrupted line for EU-China relations difficult.

During the Trump administration, Washington’s policy towards China was black and white—you are either with us or against us. Moreover, Washington made moves to reduce its economic reliance on Beijing. Although the U.S. elections have changed a lot in the United States’ China policies, starting with the president’s rhetoric and Washington’s renewed willingness to take strategic dilemmas into consideration. But the United States’ naval presence in the Mediterranean, NATO’s enlargement, Turkey’s activation, the Syrian conflict and Russian naval facilities in Tartus are making the situation more tense and less trustworthy for cooperation. Moreover, these issues could endanger the security of Chinese investments. So, these are all issues of immense importance for Beijing in light of its concern for the future of its port projects. But, for now, China will remain

neutral in the region's politics. However, it must be kept in mind that if China fails to strengthen its relations with Turkey, Israel and Egypt to help decrease regional tensions, then the Belt and Road Initiative could come under threat.

The northern and southern parts of the Mediterranean are very different from each other in terms of economic development, the level of democracy and in governance. The countries in the northern part of the Mediterranean have refugee crises and frequent government changes, which could be an immediate threat to the Belt and Road Initiative. In the case of the Middle East and North Africa, major geopolitical issues are turning the region into a melting pot. China is paying more attention here now because this unstable environment could produce a danger to Chinese investments and economic interests. China needs to secure its energy sources here as they provide for 60% of its oil consumption. Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya are vivid examples of corrupted countries. Corruption presents a significant obstacle to doing business. Considering its terrible experience in Libya, China now works more carefully in the region. The first time China incorporated its relations with the Middle East into its White Paper was in 2016. The paper talked about the 1 + 2 + 3 format (energy, trade and renewable energy). Development of this cooperation leads to an "industrial park-port interconnection, two-wheel and two-wing approach" cooperation format.²⁰ These projects will allow Chinese industrial parks (free trade zone [FTZ]) to create business clusters and increase trade flows. It is planned to combine the construction and operation of China's stable developing four large industrial parks in Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman with neighboring ports, including Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi, the Port of Djibouti, Port Said in Egypt and others, to create an "industrial park-port interconnection". The parties also agreed to combine long-term plans, including the railway networks of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, to constantly improve the Middle East region's capabilities to facilitate trade, develop industrial agglomeration and accelerate regional development. "Two wheels" refers to cooperation in oil and gas and low-carbon energy

²⁰ Jonathan Fulton, "For China, the Belt and Road run through the Middle East, South China morning post," 14 July 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2155258/china-belt-and-road-run-through-middle-east>.

while “two wings” calls for enhanced cooperation in science, technology and finance. Taken together, this layout offers a blueprint for facilities connectivity, financial integration and denser trade relations—all BRI cooperation priorities. In this regard, China has discussed harmonizing the BRI with Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, Jordan’s Vision 2025, Abu Dhabi’s (UAE) Economic Vision 2030 and Kuwait’s “Kuwait 2035”.²¹

Israel is one of the countries included in the Belt and Road Initiative not only due to investments in ports but also thanks to cooperation agreements in the renewable energy sector, agricultural sphere, chemicals market, etc. Within the framework of the initiative, the Gulf of Aqaba will be connected with the Mediterranean. Therefore, Israel is a reliable partner for China in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. For Israel, the benefits of the 21st century Maritime Silk Road could include developing the South Negev, a large desert region in the southern part of Israel. This development project is expected to be realized with the help of the Red-Med Railway. Implementing this project will allow Israel to expand the capacity of its ports, especially Haifa and Ashdod. However, there is a concern in Tel Aviv’s scientific circles about China’s increasing presence in the infrastructural sector of the region (above all in the ports of Ashdod and Haifa).

The 21st Century Silk Road will also be a good chance for Israel to reduce its trade dependence on the Suez Canal. Israel is ranked as the second-lowest investment risk on the Economist Intelligence Unit BRI risk index, making investment in this market highly attractive for China, which is currently looking for a more strategic regional footprint.²² Moreover, Israel’s warm relations with Cyprus and Greece make Israel’s participation in the BRI more likely, which will be a new, attractive door to the European market. In this regard, Israel will have an opportunity to become a net

²¹ The United Arab Emirates is also keen to be involved in the Belt and Road Initiative and is very much interested in green energy projects. The UAE has its own “Clean Energy Strategy 2050,” which links the country with the BRI. The UAE is also a founding member of the AIIB.

²² Mercy Kuo, “China and Israel in the Belt and Road Initiative,” *The Diplomat*, 19 September 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/china-and-israel-in-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

electricity exporter to the vast European market. In 1999, Washington forced Israel to cancel the sale of an intelligence aircraft to China and demanded the resignation of Israel's then Director-General of the Ministry of Defense, General (Ret.) Amos Yaron. Since then, Israel has banned any export of defense or dual-use technologies to China.²³ We can draw from this the conclusion that there is a possibility the United States will put more pressure on Israel to limit its investment policies with China. The initiative also could be a new obstacle in the relations between Egypt and Israel.

The Arab Republic of Egypt is critical for linking the Middle East with Africa. Considering the upcoming benefits from this, the People's Republic of China has invested over US\$20 million into the Egyptian economy through loans, investments and development projects. Chinese investments in Egypt contribute to Beijing's growing role in the Mediterranean region. In this way, one of China's most extensive investment packages is directed at reconstructing ports such as Ismailia and Port Said in the Suez Canal. These investments make Egypt a strategic partner country for the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by the Chinese. In this regard, the first step was in 2014, when Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi launched the Suez Canal Corridor Area Project. The aim of the megaproject was and continues to be increasing the role of the Suez Canal region in international trading. After the official announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, President Sisi emphasized that the Suez Canal Corridor is suitable for Sino-Egyptian cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative framework.

The Chinese government soon included Egypt as one of the countries suitable for building Chinese overseas economic and trade cooperation zones. Later, China became the largest investor in developing Egypt's Suez Canal Corridor. The Chinese side insists that the project is definitive evidence of win-win cooperation. We can explain the win-win cooperation because Egypt has free trade agreements with forty-three African countries. These agreements could help China easily access the African market without trade barriers.

²³ Ibid.

Moreover, Egypt’s increasing Chinese economic presence will reshape the balance of power in Africa and the Middle East. For Egypt, the Chinese investments will help develop the poorest regions and create new workplaces. The outcome of this announcement was a five-year outline document according to which the two sides agreed to develop the China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone. This project is one of the best examples of cooperation between China and Egypt. Moreover, this is a milestone for implementing both countries’ “going global” plans. The development of the Suez Canal is Egypt’s version of the Belt and Road Initiative. The fruits of this type of cooperation became evident in April 2019, when a memorandum of understanding between the Government of Tianjin and the Suez Canal Economic Zone was signed on developing the second stage of TEDA, with development projects totaling US\$5 billion.²⁴ Although the relations between China and Egypt are close, there are some points of contention. The main one is Ethiopia. Beijing’s financial and technological support to Addis Ababa is enormous, especially in the field of hydropower. All this assistance is directed toward the construction of the nGilgel Gibe III Dam on the Omo River and the Tekeze Dam on the Tekeze River. Cairo is against the construction of these dams, insisting they are a threat to its national security. The next aim of the Ethiopian government is to build the Hidase hydroelectric power plant, which will be the largest hydroelectric power station on the African continent, but it has the potential to damage Egypt’s irrigation system.

Chinese companies are not operating very smoothly in the North African countries because these countries have a long history of cooperation with Europe, and Algerian companies, in particular, prefer working with European companies because they are used to cooperating with their standards. This environment creates difficulties and high risks for Chinese companies to invest in. The Algerian port of Cherchell is a critical economic hub for China in the Mediterranean Sea. It was in 2016 when China and Algeria signed a deal worth US\$3 billion to build and exploit a new center

²⁴ Al-Masry Al Youm, “Head of Suez canal economic zone, Chinese officials discuss TEDA projects,” 9 December 2019, <https://egyptindependent.com/head-of-suez-canal-economic-zone-chinese-official-discuss-teda-projects/>

trans-shipment port of Cherchell. Algeria is interesting to Beijing because of its vast oil and gas reserves. Thus, the Chinese have made a grand investment in Algeria to construct the East-West Highway. In the case of Morocco, the relations between Rabat and Beijing have become warmer since 2016. China sees Morocco as the most politically stable country in the region. As mentioned above, Chinese investment became noticeable in the country since the Tangiers Med port complex became the largest port in Africa thanks to them. This type of cooperation with African countries is a vivid example of win-win cooperation (trade and port construction); China needs oil and gas, and the African countries need more investments to improve their economies.

The success of the Chinese investment policy lies in the fact that Beijing is following a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the countries they are investing in. China has more privileges than the EU and the United States., cheap labor and a quick hierarchical investment system.

In summary, many countries are currently competing with each other to attract the largest share of Chinese investments. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are essential for securing Chinese investments and the BRI's Central Asian route. In the South Caucasus, the overall and final defined route remains unclear. However, Armenia should try to do everything to promote its involvement in the BRI via the North-South Corridor and its being the apologist of security guarantor of the BRI's South Caucasian route. On the other hand, the military presence of the United States and NATO in the Mediterranean Sea is challenging Chinese investments in the region. At any rate, the Turkish ports' connections with Egypt are vital for Beijing due to the seriousness of the Suez Canal. Indeed, talking about political stability and the security of the BRI in the region, first and foremost, we have to take into account Turkey. Ankara's relations with Greece are politically unstable because of Cyprus. Besides, Turkey's relations with Israel are also fragile, though in the case of Israel and Egypt, there is a slight rapprochement. The discoveries of natural gas and the political war for gas between the countries mentioned above force China to informally be involved in the conflict resolution process. This means China has chosen a difficult time to start action in the Mediterranean region.

However, the Chinese are keen to construct their relations with the regional countries in trade rather than politics. Thus, we can insist here that China does not have a united regional strategy.

Nevertheless, Beijing has fewer challenges to investment in the countries of the Caspian, Black and Mediterranean Sea regions. The main obstacles are poor economies and limited port capacities, increasing the investment risk. Moreover, the risk of political changes is higher in these regions than anywhere else. As the famous Chinese scholar Jia Dashan insisted, the rise of anti-globalization and protectionist tendencies could negatively affect China’s economy. He notes that all of these factors have resulted in a slower growth rate for sea shipping and brought a stark challenge to the global shipping industry, including China’s own, as well as to China’s economy at large.

**THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT AND IRAN'S
REGIONAL POLICY¹**Anna Gevorgyan²

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For Iran, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its peaceful settlement were and remain closely related to national security interests. The basis of Iran's national security is anchored in the protection of all the layers of Iranian identity. Taking into consideration that this identity consists of Iranian, Islamic, Shiite and Revolutionary elements, we can argue that the attempt to impose a military solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and, particularly, the direct involvement of Turkey and foreign mercenaries in the conflict, has been and still remains a threat to all components of Iran's security.

The status quo of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has effectively hindered the implementation of the Azerbaijan-Northern Iran-Turkey pan-Turkic program. Moreover, the neutralization of this obstacle has been one of the important components of the security of Iran's identity. Azerbaijan, with the support of Turkey, is consistently trying to advance the idea of "one nation, two states", presenting the northern provinces of Iran as "Southern Azerbaijan" and talking about the need to unite them with the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the context of this ideology and the struggle of the Pan-Iranian ideology against it, preventing the expansion of Azerbaijani forces toward the east and southeast was within Iran's immediate interests. It is not surprising that in the aftermath of the 44-Day War in Karabakh, Iran has implemented several military drills across the Iran-Azerbaijan borders. The latest one is the largest and it has been accompanied by several anti-Azerbaijani statements from Iranian officials.

In addition, Iranian officials have repeatedly stated that the territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia is a red line for Iran and the North-South Corridor is of vital importance for Tehran.

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From the perspective of Iran's Islamic identity, the current Azerbaijani state, with its secular approaches and pro-American, pro-Israeli policies, is considered a threat in the context of regional countries which are founded on Islamic values. Many Iranian experts and state officials believe that the Israeli technologies and human resources which have been used by Azerbaijan can also be used against Iran.

From the perspective of Shiite identity, although Azerbaijan is a country with a Shiite majority population, the facts surrounding repressions in cities with a significant religious population make Azerbaijan an enemy of Shiite identity. The policy adopted by Azerbaijan around religious organizations inspires Iran to raise legitimate questions about the sincerity of Azerbaijan's Shiite identity. During and after last year's war, the transfer of Sunni mercenaries to Azerbaijan has also had a major impact on the security of Northern Iran. It is crucial to remember that Iran has made it a national security priority to fight against Sunni extremist groups in Syria, Iraq, Libya and other parts of the region, asserting that if they are not eliminated outside of Iran's borders, they will end up in the country proper. During the war, Iran's officials repeatedly stressed the importance of the withdrawal of those mercenaries from the region. The presence of the mercenaries in the region was condemned not only by the representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran and by the Majles but also in a statement made by Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on 3 November 2020.

From the perspective of Iran's revolutionary identity, the existence of Azerbaijan's clan-based state authorities and the reliance of Azerbaijani politics on foreign economic and political actors in a polarized society make Azerbaijan an obstacle for the dissemination of Iran's revolutionary values.

Thus, we can state that while Iran's response to the escalation of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was neutral and balanced, as it has been traditionally, Iran still has strong concerns about Azerbaijan's behavior and desire for a military solution, Turkey's involvement and the arrival of mercenaries in the region. Furthermore, Tehran's statements about the sovereign territories of Armenia being its red line, especially when it comes to the southern Syunik region after the trilateral agreement of 9 November, make Iran's security in the northern regions very vulnerable. This is the

reason why Iran has been proactive with regards to its statements about regional stability and peace while also initiating a series of visits to both Azerbaijan and Armenia to boost all the possible regional projects, especially concerning the North-South Corridor.

Iran's official response regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has stood out traditionally as being neutral, balanced and level-headed. Iran is the only country which borders Armenia, Artsakh and Azerbaijan. Armed clashes in the conflict zone could destabilize the situation near Iran's northern provinces. During the 44-Day War, as well as during the Four Day War in April 2016, missiles fell on the territory of Iran and a six-year-old child was wounded in one of the villages. In addition, an Azerbaijani military helicopter was shot down onto the territory of Iran. Causing further concerns for Iran is Azerbaijan's use of Israeli-produced UAVs in its border regions. Finally, every escalation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict creates a new opportunity for those interested in the spread of Pan-Turkic and anti-Iranian sentiment among the Turkish-speaking population (sometimes declared as Southern Azerbaijanis) of the northern provinces of Iran. A rally was organized by members of this group in Tabriz who demanded their government refrain from helping Armenia and allow them to go fight in Karabakh. The rally was dispersed and its organizers detained. It is noteworthy that the participants of the rally were chanting not only anti-Armenian but also anti-Iranian slogans.

On the second day of the armed clashes, the spokesperson of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, called for a ceasefire and announced Iran's readiness to act as a mediator. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif Tweeted that Iran is closely monitoring the developments, stating their neighbors are their priority and that they are ready to help resume the negotiations. This was followed by a phone call between Nikol Pashinyan and Hassan Rouhani during which the Iranians emphasized the necessity of resolving the conflict through peaceful means.

The Iranian press was paying special attention to the news about the presence of mercenaries at the Line of Contact. Meanwhile, Iranian analysts were saying that, regardless of the outcome of the clashes, the presence of mercenaries in the region would have a destabilizing effect and cause new

conflicts. The Iranian press reported that, according to Syrian sources, thirty Turkish militants formerly fighting in Syria were killed while another sixty had disappeared in Karabakh.

The spokesperson of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also mentioned the presence of mercenaries, stating that Iran would not allow terrorists to be present near its northern borders.

In the multi-layered Iranian response, the leaders of the Friday prayers in the northern Iranian provinces of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan and Ardabil stand out. They often pressed on the nationalist sentiments of some of the groups within the local population by making anti-Armenian statements, particularly conveying a religious dimension to the Karabakh conflict and emphasizing the necessity of helping Azerbaijan.

After 27 September, the representatives of the Iranian Foreign Ministry paid several visits to the countries of the region. First, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi visited Baku, Moscow, Yerevan and Ankara to discuss Iran's long-term peace plan for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This was followed by Foreign Minister Zarif's visit, which aimed at continuing the discussions which had already begun, taking into account the new realities resulting from the trilateral statement signed on 10 November.

The full details of Iran's peace plan have not been released. But its basic tenets can be traced from the interviews and announcements of Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, his foreign policy adviser Ali Akbar Velayati, the former president Rouhani, former foreign minister Zarif and his deputy Araghchi. From the above-mentioned texts it can be assumed that the program was based on the principle of territorial integrity and the goals of protecting minority rights and excluding extra-regional forces.

Iran's initiative to come up with its own program for the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could have been more of a symbolic gesture than a real peace plan. Taking into account Iran's previous failed attempts at mediation and the increased role of Russia and Turkey in the region, the following goals and potential impacts can be identified as main objectives of the initiative:

- By initiating a peace process, Iran was attempting to make an effort to improve its image within the international community and especially with the countries of the region. It was vital for Iran to project the image not of a provoker of conflict but rather of an advocate for peaceful solutions.

- Iran was truly interested in establishing a ceasefire between the conflict's parties as soon as possible. As Iran is the only country in the region bordering Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, the armed conflict also had a direct impact on its border security.

- The hostilities were especially dangerous for Iran given the presence of mercenaries. It should be noted that they were members of the same extremist Islamic groups against which the forces of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were fighting in Syria and other countries in the region. In the context of the discussions of the proposed program, the issue of removing mercenaries from the region was certainly an important part of negotiations.

- Each additional day of the war caused increased internal political problems for the authorities of Iran. Certain groups linked to Azerbaijan and Turkey were demanding the state officials of Iran abandon their neutrality and intervene in the conflict, closing the border with Armenia and supporting Azerbaijan.

Iran's attempt to mediate was also a response to these groups, as a mediating country cannot support any side of a conflict.

- Through crafting this initiative and holding discussions about it, Iran was trying to play a part of the regional developments.

The trilateral agreement of 1 November, however, changed the status quo and also created more security issues for Iran.

The trilateral statement between Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers, the creation of a Russian-Turkish military monitoring center and the point in the statement regarding the transportation corridor connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan, serve to show the role of Russian-Turkish cooperation.

In the current situation, Iran is making efforts and will continue to hold discussions with the countries of the region so as to prevent itself from becoming isolated from any forthcoming developments and ensure the

continued protection of its interests. It has already been voiced in Iran that the issue of terrorists in the region has yet to be resolved.

At the same time, Iran has stressed the unacceptability of changing the political borders in the region, thus expressing concern over the details and consequences of Azerbaijan's demand to have a transport corridor passing through Armenia. The statement of the representative of the conservatives in the Iranian Parliament, MP Ahmad Bigash, was one of the strongest in this regard, demanding the government take more active steps towards preventing Azerbaijan from achieving these goals.

Zarif's regional visit in late January 2021 can also be viewed in the context of Iran trying to overcome its isolation from developments in the region. Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh tagged this visit as the most important regional visit during the minister's tenure. Iran considers the South Caucasus as its cultural sphere of influence, an important part of its imperial past and a reminder of lost opportunities. It is important to acknowledge that the Treaties of Turkmenchay and Gulistan are important components of the Iranian political mythology and are topics as relevant and painful in the country's current political discourse as the discourse on the post-Soviet space is for Russia.

On the other hand, from the viewpoint of *realpolitik*, Iran is the only one of the three actors (the other two are Russia and Turkey) in the region that has political relations with all three recognized countries of the South Caucasus—unlike Russia, which has problems with Georgia, and Turkey, which has a closed border with Armenia. Thus, Iran considered itself the most legitimate and effective power for the settlement of issues in the region. Nonetheless, in the context of recent events, Iran is worried about being left out of the game. The dangers Iran sees are expressed in its following concerns:

- The fact of the “settlement” of the issue through joint Russian-Turkish forces belittles Iran's role as a regional power.
- The goal of unblocking communications as set out by the November 2020 statement is being interpreted by Azerbaijan and Turkey as solely the East-West connection, risking the North-South route, which is extremely important for Iran.

- The growing Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation may increase the Pan-Turkic threat to Iran's overall security system.

As a consequence of all the above-mentioned factors, Azerbaijan can become a slow-motion mine for Iran's national security.

None of Iran's concerns, however, have prevented the president of Azerbaijan from receiving its neighbor's congratulations for the victory in the Karabakh war and assurance that Iran is ready to participate in the reconstruction of the "liberated territories" and the restoration of communications.

This possible participation could give Iran an opportunity, firstly, to prevent Azerbaijan from becoming completely dependent on Turkey (thereby increasing the threat to Iran), and secondly, by participating in the processes on the ground, to monitor the local developments. Similarly, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who reacted strongly to the points expressed by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Baku held "warm discussions" with him in Istanbul, emphasizing Iran's readiness to promote regional dialogue.

Another important aspect of Iran's regional policy is preventing the participation of extra-regional powers. This importance was stressed not only during official meetings in Moscow but also during the Iranian foreign minister's exclusive interview. The Iranian foreign minister drew attention to the fact that during the second Karabakh war neither the European Union nor the United States was able to take an active part—the issue was "settled" only through Russia, a player in the region.

The discussions of the Iranian diplomat in Tbilisi focused on the expansion of bilateral relations and the importance of the North-South Corridor. In this regard, Georgia and Iran hold the same playing cards, or share the same risk of losing their cards, because if the so-called unblocking of the region means only connecting Turkey to Russia through Armenia and Azerbaijan, both countries will lose their current transit significance. Therefore, it is in the interests of Iran and Georgia to increase the capacity of the Black Sea-Persian Gulf connection and keep discussions about the implementation of the programs contributing to it on the agenda of current developments.

At the same time, Georgia has serious limitations in discussing its relations with Iran. In general, they are coordinated with the United States and with the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem, especially taking into account their growing economic leverage in Georgia.

The statement by Foreign Minister Zarif that the territorial integrity of Armenia is a red line for Iran became a key subject of discussions in Armenia. This, of course, refers above all to the inviolability of the Armenia-Iran border once again and Iran's reservations about Azerbaijan's desire to implement the so called "Meghri Corridor" program.

The "common challenges" voiced in Armenia were another important point of emphasis; these referred especially to the presence of mercenaries in the region.

Another important feature of Zarif's visit was the fact that it included meetings in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Region. This fact and the observations made publicly in each country create the possibility to make assumptions about topics discussed behind closed doors.

Zarif's visit was followed by the visits of a number of other Iranian officials and delegations to Armenia as well as by statements that the inviolability of Armenia's southern political borders was important for Iran. These statements are especially important in the context of the entry of Azerbaijani armed forces into the territory of Armenia. Iran offers its mediation mission for this situation as well but without condemning the violators of the border. The topic became more important and vulnerable after the Azerbaijani side started charging Iranian trucks driving through Armenia's Goris-Kapan road. There was even a case of the detention of two drivers charged with "illegal crossing of the borders".

Thus, it can be stated that at this stage the inviolability of borders the removal of mercenaries and the exclusion of the participation of extra-regional forces are the most important issues in Iran's regional policy. The same principles are key for Iran's newly elected President Raisi and his government. The text of his inauguration, the press conferences and the thoughts voiced in a number of bilateral meetings, including those with the RA Prime Minister and the statements relating to Armenia's authorities come to support to the above-mentioned viewpoints.

**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND NEW CHALLENGES AND
RISKS IN SYRIA:
POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES FOR ARMENIA’S SECURITY
AFTER THE 2020 NAGORNO-KARABAKH/ARTSAKH WAR**

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The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia released in 2020 indicates that Middle East-related issues are regional threats, as it states in the second section entitled “Armenia’s security environment” that “Armenia’s security environment is also affected by processes underway in the Middle East, which include, in particular, the expulsion of religious and ethnic minorities, the consolidation and spread of religious radicalism, internal conflicts, wars of attrition, and non-traditional and proxy warfare.”² And in the section entitled “Formation of a more favorable external environment,” the following is written: “Continuously expanding our cooperation with Middle Eastern states is among our priorities. Armenia must be involved in reforming the regional security system of the Middle East, aimed also at securing the historical presence of Armenians in the region.”³

These two quotations paint a general picture of Armenia’s interests and challenges in the Middle East region.

The purpose of this article is to clarify the conflicts of interests that will prevail in Syria and to provide a general outline of the possible trajectories for conflict settlements and what the end game is for both regional and international stakeholders. Particularly after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh war, the interconnection of Middle Eastern realities with what happened in Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh have become more obvious.

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² “National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia: A Resilient Armenia in a Changing World,” July 2020, 6, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1J-IsxkqsWOJ8YhmKTnizWtu6-vKadGXe/view>.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

Thus, for ensuring the security of Armenia and Armenians, the overcoming of new challenges as well as the establishment of more multilateral cooperation is needed.

The Syrian conflict marks its tenth anniversary in 2021. In March 2011, it started as a peaceful protest movement among the other Arab uprisings and erupted across Syria as it evolved into the world's most complex conflict.

The conflict's decade-long trajectory provides important feedback into the complexity of the challenges and risks that lie ahead in Syria with significant implications for both the region and the broader international community. Syria is changing, and international actors will need to contend with the emergent realities and systematic issues present in a new Syria. Syria's conflict is multilayered with several components, both internal and external. The set of dynamics unfolding in the Syrian conflict should be taken into consideration for the international response. These are the following:

- Syrian society's continuously high levels of repression accompanied by increasingly conspicuous inequalities in wealth and privilege;
- An environmental crisis, especially between 2006 and 2010. Syria experienced the worst drought in the country's modern history which caused hundreds of thousands of farming families to fall into poverty, causing a mass migration of rural people to urban places;⁴
- From early on, the uprising and the regime's response had a sectarian dimension, as many of the protesters belonged to the country's Sunni majority (a denomination that encompassed around 80% of Syria's population as of 2011), while the ruling Assad family were members of the country's 'Alawite minority (a breakaway Shia sect whose members had accounted for less than 10% of the country's population in 2011);
- From uprisings, the situation evolved into a civil war that has turned into a stalemate international conflict;

⁴Jan Selby, Omar S. Dahi, Christiane Frohlich and Mike Hulme, "Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War Revisited," *Political Geography* 60 (2017): 232-244, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629816301822>, last accessed 12 June 2021.

□ A profusion of powerful non-state actors (such as various groups of Sunni jihadists, secular Kurdish fighters, etc.);

□ The worst humanitarian crisis/catastrophic toll since WWII: 6 million Syrians are internally displaced (at least half of them children), and over 6 million are registered as refugees outside the country. Inside Syria, a large part of the population relies on humanitarian aid, which the regime seeks to exercise control over in order to enhance its power;

□ The conflict's death toll was 400,000 in 2016, after which the United Nations ceased to provide estimates;⁵

□ A terrible economic downturn: A record 12 million Syrians (60% of the population) are now considered food insecure according to the World Food Program;

□ Regional proxy battles and militarized great power competition. No fewer than five foreign actors' militaries are engaged in the Syrian battle space;

□ Mercenaries from Syria are deployed to other conflict areas as in the case of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh war;

□ Since the onset of the Syrian conflict there has occurred the displacement of many long-established Christian communities or the dramatical reduction of their numbers through forced migration. In Aleppo alone, some media outlets have reported that Aleppo's Christian population fell from 250,000 to 30,000 by the end of 2016. The exact size and location of many Syrian Christians is therefore difficult to verify in the current context.

□ The increasing administrative, security landscape and geographic decentralization (as well as the fragmentation, localization and, somehow, impotence) of the Syrian state government authorities. State policy and the local operating environment vary in the different regions and communities which are tasked with broadly implementing the will of both the central government and various stakeholders (with a multitude of military branches each pursuing its own agenda);

⁵ John Hudson, "U.N. Envoy Revises Syria Death Toll to 400,000," *Foreign Policy*, 22 April 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/22/u-n-envoy-revises-syria-death-toll-to-400000/>, last accessed 15 June 2021.

- The mechanisms by which the Syrian government may retake control of the rest of the country;
- Local conflict stakeholders and various international actors' previous and upcoming support and activities;
- Bridging the peace process and international diplomatic efforts, etc.

Syria: Who controls what: main changes on the ground

The Syrian Civil War is an ongoing multi-sided armed conflict in Syria fought between, on one side, the Ba'athist Syrian Arab Republic led by President Bashar al-Assad, along with his local and foreign allies, and, on another side, various domestic and international forces opposing both the Syrian government and each other in varying combinations.

By the summer of 2011, Syria's regional neighbors and the global powers had both begun to split into pro- and anti-Assad camps. The United States and European Union were increasingly critical of Assad as his crackdown continued, and U.S. President Barack Obama and several European heads of state called for him to step down in August 2011. An anti-Assad bloc consisting of Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia then formed in the last half of 2011. The United States, EU and Arab League soon introduced sanctions targeting senior members of the Assad regime. Meanwhile, Syria's long-standing allies Iran and Russia continued their support. An early indicator of the international divisions and rivalries that would prolong the conflict came in October 2011 when Russia and China cast the first of several vetoes blocking a UN Security Council resolution that would have condemned Assad's crackdown.

Who are involved in this conflict? When and how did they get involved? What are each stakeholder's possible endgames? These are the questions we need to answer to create the framework of the conflict's future possible trajectory.

What we have in 2021 is a Syria partitioned and decentralized into several areas: central, southeast and southwest, the northwest with the Idlib Region and the northeast with its composition of different stakeholders, rebel groups, local governance councils and significant varied international assistance actors who decide the particular conditions of their influence

areas. As they depend on differing population compositions, outcomes in a given district or area are not likely to be replicable elsewhere in Syria. Although since 2020 the conflict has entered a low-intensity phase of armed confrontation, we will assume that, taking into consideration both local situations and international actors' changing aims and political priorities, military confrontations in different parts of Syria will probably continue into the near future.

Fragmented Syria:

The Government of Syria (GoS) has militarily reclaimed **southern and central Syria**, so approximately 70% of Syria is now under the “control” of the GoS and a clear majority of the Syrian population now lives under it, though it is by no means a static entity or uniformly present throughout the areas under its nominal control.⁶

By 2020, three widely different models of religious governance survived outside the regime-controlled areas: the northwestern region of Idlib, northern regions under Turkish supervision, and the area east of the Euphrates River, which is under Kurdish supervision.

First, in the **northwestern** region of Idlib, the hardline Islamist faction now known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS or Syria's Liberation Committee)—formerly an al-Qaeda affiliate known as Jabhat al-Nusra—was ruling through the formally civilian Hukumat al-Inqadh al-Suriyya (Syrian Salvation Government). Idlib's future is among the points of contention between Russia, Turkey, Syria and Iran. This is due to their different visions. Idlib is still probably the most dangerous place on Earth. Here, the jihadist groups co-exist uneasily with moderate opposition groups, all ringed by Russian, Turkish, Syrian-regime and Iranian-backed forces, themselves tolerating an uneasy co-existence. Since the second escalation in Idlib in late 2019, Syrians and Russians ignored the de-escalation agreement there and in December sent their warplanes on a relentless bombing campaign. The bombing continued into early 2020, causing a wave of civilians to flee northward toward Turkey. In late February, a regime airstrike hit a Turkish

⁶ Hourly updates about changes in the situation throughout the entire country can be traced here: <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>.

military post on the borders of the rebel-held area of Idlib, killing at least 33 Turkish soldiers. Turkey's response was swift and massive, killing over 300 pro-regime fighters, destroying over 20 tanks and downing several Syrian aircraft. As escalation continued and a direct conflict between Turkish and Russian forces loomed, Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin met in Moscow in early March to make another de-escalation agreement. Under this agreement, Russian and Turkish forces were to conduct joint ground patrols in Idlib, and airstrikes would be suspended.

The March 2020 de-escalation agreement, like its predecessors, is unlikely to hold fully and there exists a high probability of renewed escalation and fighting between proxy groups drawing in their state sponsors, or the Assad regime—with or without a green light from Moscow—will renew its offensive, bringing it into renewed conflict with Turkey and threatening to draw in Russia. If violence escalates again in Idlib, new waves of refugees, doubtless with jihadist fighters mixed in, will push north toward the Turkish border. Rather than deal with the problem itself, Turkey will likely open its own borders to the European Union to force its neighbors Bulgaria and Greece to deal with it, as Erdoğan did in March. As this picture makes clear, Russia's intervention has achieved much, but it has not solved the problem of Syria's territorial integrity.

Interestingly, for northwestern Syria the territory that remains under opposition control lies outside the compass of “useful Syria”—the core of the Syrian state comprising the M5 corridor and the Mediterranean coast. In a budgetary sense, for the near future the capture of northwest Syria would be a net negative taking into consideration the economic problems and the central demands of the Syrian Government.

Northeastern Syria: In the northern regions of Syria controlled by the Turkish army, religious institutions were affiliated with bodies that emerged from the revolutionary era, namely local councils and the Syrian Interim Government (the executive arm of the Syrian National Coalition, the largest opposition alliance, based in the Turkish city of Gaziantep). Such institutions are now operating under the supervision of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Tensions will also grow in northern and northeastern Syria between US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and pro-

Turkish groups. At present, the situation can be described as the “Self-Administration” governing in the northeast currently negotiating its reintegration with the Government of Syria.

Syria’s resource wealth is concentrated in the northeast, and some analysts note that recapturing the northeast could lift Syria’s economy as a sign of further progress towards the government’s ultimate consolidation of power. Northeast Syria includes five of Syria’s richest oil fields, and some of the most productive oil fields are in northeast Syria, so they are currently under the control of the US-led international coalition which has the explicit goal of preventing their capture by Damascus. We must stress one more aspect of Syria’s oil production. Even though it is an important source of revenue and frequent driver of conflict in local contexts, it is still modest and, even prior to the conflict, declining oil production was already being compounded by rising domestic demands.⁷

On 30 December 2017, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) announced the establishment of the Syrian National Army (SNA), which consists of three core corps: the Sultan Murad Corps, the Levantine Front Corps and the National Army Corps. The SNA has a unified military command for all factions in the Euphrates Shield operation areas (the northern and eastern countryside of Aleppo), which in 2020 controlled 22% of Aleppo, 10% of Idlib and 24% of Al-Raqqqa. In 2020, the Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition coalition affiliated with the SIG, also announced the SNA’s new manpower had reached 80,000 fighters. Within the challenges to the SNA we can count the absence of a politically coherent project, an unclear command structure, a lack of cohesion, a lack of clarity regarding function when military and civilian tasks mix, the factions’ resistance to assimilation and the differing political affiliations of the factions.⁸ From 2016 through 2020, the Turkish Army and supporting forces

⁷ US Energy Information Administration, “Syria, International Energy Data and Analysis, 24 June 2015,” CIA,

https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Syria/syria.pdf.

⁸ Nawar Shaban, “The Syrian National Army: Formation, Challenges, and Outlook,” GCSP, Discussion Paper (28), 19 November 2020, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/sna-formation-challenges-outlook>; Ömer Özkizilcik, “The Syrian National Army (The SNA): Structure, Functions, and Three Scenarios for its Relationship with Damascus,” GCSP, Discussion

affiliated with the Syrian National Army, operating under the Syrian Interim Government of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, launched four main cross-border operations resulting in Turkey gaining control over the territories.⁹

The northeast and northwest regions have growing parallels and an intertwined destiny with regard to the role of external actors—Turkey in the northwest and the US in the northeast, with Russia exerting influence in both areas. Both regions are also largely under the control of proscribed groups, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the northwest and Syrian Kurdish elements with ties to the Kurdistan Workers’ party (PKK) in the northeast. In the northwest, significant local autonomy is likely to persist as long as the United States maintains its presence, but if the Western power withdraws, the GoS is unlikely to allow this autonomy to continue.

Syria’s conflict has transformed the country’s **southern** border region into a zone of regional contention. Key figures and negotiators from several sides (Russia, US, Israel, Iran, Jordan, GoS, local rebel groups, etc.) are becoming critical in reaching settlements, but there were also broader factors that created these unique conditions.

In the south, Jordan’s strict policies compared to Turkey’s far more permissive approach to borders and the movement of fighters is one of the factors creating a framework of settlement possibilities for the south.

The approach taken in southern Syria, especially the Dar’aa district, is that the GoS and rebel groups have negotiated an arrangement wherein the former is able to access critical territory and the latter can retain local autonomy. This method is not likely to be replicable in the Idlib Governorate or its surrounding areas.

Another important component for settlement possibilities in the south is the military and diplomatic postures taken by Russia and Israel.

Finally, east of the Euphrates River, governance lies in the hands of actors who have historically had little interest in religion, namely, the local

Paper (24), October 2020, <https://dam.gesp.ch/files/doc/sna-structure-function-damascus>, last accessed 8 July 2021.

⁹ For more details about the operations, see the subsection below, “Turkish strategies for the northeast of Syria.”

affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This left-wing Kurdish organization from Turkey has been waging an insurgency against the state since 1984, and its Syrian offshoots control the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

The peace process and international diplomatic efforts: From the Constitutional Commission and Geneva Communiqué to the Astana and Sochi processes.

All of the UN Security Council resolutions (26) on Syria since 2012 indicate the UN's high-level involvement because of its efforts to settle the conflict having been locked in a stalemate.¹⁰

Despite nine rounds of UN-mediated peace talks, known as the Geneva process, there has been little progress evident since 2014. Thus, the peace process within the framework of the Constitutional Committee cannot be expected to produce any breakthrough in 2021 and calls for a cautious step-by-step approach are prevailing. While the Kremlin is not pushing Russian initiatives or settlement plans, its endgame vision is still based on the constitutional draft proposed in 2017 and rejected by the Syrians. The diplomatic strategy from the Russian side is to not abandon any mechanisms formed in the course of the political process and to continue providing assistance to the peace process despite minimal practical results.

Most diplomats believe that the drafting of a new constitution is an inevitable "landmark" element for the future end of the war, even if it means inviting Kurdish representatives to the table and pressing for more active Syrian cooperation. However, in the areas where Assad has won, the Syrian government is not likely to be prepared to make any concessions for constitutional changes because of the lack of any positive incentives from the West in return for such flexibility. The transfer of certain authorities from Damascus to the provincial level, so, in other words, decentralization or federalization, is considered to be a useful step that would help to accommodate the new realities and minimize the likelihood of an outcome involving partition while restoring the territorial integrity of Syria.

¹⁰ UN Documents for Syria, including Security Council resolutions, are available here: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/syria/>.

The potential impacts of the Biden administration on multilayered cooperation in a future endgame for Syria is still insufficiently clear. If the new administration provides massive support to the Kurds, this will strengthen the Kurds' aspirations for independence while leading to an open conflict with Turkey and a stand-off with the GoS, not to mention a confrontation with Russian policies in Syria. After the Biden administration started its revision of Syrian policies, Brett McGurk's appointment as the Middle East and North Africa Coordinator on the National Security Council sends a message to both Ankara, with unfriendly and negative connotations, and to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), fueling hopes for more excessive support.

The Astana and Sochi Processes

Russia, Iran and Turkey have set up parallel political talks known as the Astana process. The Astana format provided an opportunity to reduce escalation and establish ceasefires in most parts of Syria in the mid-2010s. In this regard, the Astana process was able to provide a delimitation of zones of influence belonging to the conflicting parties. This means that Russia, Turkey and Iran have often managed to routinize interaction with each other over critical issues. However, practically, the Astana format can provide no productive path forward in the medium to long-term. In order to reach political decisions for a Syrian settlement, the Sochi format holds more promise of success, as the involved parties underscored the importance of making progress within the framework of constitutional reform. The Astana process failed to acquire a global dimension and remained a local forum aimed at addressing immediate local needs. While certain strategic long-term issues were agreed upon through the Astana process (usually in the format of bilateral dialogue), it has still been a struggle to make any headway. For example, in December 2018, the three countries failed to meet a deadline to form a committee to draft a new constitution after the UN had said that a list of participants submitted earlier was not credible or inclusive.

However, these two processes—the Geneva and the Astana/Sochi processes—can be bridged to bring greater stability to those areas of Syria still beyond the Assad regime's control, serving as a building block for

sustained de-escalation until a lasting longer-term settlement is negotiated through improved humanitarian access and the enhancement of local governance structures.

Russia's presence and involvement in the Syria conflict, coping with new challenges

Russia has been conducting a continual military operation in Syria since 30 September 2015, when it launched its first airstrikes against targets in Rastan, Talbiseh and Zafaraniya in the Homs province. This was the first military operation Moscow launched far from its own borders since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, Russia is not only militarily involved but is deeply invested in the conflict as it seeks to shape the course of the negotiation process and the post-conflict socio-political developments of Syria. Since the start of its military intervention in Syria in 2015, the Syrian regime's territorial control has increased from less than 20% to more than 70%.

The Russian engagement in Syria is a component of Russia's projection of its power abroad via an expansive and increasingly aggressive posture of air and sea patrols and the use of "private" military companies. Another one of Russia's goals is to exert control over current and potential energy deposits and shipping routes as well as gain greater control over maritime regions.

The mutual accusations between Russia and the United States of illegal deployment in Syria and violations of the de-confliction processes are one of the main features of the Syrian conflict and have been especially obvious in 2021. Russia's accusations against the United States are based on the fact that Russia's own presence in the country was requested by the Syrian regime. For example, the Russian Embassy in Washington Tweeted on 6 May 2021 that "The U.S. does not have any right to criticize the legitimate actions of the Russian Armed Forces." This Tweet came two days after Sean O'Donnell, the acting inspector general of the U.S. Defense Department, claimed in a report that Russian military operations in northeastern Syria constitute a breach of de-confliction processes. The report alleged that during the first quarter of 2021, "Russia continued to violate the

de-confliction processes that the Coalition and Russia established in northeastern Syria to prevent inadvertent escalations.”

The Russian Federation has an airbase in Syria at the Hmeimim airfield and a naval base in the port of Tartus. Russian Aerospace Forces aviation supports the ground operations of the Syrian army. It was officially reported that special operation forces of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation are operating in Syria. The Russian Reconciliation Center for Syria, officially known as the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring in the Syrian Arab Republic, founded on 23 February 2016, states that it is a “peace monitoring center and information office” whose stated aim is to facilitate the peace negotiations between the Syrian Arab Republic and opposition groups.¹¹ It is a joint Turkish-Russian government enterprise founded in agreement with the U.S.-led coalition and headquartered at Hmeimim Air Base in Latakia. It is also reportedly tasked with coordinating humanitarian missions and organizing localities to sign up to ceasefire agreements. For example, in May 2017, the reconciliation center was able to deliver 4.7 tons of humanitarian aid in ten missions within twenty-four hours, according to the Russian Ministry of Defense.

Russia’s goal of controlling transit roads indicates that any attack will be focused on the aim of controlling the main transit road and imposing security in the area to the north of the road at a depth that may exceed six km. At the same time, it is important to recall that for various political reasons the Bab al-Hawa crossing is now the main entry point for cross-border humanitarian aid under UN Resolution 2533 (2020), which stipulates that aid conveyances be permitted for a one-year period that ends on 10 July 2021. The main threat to Russia’s goal of securing the area north of the road is that if Russian forces block the roads, this could lead to an ISIS blockade on the oil and gas field in Deir al-Zor, while the phosphate mines in Khunayfis and al-Suwana will remain under the constant threat of ISIS attacks, which will disrupt its already slow operation.

Russia’s official diplomacy and its practical perspectives are in divergence from time to time. On the one hand, Moscow must take into

¹¹ The center’s official website is available at https://syria.mil.ru/split_eng.htm.

consideration the UN Security Council decisions and documents. But, on the other hand, it must also deal with its own operational understandings as well as its political partners' positions, which it must occasionally relay to Damascus. Its strategy is challenged by the strategy developments of the United States, Europe and the Arab governments supporting several forces opposed to Bashar-al-Assad's Syrian government, as well as by Turkey's, Iran's and Israel's main objectives and goals in the region. For an ongoing conflict scenario, Russia needs to keep its gains: forces loyal to Moscow must be preserved; guarantees of free passage through the waters of the Mediterranean Sea which connect to the Black Sea and the world's oceans must be protected; and an open clash between the interests of the most important external players in the Syrian conflict must be postponed further. A comprehensive meeting with the UN Security Council members is thus the broadest international platform, and the Geneva process is the most effective way for Russian diplomacy to propose a long-term settlement scenario.

Iranian influence and presence in Syria focused on the southern region

Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Iran has found different approaches to increase its military, security and economic influence in Syria. Iran has several interests in Syria that drive at the heart of Iran's self-perception of its role as a major regional power and patron and protector of the region's Shi'a Muslims. Iran is permanently searching for new ways to enhance its control and influence in different Syrian provinces and has focused on the southern regions, starting with directly working with foreign militias and recruiting local ones, successfully infiltrating the regime's army and security apparatus and strengthening its relations with Syrian economic circles. We will not go into the details but will reveal the map of the core influence areas. The transformation of Iranian influence from the indirect influence of the Iranian military via the presence of Lebanese militant groups (especially Hezbollah) has developed into an Iranian plan to spread its influence through nearly all parts of Syria using a combination of local and

foreign militias.¹² Complicating Tehran's efforts to stabilize a zone of influence from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon is among the secondary purposes of the activities of the United States and anti-ISIS coalition.

The Iranian presence will remain the "mother of all challenges" for the 8th Brigade (the local fighters' brigade of the Russian backed 5th Corps) for the foreseeable future in the Dar'aa district.¹³ The ongoing rivalry between Iran and its proxy forces on one side and the 8th Brigade on the other would be the main factor currently underlying the significant increase in the level of violence in the district, which has become a defining characteristic of Dar'aa since 2018 and can be expected to continue. Without further collaboration between local armed actors to fill the security vacuum and end the current state of lawlessness in the south, cyclical patterns of retaliations could re-emerge, offering an opening for the Syrian regime to reassert itself in the south.

Israel's main viewpoints and national security calculations vis-a-vis the events in Syria

Developments in Syria are of an intense and vital national interest to Israel. Israel has several principal objectives in the Syria conflict, including minimizing Iranian and Russian influence in the country, blocking the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah, preventing Syria from posing a credible military threat to Israel or permitting Iran to do so, undermining the legitimacy of Syria's claims to the Golan Heights and preventing Sunni militants from establishing infrastructure or operational bases along Israel's border. Interestingly, the main source of concern for the U.S. and Western anti-ISIS coalition efforts, which is to eliminate the ISIS and Sunni extremist groups in Syria, is not the main priority for Israel. The main sources of

¹² Navvar Saban, "Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria," 5 November 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>, last accessed 15 August 2021.

¹³ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, Syria Transition Challenges Project, Research Project Report, 1 December 2020, 2020/17," <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69176/Abdullah%20Al%20Jabassini%20-%20The%20Eighth%20Brigade.%20Striving%20for%20Supremacy%20in%20Southern%20Syria%5B12%5D.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, last accessed 15 July 2021.

concern for Israeli leaders are Bashar al-Assad's strong and empowered regime dominating throughout the country and its Iranian backers' extensive influence both through the deployment of Iranian troops and through Tehran's extensive support to Hezbollah.

However, Israel has little ability to influence events on the ground in Syria, giving it few tools for advancing its goals directly. In the long run, Israel would like to see Syria led by a moderate central government that controls its own territory and resists Iranian interference but remains too weak to threaten Israel militarily.¹⁴

Turkish strategies for the northeast of Syria

Turkey's Syrian policy has been under significant transformation since the Syrian uprising erupted in the spring 2011. In the early stage of the crisis, Turkey's main objective was to peacefully support the settlement of the political crisis in Syria; however, Turkey had to adopt a security-oriented strategy to prevent the potential spillover effects of the civil war into its borders. In the post-2016 security and strategic landscape, Turkey has been choosing a two-dimensional military strategic approach: to minimize the terrorist threat in the Northeast Syria and to support the Syrian National Army (SNA) and the Syrian Interim Government in establishing a sustainable local order.

The main Turkish concerns are border security, terrorism/counterterrorism, geopolitical challenges from other regional and international actors, and, last but not least, the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity.

The primary security issue arising from the Syrian conflict for Turkey's national security is the refugee crisis. The number of Syrian refugees in Turkey has increased over the past ten years from 14,237 in 2012 to 3,655,067 in 2021. There are seven temporary accommodations set up mainly for Syrians located in five provinces—Adana, Kilis, Kahramanmaras,

¹⁴ Larry Hanauer, "Israel's Options and Interests in Syria," RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE185/RAND_PE185.pdf, last accessed 18 August 2021.

Osmaniye and Hatay, hosting a total of 58,204 Syrian refugees—and there are others scattered throughout the country.¹⁵

The new foreign policy strategy of Turkey’s AKP government includes military power projection, reaching out to new countries for long-term economic relations and forming new alliances. In June 2020, Turkey’s National Security Council issued a statement that, for the first time, referred to the “Mediterranean” instead of the “Eastern Mediterranean”, which also reveals this new understanding.¹⁶ One of Turkey main aims is to show clearly that the maritime boundary delimitation issue in the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be settled without its consent, and its long-term strategy is to set new negotiation rules to resolve the issue.

Turkey’s engagement in several armed conflicts from the Caucasus to the Mediterranean raises the issues of overstretching and operational sustainability, which creates for Turkey serious difficulties in translating military gains into diplomatic ones. Interestingly, the humanitarian aid distribution process is extremely important and provides a possible framework for multilateral cooperation. Military over-participation in different parts of the world has the potential to create new risks for Turkey becoming further isolated or even facing military escalation.

On the one hand, Turkey’s leverage on the ground for the de-escalation of the situation in Syria in terms of military dominance has increased; but, on the other hand, this increase in leverage may also narrow the space for diplomatic solutions. Multilateral frameworks are needed in order to facilitate diplomacy in dispute resolution.

Each of Turkey’s military operations in Syria has the aims of territorial control and a unilateral framework. They are the following:

□ Euphrates Shield (2016-2017), Area (Al-Bab region), Target (ISIS)

¹⁵ “Migrant Presence Monitoring for Turkey,” ReliefWeb, Quarterly Report, April-June 2021, 8, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Q2_quarterly-Apr-May-Jun-21.pdf, last accessed 10 July 2021.

¹⁶ NSC June 2020 Meeting Statement: “Our country’s rights and interests on land, at sea and in the air will continue to be protected without any concession.” Available at <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/120359/national-security-council-convenes-under-president-erdogan-s-chairmanship>, last accessed 16 April 2021.

This was a cross-border military operation conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces and Turkey-aligned Syrian opposition groups which led to the Turkish occupation of northern Syria. Operations were carried out in the region between the Euphrates River to the east and the rebel-held area around Azaz to the west. The Turkish military and Turkey-aligned Syrian rebel groups, some of which used the Free Syrian Army label, fought against the forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as well as against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) starting on 24 August 2016. On 29 March 2017, the Turkish military officially announced that Operation Euphrates Shield had been “successfully completed”.

□ Olive Branch (2018), Area (Kurdish majority Afrin Region), Target (PKK/PYD)

On 20 January 2018, the Turkish Army and supporting forces affiliated with the Syrian National Army (SNA), operating under the Syrian Interim Government of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, launched the Operation Olive Branch offensive against Syria’s Kurdish-majority region of Afrin. This cross-border military operation was conducted against the Kurdish People’s Protection Units or the Democratic Union Party (YPG/Kurdish: Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat PYD)—which are perceived to be controlled by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and which are the primary component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—and had the stated aim of eliminating the Daesh terrorist presence in Syria’s Northern Afrin district. As a result of this offensive, by 24 March 2018, Turkey was occupying Afrin and its surrounding areas. Immediately following the operation, military groups began extensively and systemically looting the properties of Kurdish residents, and the SDF insurgency in Northern Aleppo began.

□ Operation Peace Spring (2019), Area (region between Ras al-Ayn and Tal-Abyad), Target (PKK/PYD)

On 9 October 2019, the Turkish Army and allied armed groups affiliated with the SNA attacked the districts of Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn following the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from the region in a new assault into Syria termed “Operation Peace Spring”. The assault involved serious

abuses of human rights against civilians and gave Turkey and its allies full control over Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn on 27 November 2019.

□ Operation Spring Shield (2020), Area (Idlib region), Target (Syrian Army)

This was a cross-border military operation conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) against the Syrian Armed Forces and allied militias in the Idlib Governorate of northwestern Syria, which began on 27 February 2020 in response to the Balyun airstrikes. Turkey's National Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said that the purpose of the operation fell within the framework of the Astana talks and involved the aims of ensuring a ceasefire agreement in the Second Northern Syria Buffer Zone and preventing migration from Idlib towards the Turkish border. On 5 March 2020 Turkey and Russia signed a ceasefire agreement in Moscow.

US objectives in Syria: Does the United States have an end game in Syria?

From the historical overview of US-Syria relations, we can assume that U.S.-Syria relations were severed and became complicated since the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁷ Syria has been on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism since its inception in 1979. Syria is subject to legislatively mandated penalties, including export sanctions under the Syrian Accountability Act and the ineligibility to receive most forms of U.S. assistance or to purchase U.S. military equipment. Since the conflict erupted in Syria in March 2011, subsequent executive orders have been issued in response to the ongoing violence and human rights abuses taking place in Syria. In 2019, the U.S. government authorized a new sanctions program under Executive Order 13894 that allows for sanctions to be levied on those preventing, disrupting or obstructing a political solution to the Syrian conflict, which includes both Syrians and any foreign enablers. In June 2020, the sanctions provisions of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act came into full effect, allowing the U.S. government to sanction regime financiers, officials and senior

¹⁷ "U.S. Relations with Syria, Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, 20 January 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-syria/>, last accessed 18 July 2021.

government figures around Bashar al-Assad and their enablers, as well as military leaders who perpetuate the conflict and obstruct a peaceful, political resolution of the conflict as called for by UNSCR 2254.

Upon examination of the military and diplomatic strategy of the United States with respect to the conflict in Syria, it is clear that the objective of the United States in Syria is to support the full political transition from the criminal, terrorist rule of a family and its entourage to a consensual, legitimate system featuring the rule of law by 2021. Absent this transition, other important goals—the enduring defeat of ISIS, the neutralization of al-Qaeda, the liquidation of Iran’s military presence, an end to armed conflict, the protection of civilians from state and Islamist terror, the return of over 6 million refugees, sustained tranquility and the country’s reconstruction—will be very difficult or impossible to achieve. Since the Syrian conflict started, the United States has supported the UN-facilitated, Syrian-led process mandated by UNSCR 2254. From the point of view of the United States, there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. Since the rise of ISIS in 2014, the U.S. government has worked closely with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to achieve a lasting defeat of the terror group. Working by, with and through local partners, the coalition achieved the territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria in March 2019. The coalition remains committed to ISIS’s enduring defeat through stabilization support to liberated areas, facilitating the return of displaced individuals, finding long-term solutions for detained foreign ISIS fighters and promoting justice and accountability efforts in Syria and Iraq. The anti-ISIS coalition, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), remains in control of this third of Syria’s territory, which is rich in agriculture and oil. U.S. forces also control the al-Tanf military garrison in southeastern Syria, which is astride a land route important to Iran. Moreover, the U.S. garrison at Al-Tanf still rankles Damascus and Moscow and complicates Tehran’s efforts to establish a zone of influence from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Despite Turkey’s operations against the SDF and the subsequent agreement of the SDF to allow Russian and regime forces into part of its zone of control, eastern Syria is still largely not under government control. Neither the problem of Al-Tanf

nor the problem of eastern Syria can be resolved without the acquiescence of the United States, and Moscow seems to have little idea how to gain it.

Despite the success of the de-confliction arrangements aimed at preventing conflict between the United States and Russia so far, the potential for mistakes and miscalculations will continue to exist as long as both militaries are operating in Syria and its skies. The August 2020 incident, where four U.S. service members were injured after an altercation with Russian forces in northeast Syria, demonstrates this risk.¹⁸

After taking office in January, the Biden administration began a review of American policy in Syria and the ongoing civil war there, especially after Trump's controversial policy settings. This review sought to turn the page on the Trump administration's policies, which shifted U.S. priorities in Syria from the narrow goal of fighting the Islamic State to expanding the mission to counter Iran and safeguard Syrian oil from Bashar al-Assad. U.S. interests are now linked to two twin aims: increasing humanitarian assistance and retaining a U.S. military presence to combat ISIS.¹⁹ Despite the Biden administration's wish to end "forever wars", U.S. troops remain in Syria. (Roughly 900 U.S. troops, including a number of Green Berets, will remain in Syria to continue supporting and advising the Syrian Democratic Forces fighting the Islamic State.) Even Trump, on 29 October 2019, stated that they decided to stay there as "we are keeping the oil", which has also the explanation of "securing the oil fields" against ISIS.²⁰

Another important dimension of the U.S. presence and influence in Syria is the major assistance provided to Syria. The United States is the largest single donor to the humanitarian response in Syria, providing over

¹⁸ "Russia's War in Syria, Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned," FPRI, edited by Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller and Aaron Stein, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/russias-war-in-syria.pdf>.

¹⁹ Aaron Stein, "Assessing the Biden Administration's Interim Syria Strategy," FPRI, 15 June 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/06/assessing-the-biden-administrations-interim-syria-strategy/>.

²⁰ Conor Finnegan, "'We're keeping the oil' in Syria, Trump says, but it's considered a war crime: The Pentagon said the U.S. would use force to protect troops securing the oil," ABC News, 29 October 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/keeping-oil-syria-trump-considered-war-crime/story?id=66589757>.

US\$13 billion in humanitarian assistance for more than 13.4 million vulnerable individuals inside Syria and over 5.6 million displaced persons in the region (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt) since the start of the crisis. This also includes US\$141 million in support of the COVID-19 pandemic response in Syria and the region.

Moreover, from 2012 to 2018 the United States provided different types of non-humanitarian assistance to bolster the Syrian Opposition (Free Syrian Army and Free Syrian Policy) in the northwestern, northeastern and southwestern areas.²¹ (The southwest fell under the control of the GoS in July 2018.) In northeast Syria, the United States is working with its partners in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to support the enduring defeat of ISIS through stabilization efforts in liberated areas. To date, the United States has been the largest provider of stabilization assistance in northeast Syria, providing over US\$350 million in funding since late-2016 for stabilization and early recovery programs.

Humanitarian crisis as a possible emerging framework for peace process diplomatic developments

The UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi has called Syria “the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time, a continuing cause for suffering”.²² Syria has endured the most catastrophic humanitarian toll since WWII.

With regard to the humanitarian crisis, priority is given to deliberations at the United Nations Security Council and the mandate governing cross-border aid delivery to opposition-controlled areas. The 2014

²¹ U.S. stabilization and early recovery efforts have focused on various types of restoring essential programs like water and electricity; supporting local governance and civil society to meet citizens’ needs; improving and supporting the education sector to help children return to school and provide vocational training; supporting independent media to provide locally-relevant and accurate information to citizens; removing the explosive remnants of war; generating economic activity; providing support and training for community security providers; supporting transitional justice and accountability; reconciliation and reintegration efforts at the community level; building local capacity to support longer-term sustainability, etc.

²² “Syria Refugee Crisis,” UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/syria/>.

agreement allowed for four crossings, but that number has decreased to one, owing to Russian and Chinese opposition.²³ The mandate for the final crossing point expires on 10 July 2020 and, without an extension, Syria's northwest risks getting cut off from the last crossing with Turkey.

The UN Security Council must reauthorize the UN's cross-border access at Bab al-Hawa and reinstate other UN border crossings before the current authorization expires in July. Bab al-Hawa is the sole remaining UN crossing and a vital lifeline for the UN to ensure it can deliver life-saving aid to Syrians. Each month, about 1,000 trucks carrying aid for millions of people in northwest Syria cross through Bab al-Hawa.

Unfortunately, controversies prevail even in the processes of providing and supplying humanitarian aid. The Russian position is that Damascus is the sovereign government of Syria and, therefore, the United Nations should only deliver assistance through the country's capital. The Biden administration has sought to take advantage of this relationship, particularly on the stabilization assistance issue and finding a compromise on aid deliveries between areas controlled by the Turks and the Assad regime. The basic formula, it appears, is to offer "more aid for continued access". This formula would increase total U.S. assistance to the UN, which would necessarily include more aid delivered via Damascus. This compromise would satisfy some of Russia's desires without compromising U.S. efforts in the northeast and northwest of the country.

There is no viable alternative to UN cross-border assistance to meet the scope and scale of aid required in Syria, where humanitarian needs are at the highest levels ever seen, stemming from a decade of conflict and compounded by COVID-19 and an escalating economic crisis. Interestingly, the humanitarian aid distribution process is extremely important and provides a possible framework for multilateral cooperation.

Conclusion

²³ "UN renews Syria aid via Turkey but one of two access points shut," Al Jazeera, 12 July 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/12/un-renews-syria-aid-via-turkey-but-one-of-two-access-points-shut>.

The Syrian conflict is an ongoing multi-sided armed conflict in Syria fought between, on one side, the Ba’athist Syrian Arab Republic led by President Bashar al-Assad, and its local and foreign allies, and, on the other side, various domestic and international forces opposing both the Syrian government and each other in varying combinations. The Syrian regime is fragile and incompetent, but it has the backing of Russia and Iran. It has also withstood the opposition-led rebellion for ten years. The regime does not control the entirety of the country, but the opposition is too weak to mount offensive operations to take back territory. Moreover, the country is faced with an economic catastrophe stemming from the collapse of the Lebanese banking sector and the impact of COVID-19, as a “multiplier of humanitarian needs”, in addition to the American sanctions, a severe drought that has reduced agricultural yields and the destruction of infrastructure.

The situation is evolving in a way that the lack of a powerful internal or local actor makes the regional or international powers involved dominant in terms of creating frameworks for the settlement of the conflicts in several districts of the country. Even though the conflict has entered a low-intensity phase of armed confrontation since 2020, we will assume that, taking into consideration both local situations and international actors’ changing aims and political priorities, the military confrontations in different parts of Syria will likely continue into the near future. Thus, considering the types of interests and challenges of the foreign actors (mostly Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran and Israel), the situation will find resolution according to one or another player’s interests and challenges. Interestingly, for the near future, the humanitarian crisis, aid distribution and the goal of the final defeat of ISIS serve as the main frameworks for multilateral cooperation.

The Syrian conflict zone is increasingly enmeshed in an expanding series of interlinked conflicts stretching from Libya to Nagorno-Karabakh, and even to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Reflective of wider regional and global disorder, these overlapping conflicts often reverberate across geographic zones, introducing potential “wild card” elements into the already complex Syrian conflict. For example, Russian and Turkish competition in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh has found its echo in the Syrian arena with its destabilizing effects and vice versa.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST OVER THE LIBYAN CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF ARMENIA

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The Arab Spring, a chain of anti-government protests and uprisings, had major implications throughout the Middle East region and it particularly affected oil-rich countries, including Libya. Libya is the largest holder of proven oil reserves in Africa (48 billion barrels). Before 2011, Libya's oil production averaged about 1.64 million barrels per day, about 96% of the government's revenue, which accounted for 60-65% of the country's GDP.² During the reign of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya's oil industry was run by the state-owned National Oil Corporation (NOC), which was responsible for implementing Exploration and Production Sharing Agreements (EPSA) with international oil companies (IOCs). Among these international oil companies were ENI (Italy), Total (France), Repsol (Spain), OMV (Austria) and Equinor (Norway).³ Colonel Muammar Qaddafi was not considered to be a reliable partner for the above-mentioned international oil companies. He used to demand tough contract terms, frequently raised fees and taxes and made other restrictions. This policy was in stark contrast with the interests of foreign actors, especially a number of Mediterranean European states, which led to their active participation in Libyan politics with the desire to gain a greater share of oil production and increase their influence in Africa.

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² "Oil Production, Libya, Annual," US Energy Information Administration, https://www.eia.gov/odata/qb.php?category=1039874&sdid=STEO.COPR_LY.A, last accessed 8 August 2021.

³ According to the International Energy Agency, over 85% of the country's oil and gas was exported to the European countries, while only 13% was exported to Asia. Libyan reserves of "sweet" crude oil can be used with very little refinement, making European and Asian markets heavily reliant on the high-quality crude coming from this country. This fact explains the involvement of foreign actors and their interest in the Libyan conflict. Italy in recent years has relied on Libya for more than 20% of its oil imports. And France, Switzerland, Ireland and Austria all depended on Libya for more than 15% of their imports before the fighting began.

The main struggle over Libya is for control over oil resources which are highly necessary for a number of external actors in order to ensure the dynamic development of their economies and strengthen their geopolitical position but which are also needed by regional actors to ensure their own security. From the point of view of global governance, each actor in this conflict is trying to implement its global agenda by having political control and a military presence in Libya.

The main aim of this study is to analyze the conflict of interests between local, regional and international actors over the Libyan issue, which, undoubtedly, affects the policy of these forces towards our region, and to understand how these developments in a country “far from” Armenia can influence the Republic of Armenia’s national security and foreign policies.

Internal actors

Since 2014, Libya’s political landscape has been divided between the two main parties to the conflict: the **Libyan National Army (LNA)**, based in Tobruk and the **Government of National Accord (GNA)** based in Tripoli. Each of these two conflicting parties has its own government, parliament, armed forces, central bank and national oil company.

Eastern Libya is under the control of the Libyan National Army (Arab Libyan Armed Forces) and the other groups allied with it. The LNA, led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, controls the oil crescent areas on the Mediterranean coast and the largest share of the oilfields (Amal, Sharara, Farigh, Zelten, Sarir, Messla and Nafoora), the production share of which is estimated at 900,000 barrels per day. Five (Sidra, Ras Lanuf, Zueitina, Brega, Harika) of Libya’s six major oil ports are also under the control of the Libyan National Army.

The forces of the Government of National Accord, led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, control western Libya, which is not rich in oilfields but contains the ports of Misrata, Zliten, Tripoli and Zawiya, in addition to a number of refineries that depend on the flow of oil from fields in the west.⁴ The

⁴ Libya Political Agreement, Skhirat, 17 December 2015, <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/Libyan%20Political%20Agreement%20-%20ENG%20.pdf>, last accessed 2 June 2020.

Government of National Accord in Tripoli and the Presidential Council were formed under the terms of the Libyan Political Agreement signed on 17 December 2015 in Skhirat, Morocco. Under the terms of this agreement, the functions of the country's legislature were to be performed by the House of Representatives, which was elected in 2014. The House of Representatives in Tobruk led by Aguilah Saleh, however, supports the Libyan National Army, which controls the eastern part of the country.

Another important internal actor in the Libyan conflict is the **National Oil Corporation**. Libya's oil extraction and export processes are under the supervision of this organization, which was established in 1970 to replace the general Libyan Petroleum Corporation (1968). After the nationalization of foreign oil companies in Libya in 1973, Libya's oil production fell sharply from an unprecedented level of three million barrels per day in 1970 to about one million barrels per day in the 1980s. Libya's relatively stable period of hydrocarbon production and export started only in the 2000s, after UN, U.S. and EU sanctions on Libya were lifted and investments by foreign companies increased. Among these investment projects are the implementation of the West Libya Gas Project and the construction of the 520 km Green Stream gas pipeline from Mellitah to Gela in Sicily, operated by a joint venture between Eni and the NOC. Libya's gas production more than doubled during the 2000s, from an average of 6.0 bcm in 2000–2004 to 13.6 bcm in 2005–2010.⁵

The political and security instability in Libya since 2011 has caused great obstacles for the normal operation of this organization. In January 2012, production was mostly restored after a temporary halt in the oil industry due to the armed conflict in Libya. However, this was a short-lived restoration because of the subsequent reactivation of the struggle between armed groups and violence and insecurity in the country, which also resulted in the targeting of oil production terminals.

⁵ "Oil and Gas in a New Libyan Era: Conflict and Continuity," The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, February 2019, <https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Oil-and-Gas-in-a-New-Libyan-Era-Conflict-and-Continuity-MEP-22.pdf>, last accessed 4 July 2020.

The Libyan conflict was also accompanied by the activation of the Islamic factor though it did not gain as much momentum here as in Syria and Iraq. Among the Islamic extremist groups operating in the country are the Islamic State, Ansar al-Sharia and the Shura Council of the Benghazi Revolutionaries.

External actors

The foreign actors involved in the Libyan conflict are pursuing their specific interests in the country in the economic, political, military, security, ideological and other dimensions. After the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi by NATO intervention in 2011, foreign actors quickly became more involved in Libyan developments, providing financial, military and political assistance to local players. However, this does not mean that foreign actors have gained full political control over the actions of local players.

European countries

For the EU's Mediterranean member-states, Libya is a country within a region of vital interest to them. Libya is strategically important for European security, especially for the mitigation of migration flows and crises and for providing stability to the entire Mediterranean Sea. Control over Libya means re-controlling and addressing potential threats and challenges to Southern Europe.

The EU member states have conflicting interests towards Libya and these interests are mainly conditioned by the need to secure their oil investments in the country. The Italian ENI (considered to be the biggest foreign company in Libya), the French Total and the German Wintershall have been operating in the country since the 1950s. As for the other company, Spain's Repsol, its first exploration and production activities in Libya date back to the early 1970s. The above-mentioned companies have continued to build their presence in Libya despite the tense political situation.⁶

⁶ In October 2018, ENI signed a letter of intent (LOI) with the Libyan National Oil Corporation and BP, which set in motion the process of assigning a 42.5% interest to ENI and BP's EPSA operatorship in Libya, with the aim of re-launching exploration and development

Italy has played a key role in Libya both before 2011 and throughout the Libyan crisis thanks to its huge interests in the country and its dependence on Libyan oil and gas resources, as well as due to migration and security issues. The main representative of the Italian capital in Libya is ENI, which is the leading foreign energy operator in Libya and responsible for 45% of Libyan oil and gas production. Although ENI is considered a private company, about one third of ENI's shares (30.33%) is under the control of Italy's Treasury Department. Thus, it is clear the activities of this company in Libya reflect the geopolitical needs of Italy. The main investments of ENI in Libya are concentrated in the western Tripolitania region (ENI being a 50% shareholder in the Western Libya Gas Project), and the country has naturally been supporting the western authorities of Libya although since 2020 it has also pursued a policy of openness to all conflicting parties.

Italy and France are pursuing a policy of counterbalancing each other's influence, which is manifested by their support to the different conflicting parties in Libya. France has huge investments in North Africa and its role in Libya is also outlined in the need to secure its capital. The competition between Italy and France over expanding their influence in North Africa dates back to the nineteenth century. Nowadays, the French Total and Italian ENI see each other as a major threat to their respective operations in Libya's oil industry. Unlike Italy, France provided military support to the country's eastern authorities during the Libyan crisis, believing that they would better resist armed groups and terrorists, thus securing French interests.

The other European state involved in the Libyan conflict, Germany, conducts a more neutral policy towards the conflicting parties in the country.

activities and promoting favorable conditions for investment in Libya. In 2019, Total and the National Oil Corporation (NOC), with the agreement of the Libyan government, signed an agreement to implement Total's participation in the Waha concessions, located in the Sirte Basin in Libya. See "Eni, BP and NOC sign deal to resume Libyan exploration," Eni, 8 October 2018, <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/media/press-release/2018/10/eni-bp-and-noc-sign-deal-to-resume-libyan-exploration.html>, last accessed 27 July 2022 and "Libya: Agreement Between NOC and Total Endorsing the Group's Entry into the Waha Concessions," TotalEnergies, 12 October 2019, <https://totalenergies.com/media/news/press-releases/libya-agreement-between-noc-and-total-endorsing-groups-entry-waha-concessions>, last accessed 6 April 2021.

For its part, Germany has an obvious economic interest in ensuring stability in the country and protecting its ports. The German company Wintershall has an investment of approximately US\$2 billion in exploration and production in Libya. The role of Germany as a mediator for the peaceful resolution of the conflict was manifested in the initiation of the Berlin process, which led to the organization of the first Berlin Conference on Libya in January 2020 and the second in June 2021. This process led to some positive yet fragile changes in the country, as a new interim unity government was elected.

The policy of European countries towards Libya in general should be considered within the context of competition for influence in North Africa and can be characterized by the lack of a common agenda, which has allowed other international actors to become more actively involved in this conflict.

The United States

The United States played an important role in NATO's intervention in Libya, which supported anti-Gaddafi rebels. Soon after the attack on the U.S. liaison office in Benghazi, the U.S. mission in Libya relocated to Tunis. Since then, the United States has taken a relatively passive role in Libya and has not invested sufficiently in post-conflict stabilization. Even if the United States' diplomatic engagement with Libya's major political players continued, during the subsequent years of the ongoing Libyan conflict, U.S. policy towards Libya was mainly anchored on counter-terrorism actions. This policy was especially noticeable during the Trump presidency, as Trump did not signal any willingness to be engaged in the Libyan conflict. Due to American inactivity in Libya and the lack of any common EU policy towards Libya, other actors, including Russia and Turkey, have pursued their interests in the country.

Russia and Turkey as the major external forces in Libya: cooperation or competition?

Turkey and Russia are now the most highly interested and involved external actors in the Libyan conflict. The two countries have experience with intervening in regional conflicts and cooperating with each other in the context of such intervention, as we have seen in Syria followed by Libya and,

finally, Artsakh. The dynamics of the relations of the two countries have gradually changed within the context of the above-mentioned conflicts.

Turkey and Russia pursue different policies towards the Middle East region, including Libya, based on their historical backgrounds and national interests and priorities. Both countries consider the Libyan crisis, on a larger scale, as part of geopolitical rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey

Turkey has deep-rooted relations with Libya. Until 1912, Libya was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, Turkey still considers Libya a country within its sphere of influence. Turkey's motivation to intervene in the Libyan conflict can be represented by its interest in three dimensions: economic pretensions, geopolitical interests and ideological ambitions. Turkey, being highly dependent on energy imports, aims to become the region's main energy trading hub, using its market and geostrategic position to increase its presence in the Mediterranean basin. These drivers forced Turkey, which has been present in Libya from the very beginning of the crisis, to show more active participation, especially over the last two years. Turkey's ambitions include becoming a regional energy trade center, diversifying supplies, and gradually achieving more or less full control over regional hydrocarbons infrastructure. It should be noted that a number of pipelines transporting oil and gas to European markets pass through Turkey, which plays an important role in energy relations between Russia, Europe and the Middle East.

The close trade and economic relations between Turkey and Libya were established in the 1970s and 1980s through numerous joint agreements as a result of which Turkey gained a significant stake in Libya's construction industry. According to the data from 1972-2010, 19% of Turkish contractors' businesses were concentrated in Libya. According to the Turkish minister of commerce in 2011, Zafer Çağlayan, after the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, Turkish companies in Libya had projects worth about US\$15.3 billion. (Two hundred Turkish firms were carrying out more than 214 projects at over one hundred construction sites.)

Those businesses indeed suffered huge losses due to the political crisis in Libya. Both Turkey and Libya are now interested in the speedy resumption

of their joint projects. In order to strengthen bilateral relations and create sufficient opportunities for Turkish companies to complete their half-finished projects, the Turkish-Libyan Joint Working Group organized a meeting on 31 January 2019 in Libya that was attended by Turkey's minister of commerce and the LNA's minister of planning. Participation in post-crisis reconstruction work in Libya is also considered by Turkey as a good business opportunity for its construction companies.

During the Libyan crisis, Turkey paid special attention to ensuring the smooth operation of its diplomatic missions in the country. Turkey welcomed the signing of the Libya Political Agreement on 17 December 2015, which was also attended by Turkish Foreign Minister M. Çavuşoğlu. In the years following the signing of the agreement, Turkey supported the government of the Libyan National Accord, which was reinforced by regular meetings of high-ranking Turkish officials and Fayed Saraj, the president of the Libyan Presidential Council.

Turkey has signed two important documents with Libya's western authorities over the last two years. On 27 November 2019, Turkey signed a maritime agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord delimitating maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean. Libya's internationally recognized government in Tripoli had previously declined to consider this document several times. This memorandum, which makes Libya and Turkey neighbors as far as their coastal zones and establishes the borders of the continental shelf and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ), was sharply criticized by Egypt, Greece and Southern Cyprus. The issue was later discussed at a NATO meeting in London with the participation of the representatives of France, Germany and the United Kingdom.⁷ Turkey is

⁷ The Greek side claims that the memorandum violates the UN law on the sea, as Libya and Turkey do not have a sea zone and there are no maritime borders between the two countries. The borders set out in the new agreement intersect in the continental shelf of the southern Mediterranean, particularly in the islands of Crete, while the Turkish authorities do not accept the declaration of the exclusive economic zone of Crete. One of the important points in the agreement, however, is that "In case there are natural resources extending from the EEZ of one party to the EEZ of the other, the two Parties could cooperate in order to reach an agreement on the modalities of the exploitation of such resources." See: "Memorandum of Understanding Between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of National Accord-State of Libya On Delimitation of the Marine Jurisdiction Areas in the

deeply concerned about the cooperation of a number of actors in the Eastern Mediterranean, including Greece, Egypt, Israel and Cyprus, in the energy and security spheres and is trying to take more proactive steps in Libya to thwart their plans. The establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in 2020, from which Turkey was excluded, is an example of successful cooperation between these countries.

Another important document is the military and security agreement on the basis of which the Turkish Parliament approved a one-year military intervention in Libya on 2 January 2020 and officially deployed its troops in the country. With the active participation of Turkish forces, the Libyan Government of National Accord was able to push the Libyan National Army back from the outskirts of Tripoli. Thousands of Syrian mercenaries who were previously relocated by Turkey remain in Libya today and have become an instrument of Turkey's foreign policy goals. The Turkish military presence in Libya is a mirror image of the Russian presence in Syria, as both countries justify their presence through being invited by the legitimate government.

In Libya, we are also witnessing the rivalry of two major Sunni civilization programs in the religious, political and ideological spheres: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis. The biggest regional supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood is Turkey, with which the Muslim Brotherhood has been cooperating since the end of Ataturk's rule, after the Democratic Party came to power. In 1969, Nejmeddin Erbakan founded the Turkish branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. This fast-growing network has spread to Sudan, Libya and elsewhere.

Russia

Russia-Libya relations are inherited from USSR-Libya relations. The Soviet Union was trying to expand its presence in Libya in order to improve its geostrategic positioning and spread its political influence in the

Mediterranean," signed 27 November 2019, United Nations, [https://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/TREATIES/Turkey_11122019_\(HC\)_MoU_Libya-Delimitation-areas-Mediterranean.pdf](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/TREATIES/Turkey_11122019_(HC)_MoU_Libya-Delimitation-areas-Mediterranean.pdf), last accessed 14 March 2021.

Mediterranean basin. USSR-Libya economic relations strengthened after Gaddafi came to power, particularly during the second half of the 1970s. The bilateral relations were not limited to trade-economic ties but also had a certain nature of political-military cooperation with the purchase of Soviet arms and ammunition by the Libyan side. Libya acquired heavy industrial products from the USSR, and a number of Soviet engineers and instructors worked under bilateral agreements to build missile bases in Libya.⁸

The USSR was trying to confront the Western powers with its presence in the Mediterranean and take part in the political issues of North Africa and the Middle East. Soviet naval diplomacy sought to gain access to Libyan port facilities, which would not only enable the country to strengthen its position in the region but also to control the navies of other countries, especially the United States. During Vladimir Putin's visit to Libya in 2008, Libya's debt of about US\$5 billion to the USSR was canceled. The two countries signed contracts worth US\$10 billion including arms sales and the construction of a 550 km railway between Sirte and Benghazi.

"Strengthening Russia's position as one of the most influential centers of the modern world" is listed in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept (2016) between the country's security interests and strategic priorities. To this end, Russia finds it also necessary to strengthen its presence in the areas of the Three Seas region, considering NATO's numerous anchors in the same region. Today, the only Russian military base in the Mediterranean is located in Syria, and Russia does not have much leverage over the Mediterranean basin states. The Libyan crisis has allowed Russia to once again remind the world of its role as a center of influence in the modern world and to promote its own visions of international peace, security and stability as enshrined in the country's foreign policy concept.

Russia has been working with all of the political forces in Libya to help them come to an agreement. Thus, Russia maintained relations with the internationally recognized Tripoli government led by Fayeze al-Saraj while actually supporting Haftar and being one of LNA's committed allies. Russia

⁸ Ronald Bruce St John, "The Soviet Penetration of Libya," Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The World Today* 38, no. 4 (April 1982):136-137, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40395373>, last accessed 6 February 2021.

attaches great importance to the House of Representatives and its speaker, Aquila Saleh, as it is considered to be a legitimate body elected in Libya.

Russia has been repeatedly accused of having not only a geopolitical but also a military presence in Libya, particularly of deploying foreign mercenaries in the country. In the UN Libya Sanctions Committee report released in May 2020, the United Nations first expressed concern over the presence of 1,200 Wagner Group militants in Libya (since 2018). At the beginning of the year, the Russian president stated at a joint press conference with Angela Merkel that “if there are Russian citizens in Libya, they do not represent the interests of the Russian state and they do not receive funding from Russia.” For a number of local and regional actors, the Russian military involvement is important in Libya as a countervailing force to Turkey’s increasing military role in the country.

Another important issue in Libya is the migration flows. Libya, particularly its Fezzan region, is a hub for Libyan as well as sub-Saharan African migrants to cross the Central Mediterranean into Europe. Most of the illegal immigrants to Libya are from Niger and Chad but some are from Algeria, in total numbering about 150,000 each year. By strengthening its position as a guarantor of peace in Libya, Russia will have some leverage over the flow of migrants and it can use this situation in its relations with EU countries. The issue of migrants can also become a trump card in the hands of Turkey, experience in which the latter has already gained by raising the issue of immigrants from Syria from time to time.

Russia is cooperating in Libya with Algeria, which of the regional Arab states has a relatively large Russian influence, and Egypt, which has entered a new phase of relations since 2014. This policy of Russia suggests that the latter has assumed the most advantageous position—the guarantor of security in the Libyan conflict and the mediator of the conflict settlement.

As a part of Russia’s mediation mission, Russian President Vladimir Putin, along with the Turkish President Recep Erdoğan, called for a ceasefire in Libya in January 2020. But their attempts to broker a peace process in the country failed because Khalifa Haftar refused to sign the agreement.

Thus, the developments in Syria, Libya and Artsakh have brought Russia-Turkey cooperation closer and more interconnected in different

dimensions. In particular, Turkey is purchasing S400 missile systems from Russia and a deal has been signed for a natural gas pipeline project (TurkStream) to export gas from Russia to Europe via Turkey. However, it should be remembered that, in all regional conflicts, Russia and Turkey are on different sides of the table. At present, the relations between the two countries are somewhat balanced due to their interdependencies. However, this is gradually changing; for example, in the energy field, Turkey imported more than 50% of its natural gas from Russia in 2017 but only 33% in 2020.

Russia's interest in the region can also be explained by its budgetary needs. The relatively cheap Libyan gas could also be an alternative for the European market, which relies mainly on Russian gas, and that, of course, would not be in Russia's economic interests. By establishing control over the Libyan oil and gas reserves, Russia can play a major role in dictating the pricing policy and organization of this market in the future.

Arab countries

Like the EU countries, the Arab countries do not have a common agenda for resolving the Libyan conflict either. Among the Arab countries, the Libyan crisis has mostly affected Libya's neighbors—Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia. Egypt has tried to position itself as a regional power broker considering the importance of a secure and economically stable Libya for the country. The two countries share over seven hundred miles of desert border where different tribes are engaged in smuggling activities that present a big security challenge to Egypt. Egypt has mainly supported Haftar and provided military and logistical support to him since 2014, believing that this could help to provide border security and prevent weapons smuggling without direct intervention in Libya.

Egypt's main concerns here are to secure its western borders, to prevent the coming to power of Islamic forces in the country and to stop Turkey from strengthening its position in North Africa with its presence in Libya. To this end, Egypt is cooperating with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

In the last decade, the Gulf countries, especially the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have become more involved in international affairs and regional developments, which has also been evident in Libya. Initially

providing political support for the international intervention in Libya, these forces later provided operational, financial and material assistance to Libya's conflicting parties. Qatar is more inclined to defend the country's western authorities, thus falling into the same camp with Turkey, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with their anti-Muslim Brotherhood agenda, support the eastern authorities of the country and cooperate with Egypt. Despite being in different camps, all the Gulf countries are highly interested in stabilizing Libya in order to continue their development programs in the country.

The Libyan crisis and Armenia

Due to the change of the meaning of the term "region" and considering that every small region is now connected with almost the whole world, we can state that even countries located relatively far from Libya also bear the effects of the developments there. There have been no special relations between Armenia and Libya since the establishment of diplomatic relations. Despite there being no Armenian presence in Libya, no Armenian organizations there and no partners with a pro-Armenian position, in December 2019 Libya's eastern interim government decided to declare April 24th as a National Day of Remembrance for the Armenian Genocide. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of this government issued a statement on 24 April 2020 which called on countries around the world to recognize and remember this crime. The statement targeted Turkey and its blatant illegal interference in the internal affairs of different countries. It is clear that the Armenian Genocide in this case was a tool in the hands of the Libyan interim government used to impose pressure on Turkey. From the very beginning of the conflict, the Armenian side did not comment on the developments in Libya at the level of the Foreign Ministry. The first remark on the issue was on 8 June 2020, when the Armenian Foreign Ministry Spokesman welcomed the initiative of the Arab Republic of Egypt to declare a ceasefire and start a political dialogue between the conflicting parties. This statement was a clear indication that Armenia is interested in seeing regional cooperation, peaceful coexistence and stability.

The deployment of mercenaries and terrorists by Turkey to Nagorno-Karabakh during the 2020 Artsakh War once again proved that Armenia

could not stay out of the wider processes in the Three Seas region. The agreements and competitive cooperation between Russia and Turkey in the context of regional conflicts might also be accompanied by mutual concessions in some areas, which could directly affect our security issues.

Libya's fragile peace: the mines under the new agreement

After nearly ten years of struggle, on 15 March 2021, Libya's conflicting parties formed a unified interim government headed by Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dabaiba. This followed the signing of a ceasefire agreement between the warring parties on 20 October 2020. Later, in February 2021, the UN-backed Libyan Political Dialogue Forum nominated Abdulhamid Dabaiba as a Prime Minister and Mohamed Mnefi to head the Presidential Council. Despite the formation of the National Unity Government, the country remains split not only geographically but also politically. The new government should organize elections by the end of 2021 and reunify the country's different state institutions, including the armed forces and Central Bank.

Organizing all this, in fact, requires great efforts if we take into account that even the scope of the elections is unknown, that is to say, whether the country will choose the parliamentary or presidential elections. Another important problem is the one related to the position of supreme commander of the armed forces. According to the UN-backed roadmap, a three-person Presidential Council is considered to be the "commander" of the armed forces, yet this is not ratified by the parliament, which means that the Libyan authorities now need to define the legal ground for implementation of the ceasefire agreement. This must be done as soon as possible to ensure the country's peaceful transition; otherwise, the situation on the ground could change under the influence of external actors and this could lead to the resumption of hostilities.

- The Libyan crisis can be described as a struggle between various internal and external actors for control over the country's main oil and gas resources. Here, we witness the clash of interests of local, regional and international actors in several dimensions: ideological, economic,

geopolitical and military. The rivalry between the two Sunni models, the Salafi Movement and Muslim Brotherhood, and the civilization programs enshrined in them, is also evident in the Libyan conflict.

- Since 2011, the Libyan conflict has been accompanied by a political, security and economic crisis, as a result of which both ordinary citizens suffer and state institutions gradually weaken and cease to function effectively.

- The key to resolving the Libyan conflict is understandably not in the hands of one force. Thus, the states involved here find difficulties in reaching a mutually beneficial agreement.

- The ceasefire in Libya and the formation of an interim government of national unity does not mean a complete transition to peace in the country, considering the fact that foreign mercenaries remain there and the prospect of new elections remains bleak.

- In the context of regional conflicts, including the Libyan crisis, Turkish-Russian relations can be described through the logic of one of the laws of dialectics—unity and the struggle of opposites.

- For Russia, participation in the Libyan conflict is an opportunity to expand its influence in the Mediterranean and to counterbalance the influence of the West.

- Turkey-Russia relations are unlikely to deteriorate in Libya, considering their interconnected/interdependent levers in other regional issues.

- Armenia cannot stay out of the regional developments. Thus, it must be vigilant and actively respond to the realignment of the forces in the region in order to safeguard its vital interests.

GLOBAL PROJECTS' COMPETITION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

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The purpose of this research is to examine the competition of global projects in the Mediterranean Sea in the context of the “Three Seas System” theory² by examining the competitive situation around key Mediterranean ports.

In terms of maritime communication in the Three Seas System, the main load falls on the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea with its Bab El-Mandeb Strait³.

In this study, it is only the deepwater ports with an annual handling capacity of 1 million TEU and over that are the object of investigation. The impact of lower-capacity deep-water ports on Mediterranean trade is not critical. Thus, there are several ports which can be singled out from the ports of the Mediterranean Sea that meet this criterion.

The Western European Mediterranean basin mainly includes the Spanish, French and Maltese shores of the Mediterranean as well as the Italian shore along the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Strait of Sicily. The Western Mediterranean washes the coasts of Morocco and Algeria from the south.

The Western Mediterranean accounts for 40% of the entire Mediterranean trade, approximately 14 million TEU. Therefore, the volume of goods circulation in the entire Mediterranean is approximately 35 million TEU⁴.

Let us consider the Western Mediterranean. French and Spanish ports share the main volume of goods turnover in this sector. It is interesting to observe the geographical positions and service areas of these ports as well as to understand their management frameworks.

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² See: David Hovhannisyan, Regional tendencies in the context of “Three Seas theory” // *Analytical Bulletin*, Vol. 1 No. 9 (2016), pp. 8-36.

³ About Bab El-Mandeb Strait in the “Three Seas System” theory see: Hayk Kocharyan, The importance of Bab-El-Mandeb in the context of “three sea system” // *Analytical Bulletin*, Vol. 1 No. 9 (2016), pp. 36-58.

⁴ General introduction to the Western Mediterranean Sea basin, European MSP Platform, <https://maritime-spatial-planning.ec.europa.eu/sea-basins/west-mediterranean> (accessed 14.12.2021).

The largest French port in the Mediterranean is the port of Marseille, which is significant in a number of ways and serves both passenger and cargo transportation. The port of Marseille serves the western and northern directions of the Mediterranean and provides an annual volume of cargo transportation of 1.4 million TEU. The port of Marseille is fully managed by the French shipping giant CMA CGM Group⁵.

There are three deepwater Spanish ports in the Western Mediterranean: the ports of Valencia, Algeciras and Barcelona.

The largest port in the western half of the Mediterranean Sea is the port of Algeciras with its cargo terminals. This port, equipped with modern infrastructure for cargo transportation, is located right next to the Strait of Gibraltar and is the first major port when entering from the west. The annual capacity of Algeciras is approximately 5.1 million TEU (2019). The French cargo transportation giant CMA CGM Group has become the owner of 51% of “Total Terminal International Algeciras”, one of the main cargo transportation terminals of Algeciras⁶.

The advantage of the port of Algeciras is that it is used for both north-south and east-west sea freight routes, connecting Asia, America and Africa to Europe.

Unlike the port of Algeciras, the other large Spanish port, the port of Valencia, is an important hub for the “Mediterranean Corridors”, which feed the “Trans-European Transport Network”. The development of road and railway infrastructure increases the importance of the port of Valencia for the European cargo supply system. In reality, the port of Valencia consists of the ports of Valencia itself and the ports of Sagunto and Gandia, all of which are controlled and managed by the Spanish state. The annual cargo transportation of these ports is about 5.44 million TEU⁷.

The next Spanish port significant for Mediterranean trade in terms of cargo volume is the port of Barcelona, which has an annual cargo volume of 3.32 million TEU. The port of Barcelona is distinguished by its technological

⁵ The port of Marseille Fos, <https://www.marseille-port.fr/en?PAGEID=-90000119> (accessed 22.12.2021).

⁶ For details see the official web page of TTI ALGECIRAS, <http://www.tti.algeciras.com/en/the-company/> (accessed 23.12.2021).

⁷ Statistical Report, Port Authority of Valencia, December 2021, <https://www.valenciaport.com/wp-content/uploads/2112-Statistical-Report-December-2021.pdf> (accessed 23.12.2021).

development and specialized terminals. This port is also controlled and managed by the Spanish state through the state agency “Puertos del Estado”.

In the context of the Mediterranean trade infrastructure, the Malta Freeport and Valletta ports occupy a unique place through which up to 4 million TEU pass annually. The uniqueness of Malta lies in the fact that it is an intermediate stop in the Mediterranean trade system. With natural deepwater ports, Malta is able to accommodate the industry’s giant bulk carriers, providing a downstream supply chain with smaller tonnage bulk carriers.

The companies involved in the management of Maltese ports are mainly established with the involvement of private capital, and, in some cases, the involvement of large European cargo carriers can be seen.

Due to their geographical location, Italian ports are a link between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean. The Italian ports of the Western Mediterranean—Genoa, Vado Ligure, Savona and Pra—are managed by the Western Ligurian Sea Port Authority (WLSPA). Those of the Eastern Mediterranean, of which the main one is the port of Trieste, are managed by the Eastern Adriatic Sea Port Authority. In addition to the above-mentioned ports, other Italian sea hubs, such as the ports of Venice, Taranto, Gioia Tauro, Naples, Salerno and Ravenna, are also notable for their importance. The ports of Venice and Gioia Tauro can be distinguished from the latter. The terminals of the port of Venice are operated by the French shipping company CMA-CGM, and the second port of Gioia Tauro in Italy is operated by the Swiss Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), a private company owned by the Italian Aponte family.

The geographical location of Italian ports is of great interest to China in terms of its “One Belt, One Road” initiative, as evidenced by the “Memorandum of Understanding” signed between China and Italy in March 2019. It is noteworthy that the signing was followed by the signing of a number of agreements, including a “memorandum of agreement” between the ports of Genoa and Trieste and the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), which is controlled by the Chinese state⁸. The separation of these two ports shows the key points in the Western and Eastern Mediterranean that China is considering for the implementation of its global project.

⁸ See: Francesca Ghiretti, *The Belt and Road Initiative in Italy: The Ports of Genoa and Trieste* // *IAI PAPERS 21* // 17 - APRIL 2021.

The Sino-Italian memoranda caused some tension among the other European Union member states and the United States. One of the main reasons for the tension was the fact that by that time China had also managed to establish control over the largest port in the Mediterranean, the Greek port of Piraeus. In fairness, it should be noted that, despite many attempts, relations did not go any further in the period after the signing of the memoranda. The resistance of the European Union legislative framework, including the Italian legislation regulating the sector, and the 2020 US sanctions against the China Communications Construction Company should be highlighted among the main hindering reasons.

It should be noted that, despite resistance, the Italian port infrastructure did not escape Chinese capital. In particular, the Chinese COSCO and Qingdao Port Group have a 49.9% share in the new terminal of the port of Vado Ligure. In Savona, Chinese capital controls a crane manufacturing plant that manufactures and maintains cranes for port terminals. China is also participating in the Trihub project, which is intended to refurbish and modernize railway stations around the port of Trieste⁹.

In order to work in the European market in general, the Chinese company COSCO (China Ocean Shipping Company) founded the European company Diamond Line GmbH, whose headquarters are in Hamburg, Germany. Germany, Italy and Turkey are the target countries for this company.

Chinese companies compete with European, particularly French and German companies in the Italian port infrastructure market. For example, Hamburger Hafen und Logistik AG (HHLA) acquired the right to build the Logistic Intermodal Platform of the port of Trieste and the corresponding leasing management, which bought 50.01% of the aforementioned platform, leaving the Chinese companies out of the competition.

The picture changes if we move to the large ports of the Eastern Mediterranean, the largest and the leader in terms of cargo transportation being the Greek port of Piraeus. In addition to Greek ports, Turkish, Israeli, Syrian, Egyptian, Tunisian and Libyan ports are involved in the trade of the Eastern Mediterranean.

As we have mentioned above, the important nodal port of the Eastern Mediterranean is the Greek port of Piraeus, which provides an annual

⁹ Ibid.

turnover of 5.65 million TEU, connecting the European continent with the Asian one. As of 2020, 67% of the shares of Piraeus port are owned by the Chinese company COSCO¹⁰. China considers the port of Piraeus to be the most important hub in the context of the maritime component of its “One Belt, One Road” project and is investing heavily in expanding the port’s capacity, as well as trying to keep the so-called “17+1” format, China’s cooperation with 17 Central and Eastern European countries¹¹.

In addition to the advantage of the geographical location, the port of Piraeus is the only one in the Eastern Mediterranean that has the appropriate infrastructure to handle transshipment cargo and also has Free Zone type II status, when control is carried out by warehouse customs processes.

The busiest Turkish port in the Eastern Mediterranean is the international port of Mersin, which is the leader among all Turkish ports and has an annual volume of 1.8 million TEU. This port serves not only the Turkish market but is also a transit route for the European market. 51% of the shares of the port are controlled by the leading Singapore company PSA International Pte Ltd.

After the explosion of the port of Beirut, the active deepwater ports on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea which continue to be part of the international trade network are the Israeli ports of Haifa and Ashdod. Haifa is the largest of these ports and provides an annual turnover of about 1.3 million TEU. In order to increase the turnover of its ports, the Israeli entity tried to attract additional capital and build new terminal infrastructure next to the aforementioned ports under state control.

China showed great interest in this Israeli initiative, which through the state-owned Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG) will invest about US\$1 billion to build the new port of Haifa. After construction, SIPG will manage the port until 2046¹².

¹⁰ Shin Watanabe, China's COSCO raises stake in top Greek port Piraeus to 67%, October 26, 2021, shorturl.at/bipz8 (accessed 23.12.2021).

¹¹ Andreea Brinză, The “17 +1” Mechanism: Caught Between China and the United States // *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (2019), pp. 213–231, DOI: 10.1142/S237774001950009X

¹² Wang Ying, SIPG automates Israel's port in Haifa, China Daily, 2021-09-04, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202109/04/WS6132c913a310efa1bd66d4df.html> (accessed 25.12.2021),

China also made an offer to invest in Ashdod port, but Israeli laws did not allow Chinese companies to participate in both tenders at the same time, as a result of which the Chinese side preferred to focus on Haifa port. As a corollary, the private port of Ashdod will be built by the private company of another giant of the sector, the Swiss Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC).

In contrast to the European and Near Eastern ports of the Mediterranean Sea, the Mediterranean ports of the African continent deal with relatively smaller volumes. An exception is the port of Port Said in Egypt. Its main cargo terminal, the Suez Canal Container Terminal (SCCT), is located at the beginning of the Suez Canal and is the main link between the Red and Mediterranean Seas. About 3.8 million TEU of cargo passes through the port's terminals annually. 55% of the shares of the Suez Canal Container Terminal belong to APM Terminals, a part of the MAERSK group, which also carries out the management. The second largest share of SCCT, 20%, is owned by the Chinese company COSCO.

Among the 13 Algerian commercial ports on the African continent of the Mediterranean, Jijel deserves attention. Its infrastructure is undeveloped and not adapted for serving container ships. The port of Jijel can serve only break bulk vessels. However, it is a natural deepwater port that can accommodate ships with a draft of up to 18.2 meters. Considering the fierce competition in the Mediterranean, it is predictable that this port will become an object of interest for various superpowers. France, Italy and Turkey compete with each other in the Algerian market. Of the latter, about US\$35 billion have been invested in Algeria. It should not be excluded that in the near future, China may actively join the above-mentioned three competitors in the struggle for Algerian infrastructures.

Due to their strategic location, Tunisian ports stand out from the ports on the African coast of the Mediterranean—especially those located in the north of Tunisia, as they are mainly in the Mediterranean Sea.

The northernmost Tunisian deepwater port is the port of Bizerte, which has naturally deep water and a sheltered bay; and the nearest European coasts in Sardinia and Sicily are approximately 200-250 km away.

In addition to the above, Bizerte is also a land hub for the SEA-ME-WE-4 submarine telecommunications cable. The SEA-ME-WE-4 cable was commissioned back in 2005. The capacity of the SEA-ME-WE-4 cable is 2x64x10Gbps, and it connects Southeast Asia through the Indian

subcontinent and the Middle East to Europe (France). This cable, about 18,000 km long, has 17 land nodes and connects about 15 countries in one network. It can be said that control over the Bizerte land hub allows for control over the traffic entering and leaving Europe.

Based on the circumstances listed above, the issue of control over the port of Bizerte keeps French Bouygues, Vinci et Eiffage, Chinese Yuanda Commercial Financial Investment Group and American companies in hot competition. China, France and the USA are trying to establish control over the port of Bizerte, but the final result is not yet clear. At the time of the study, negotiations are still continuing, and it is not clear which of the parties will succeed. The problem is also complicated by the internal political crisis in Tunisia, but it is expected that the interests of two of the three players, the USA and France, coincide in terms of excluding the Chinese from a presence near their (NATO) shores.¹³

In addition to its commercial importance, the port of Bizerte also has a military use, and a part of Bizerte Bay is used as a military anchorage. Located nearby is also the Tunisian Air Force's Sidi Ahmed Air Base, which, according to unofficial information, is used by AFRICOM for the operation of unmanned aerial vehicles.

Summarizing the study of the situation around the Mediterranean ports, a number of important points can be highlighted.

- The Mediterranean Sea with its infrastructure is an area of sharp competition for both regional and extra-regional players. This struggle is found mainly in the competition between projects implemented by different centers in the Mediterranean. The struggle between the EU's European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the United States' "Greater Middle East" and the Chinese "One Belt, One Road" projects is shaped by the approaches of these forces to the infrastructures of the Mediterranean.

- It can be noted that the infrastructures of the Western Mediterranean are mainly controlled by the EU countries, particularly by France and Spain, but there is internal competition here as well. The French shipping giant

¹³ CI VIEW: Bizerte triggers new great game between the US, China and France, March 11, 2018, <http://capitolintelgroup.com/ci-view-bizerte-triggers-new-great-game-between-the-us-china-and-france/> (accessed 25.12.2021),

CMA CGM Group is trying to acquire controlling stakes in various European ports, a clear example of which is its management of shares in Spain's Algeciras. It should also be noted that France considers the western Mediterranean to be a vital area for it and that is why it is involved in the situation around Tunisian Bizerte; it should be expected that France will take serious steps to control the port of Bizerte. It is likewise noticeable that France is taking steps to spread its influence in the European ports of the Eastern Mediterranean as well, which is currently manifested by French companies' ownership of non-controlling shares in some ports.

- The Eastern Mediterranean remains an area of intense competition between China and the EU's main players, France and Germany. A Chinese state-owned company's takeover of a controlling stake in the Greek port of Piraeus and large-scale investment in building new terminals is further straining competition and concerns the United States, which is taking active steps to curb China's influence on NATO's intercontinental trade. Thanks to the joint efforts of the EU and the United States, the potential increase of the influence of Chinese companies in the Italian ports of Genoa and Trieste was suspended at this stage, as a result of which the German company gained an advantage in Trieste. It should be assumed that this is a temporary pause taken by the Chinese side in order to understand the actions of the new U.S. regime and to develop possible countermeasures.

- Despite the unsuccessful attempt to acquire Italian ports, it should be noted that China's influence in the Eastern Mediterranean is significant, as the main ports of Piraeus in Greece and Haifa in Israel are controlled and managed by the latter and it is the second-largest investor in the Suez terminals of Port Said, Egypt.

- In the near future, it is possible that the Mediterranean African ports will become objects of competition, especially considering the situation where a heated battle is already underway for the Tunisian port of Bizerte. It is likely that the next arena of struggle will be the Algerian Gijel. It should be noted that in the struggle for African ports in the Mediterranean, China may have the chance to bypass the main obstacle, which is EU regulatory laws reducing opportunities to acquire European ports in the Mediterranean.

THE ECHOES OF ARMENIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS IN GEORGIA

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Introduction

The contemporary Caucasus is characterized by relatively new conflicts as well as controversies inherited from the past. Georgia, twenty percent of which is occupied by neighboring Russia, is trying to build good-neighborly, in some cases strategic, cooperation with its other three neighbors.

Relationship with Turkey

Euro-Atlantic integration is a declared foreign policy priority of Georgia. Thus, its relationship with Turkey, which is a member state of NATO and at the same time a candidate for EU membership, is particularly important for Georgia. Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Georgia's independence on 16 December 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and diplomatic relations between the two countries were established on 21 May 1992.

The cooperation between Georgia and Turkey is of a strategic nature and is developing successfully in the political, security and defense spheres as well as in the trade-economic, cultural, humanitarian and energy fields. Turkey is the largest trading partner of Georgia with whom a free trade regime exists. The Turkish private sector is also one of the largest investors in the Georgian economy. Furthermore, citizens of both Georgia and Turkey enjoy a simplified travel regime between the two countries.

Turkey is a strong supporter of Georgia's territorial integrity. Among other things, this implies unwavering support for a non-recognition policy, both inside and outside the country (e.g., in the Middle East and within international institutions). Given the importance of this issue for Georgia, this appears to be a strong point in the bilateral relations of the two countries.

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Relationship with Armenia

Diplomatic relations between Georgia and the Republic of Armenia were established on 17 July 1992. Georgia and the Republic of Armenia have close friendly relations based on the principles of good neighborliness, cooperation and mutual respect, a tradition that goes back for over a millennium. There is a free trade agreement between the countries. Armenia is an important trade partner of Georgia. Cooperation in the field of tourism is also growing. Bilateral relations were reinforced by the Velvet Revolution that occurred in Armenia as, given the prospect of democratic developments in Armenia, it may give a strong synergistic impetus to cooperation between the two countries. It is strategically important for Georgia to have a European-style democracy in the neighborhood.

Armenian-Turkish relations through the prism of Georgia

The echo of the armed confrontation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border has reached Tbilisi. The clash, which happened a few dozen kilometers away from the Georgian border, rattles not only the stability of the two countries, but also, if there were to be any escalation of the conflict, could threaten to bring many serious consequences for Tbilisi too.

The risks are related to both internal (endogenous) factors such as relations with ethnic and religious minorities and external (exogenous) factors, including the engagement of at least two major regional players, Russia and Turkey, in the confrontation. So, in the event of any renewal of hostilities, the conflict would most likely have some kind of physical effect on the territory of Georgia. Any escalation of the conflict will ultimately call into question the credibility of the entire South Caucasus as an important transit area. As the stability of this zone thus plays a central role in the region's security, including its economic dimension, at the end of the day, Georgia has a strong interest in securing stability and the peaceful transformation of conflicts.

Improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations would ease tensions in the region, which in turn would open a window for extensive energy and transport transits as well as other transnational projects. The substantial involvement of Armenia in these projects would significantly improve its security environment.

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS. CONTINUITY AND EXISTING PROBLEMS

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History helps us to create a wider picture of the reality in which the South Caucasus exists now. That is why we are going to discover the influence of the Russian Imperial and Soviet eras on the states in the region and identify the causality of foreign policy relations between Russia and the South Caucasian states.²

The main question is why neither Russia nor any of the individual South Caucasian states succeeded in developing an effective strategy towards each other despite their shared borders in the Russia-Azerbaijan and Russia-Georgia cases and being a proclaimed strategic partner in the case of Armenia? How did the Soviet period influence the current state of relations between Russia and the South Caucasian states? Those are the issues analyzed in this paper.

International relations in the South Caucasus are convoluted because of their rich and complicated past, among other things. Over the centuries, interstate relations inside the region developed in unpredictable directions. Georgia was a real partner for Russia in the conquest of the Caucasus in the 19th century. Yet, since 1991, relations between Russia and Georgia have been tense at best. The proclaimed secular states of Azerbaijan, though mainly Shia, and Turkey, which is mostly Sunni, are now solid allies, whereas Armenia enjoys a relationship of trust with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Turkey, Iran, and Russia are still the main external players in the region though they have, to some extent, even become “domesticated”.

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² I mean three independent internationally recognized states when something else is not mentioned.

Except for a brief period of turmoil during the Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing Russian Civil War, the entire Caucasus remained within the Russian sphere of influence until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even now Russia continues to play a significant role in economy, energy and security policy in the South Caucasus.

The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union in the South Caucasus

In previous centuries, the South Caucasus was coveted by empires competing for control over it. The Ottoman, Persian and Russian Empires were the main actors in the region, which was one of the key communications bridges between Europe and Asia. The Russian Empire continued its expansion in the Caucasus in the 19th century. In 1801, almost two decades after the Treaty of Georgievsk, which established a Russian protectorate over Kartli-Kakheti (modern eastern Georgia), Georgia became a part of the Russian Empire. With the treaties of Gulistan in 1813 and Turkmanchay in 1828, some territories of modern Azerbaijan and parts of Armenia and Georgia were also included into the Russian Empire. The enlargement process was continued after the Russo-Turkish Wars in 1828-1829 and 1877-1878. Parallel to its expansion, as an empire, Russia was working on the suppression of secessionist policies, usually driven by movements to preserve national identity. The Church and educational entities that were frequently supervised by churches were among those upon whom the policy of suppression was implemented. The Russian Revolution in 1917 became the beginning of a new era in Russian politics. Of course, such kinds of scenarios had an influence on minorities living in the empire. A year after the revolution, in May 1918, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia proclaimed independence.

The fact of having been part of the Russian Empire had a huge impact on modern states, and the dissolution of the Russian Empire brought a new set of problems to the former empire, both its center and its provinces.

The process of Sovietization became a common political reality for the South Caucasus. In 1922, the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, consisting of the Azerbaijani, Armenian and Georgian Soviet

Republics, was established and existed until 1936. After that, all the states became Union Republics.

During the Soviet period, member-states had no right to establish diplomatic or trade relations with foreign states and had no armies of their own. The center was Moscow but not Russian national elites per se (somehow due to the regime's proclaimed internationalist ideals), and that was one of the features that arose in the Soviet period. The Sovnarkom decree concerning the "Separation of Church and State, and of School from Church," of 25 August 1918 affirmed the secular nature of the state and proclaimed freedom of conscience and religion, and deprived religious organizations of property rights or the rights of a legal entity. Naturally, it had an impact on states where the religious factor was crucial for national identity conservation. For example, for the Armenian nation, the Church was the entity that for many years had functioned as a centralized power and conservator of national identity with its traditions and language, including while there was no sovereign statehood.

Despite the promises of Communism, the Soviet economy was dysfunctional, leading to the rise of the gray market and overwhelming corruption by the time of the late USSR, especially starting in the 1970s. The arguably associated rise of nationalism starting at the end of the 1980s then shaped the South Caucasus's future in the coming decades. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of nearly five centuries of Russian history characterized by the Imperial and Soviet regimes forming the backbone of Russian statehood. While this event certainly had a huge impact on the world order, for the former Soviet states it was a momentous yet somewhat discombobulating development.

Dynamics of Russian Foreign Policy Since 1991

After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia concentrated firstly on its domestic policy and the development of its relations with the European states under the concept of "democratic solidarity". One of the reasons for the Bialowieza Forest agreement was the fact that Russia had grown tired of being an all-Union donor. Russia became the USSR's successor, keeping its symbols, its seat of government in the Kremlin, its nuclear briefcase, and its place as a

UNSC permanent member. The other states, despite their internal problems, had to find their own way to fit into international politics and establish relations with their neighbors and other states. For Russian diplomacy, the priority at that time was to adapt to its new role of no longer being a superpower and to find a new, apparently not “leading”, place in the democratic world system. And the diplomacy of the so-called newly independent states was mainly oriented toward establishing relations with the rest of the world, the ones that had been out of reach for them under Soviet rule.

But was it harder to lose positions or to create new ones and establish a different kind of diplomacy? In fact, an interesting phenomenon of disbalance is observable. The formerly great state, with its replacement in a weaker position, had lost a degree of its power and certain territories once part of an integral state system for it (e.g., the nuclear arsenals in Ukraine, the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan and numerous military bases found in periphery areas). For the other states, the collapse of the USSR became a way to establish or regain sovereignty, even though it was not achieved in the usual way, meaning a struggle for independence, which for centuries has been considered a key element in establishing new, independent states. Going through the national liberation process helps an emergent state establish some mechanisms for authority formulation, frameworks for action and a road map for its independent future. As a result of acquiring sovereignty “on a technicality” as it were, the former USSR states, the three independent states of the South Caucasus among them, have had to maintain a balance in the construction of their interactions with Moscow. The formation of these republics has brought up several challenges in the region since each of them has unique territorial and ethnic aspirations and socioeconomic priorities.

In 1991 the reality had changed and at that time there were a lot of internal problems, so there was no time or resources for the creation of sophisticated and innovative foreign policy standards.

In 2008 the Russian scholar Alexey Bogaturov presented the idea of three generations of Russian foreign policy doctrines, which helps us to understand and visualize these policy doctrines’ frameworks through the

lenses of the Russian authorities and scholars of each successive generation. The first generation of Russian foreign policy doctrine is a mix of Lenin's (the main purpose of Soviet Russian foreign policy being the formation of external conditions for the creation of socialism) and Mikhail Gorbachev's (new political thinking according to which the main universal value became the survival of humanity and its protection from the threat of nuclear war) these. Boris Yeltsin then remade both ideas defining a new main purpose of creating the external conditions for building democracy in Russia and the main universal value became the democratization of the whole world. Thus, in the early 1990s, the core concept was the idea of *democratic solidarity*. For the nation, it was easy to adopt this ideology because of its formal similarity to the Soviet one. At that time in Russia, there was no obvious need for political will to waste resources on the establishment of relations with the former USSR states. Firstly, diplomacy was focused on integrating Russia into the democratic world. Secondly, there was no money to pay for the development of a state academic elite. Academia was left without financing after the collapse of the ideology-based state and this fact contributed to the country's "brain-drain" and weakened academia. Beyond this, the representatives of academia that remained in Russia mostly became specialists in what is currently called American Studies, working in the Institute of the USA and Canada of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). The two main reasons for that were, firstly, it was one of the very few ways to earn money being a scholar in political science (mainly via grants that became accessible after the dissolution of the USSR) and, secondly, it was a necessary subject at that time. Although this may be considered as having a positive impact on the development of that sphere, it was only in a narrow sense. This fact of this focus on American Studies supports the idea that in the first years after the USSR collapse, Russian foreign policy was passive and accommodative, whereas other former members of the USSR had to develop new strategies in foreign policy despite the fact that the core national diplomats in these states had been representatives not of their national states but of the defunct Soviet apparatus.

In terms of its global influence, Russia withdrew not only from the former post-Soviet republics but also from the Arab countries, the African

continent, Latin America and South Asia. Its limited resources were the main reason Russia prioritized and focused mainly on its domestic policy problems (the attempted coup d'état in 1993 and the Chechen question, etc.). During this period the Russian authorities were mainly preoccupied with the country's existing economic difficulties, which were mainly inflation-related, and dealing with the psychological perturbations generated by the loss of their great power [великая держава, velikaja derzhava] status.

Well-known as a pro-democratic foreign minister, in 1994, Andrei Kozyrev brought the territory of the former USSR back into the reality of Russia's special interests. This was the year that marked Russia's growing activity in its "near abroad", including the South Caucasus. The Russian term "near abroad" is used to refer to those states that neighbor the Russian Federation and which until the dissolution of the USSR formed part of it as Union Republics.

When Evgeny Primakov arrived on the scene, he opened a new era of Russian foreign policy, not only as a foreign minister but also by acquiring the prestige of a statesman [государственник, gosudarstvennik] who spoke about Russian national interests and the need to establish and develop relations not only with the Western states but also with the Asian ones like Japan, China, India and the Arab countries, as well as the Latin American ones. This is the moment that in Russia is called the "pivot to the East".

The second half of the 1990s and the second generation of Russian foreign policy is characterized by *selective cooperation*, which means that in this period interactions with the West were developed with some reservations (e.g., the Kosovo case of 1998-1999). The dissolution of Yugoslavia was a painful problem, and the Russian authorities feared a similar fate. In the last year of the 20th century, the Russian president signed a military doctrine (which came into effect in 2000) that included a curious point about "the first nuclear strike". It is possible that the unease that the Russian authorities felt over the Yugoslavian situation and the inclusion of this point are interconnected. However, there were no extraordinary pivots associated with the appearance of the new president Vladimir Putin in 2000. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to be headed by the same person as before, Igor Ivanov, and no one at that time was imagining that Putin would become the

main force in changing Russian foreign policy. As he settled into his role as president, he launched the state onto a path of centralization and concentrated on domestic issues. He also initiated the live meetings tradition (“Direct Line with Vladimir Putin”), which is today one of the main sources of information for analyses of Russian domestic and foreign policy.

Until around 2004, Russia was too weak and internally divided to project power and influence in the wider Caucasus region. Moreover, the decision taken in 2005 to stop subsidizing Russian energy supplies to members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) turned out to be a milestone event in Russian policy. This decision helped give a fresh impetus to the economy after years of decline. From November 2001, when the price of oil was at less than US\$30, to November 2006, it rose to over US\$84. The next step in modifying Russian foreign policy was the implementation of the goal of increasing Russia’s role in international relations. In a summer meeting with the diplomatic corps in 2006, Putin said that it is time to *align Russian policy with its economic opportunities*, characterizing the third generation of Russian foreign policy.

It is obvious that the South Caucasus, a region located in the Three Seas zone (the area formed by the Caspian, Black and Mediterranean Seas), became the active vector of Russian foreign policy in the second half of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Russia began to see NATO’s enlargement with the Eastern Partnership Initiative (launched in 2009) as an attempt to decrease its own influence in its near abroad. At the same time, the concept of Russia as a great power took shape and replaced the imperial idea.

The significant difference between “empire” and “great power” in the Russian foreign policy concept is the following. Whereas the empire is concerned about the development and support of the non-central parts of the state often even more so than its central parts, according to the status of great power, a state puts the emphasis above all on strengthening its own might and international influence. Within the framework of “rebuilding” foreign policy in the middle of this century’s first decade, the term “near abroad” remained relevant.

The understanding of those facts helps us to formulate a representation of the regional and international order as seen through the Russian lens. One of the features of this image includes the idea of an area of vital interest located outside of Russia's borders. At the same time, the Russian authorities are aware of and try to eliminate the growing influence of other powers like the EU, United States, China, Turkey and so on. Russian authorities clearly understand that their own geopolitical ambitions are framed by economic and political realities.

The changes in Russia's foreign policy became obvious to its international partners especially after Putin's well-known speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, where he spoke about NATO's enlargement as a factor that reduces credibility in international relations, the UN Security Council as being the only body with the right to legitimize the use of force, how the unipolar world has nothing in common with democracy and so on. It was at that time that the general line was developed that the admission of former Soviet states to the Euro-Atlantic community was a challenge for Russian national security. But Russia itself wanted to establish stable relations with the West. Relations with the EU and the United States are valuable for Russia itself and particularly for its economy despite the fact that in times of crisis the authorities restrict relations, using sanctions as one of their tools.

During the current period of Russian foreign policy that started in 2006 and continues through the present, the main dates have been 2008-2009 with the economic crisis and the August 2008 war, 2014-2015 with the Ukrainian crisis and the starting of the military campaign in Syria and 2020 with the 44-day Artsakh war, the Russian mandate on the deployment of peacekeeping forces and the situation in Belarus. All these events take up enormous resources and energy expenses. We may conditionally characterize the current doctrine as based on a policy of *increasing influence abroad* and establishing Russia as a great power.

Bilateral relations with South Caucasus states

The region that today consists of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan is plagued by many problems, including incomplete nation-building, cultural

disorientation, deeply rooted corruption, socio-economic and environmental disintegration, regional conflict, fragile democratization and criminal networks. For Russia, the South Caucasus is highly important not only as an element of its foreign policy but also as a part of its domestic security because the region shares borders and history with the North Caucasus. At the same time, geopolitically, Transcaucasia (The term Закавказье, Zakavkaze is used in Russian as a synonym for South Caucasus region.) is a link between Europe and Asia; therefore, its political stability and economic development is also important to many countries in Asia and Europe.

The South Caucasus is attached to the greater Middle East both geographically and by the Islamic factor, to Europe by institutions (the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Partnership for Peace) and the aspirations of elites, and to the Russian north by economic dependencies and complex cultural and demographic affiliations. It is, like the modern Middle East, a region with important oil and natural gas holdings and a large number of unresolved local disputes.

Armenia

In 1991, Armenia, like all the newly independent former Soviet republics, faced a complicated reality. The republic, among other problems it needed to solve, also had to manage the consequences of an earthquake and difficulties raised during the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) conflict. From the very beginning of its independence, Armenia found itself under a blockade as the borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey were closed, and that vastly impacted its economic development. Armenia has only been able to deal successfully with two of its neighbors—Georgia and Iran. Russia played a huge role in the cease-fire agreements of 1994 and 2020, and Russia also was one of the mediators during the attempt to establish an Armenia-Turkey dialogue through the Zurich Protocols.

After the dissolution of the USSR, Armenia became a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Union. Armenia became one of the states loyal to the Russian Federation among the former USSR member-states and in the South Caucasus particularly.

President Serzh Sargsyan, after negotiations with the EU on Association Agreements in 2017, rather than signing a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Europe decided instead to join the Russia-centric EAEU. Currently the CIS, CSTO and EAEU are tools that assist Russian foreign policy in the near abroad, including in the Armenian case.

The Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) problem with its two cease-fire agreements, dependence on Russian energy supplies and assistance in the military sphere (There is a base in Gyumri and the enlargement of the Russian military presence is currently being considered.); security issues and the Russian presence in the Armenian economy in strategic areas (namely SCZD/RZD, Gazprom Armenia, Metsamor NPP, Armenian Electric Networks, etc.) are the key points in bilateral relations. All these factors have led Armenia to establish and develop relations with Russia in the form of a proclaimed strategic partnership. It is symbolic that Armenian and Russian border guards are collaborating together on the former Soviet borders, currently Armenia-Turkey and Armenia-Iran. Moreover, the so-called Velvet Revolution of 2018 was proclaimed by those behind it as an internal event that had no links with Armenian foreign policy, and the authorities highlighted the fact that there would be no changes in foreign policy. But reality is usually more complicated than we expect, and the events in Armenia had their influence on security issues in the whole region and bilateral relations with Russia. It should be noted that high-ranked Armenian officials related to foreign policy (the president, foreign affairs minister and prime minister) usually visit Russia first. This is also a significant gesture that highlights the country's priorities in foreign policy.

Relations with Armenia are vital for Russia and its regional security policy. The military base in Gyumri is a pillar for its security. The location of Armenia in the Three Seas zone makes the state a possible hub for further infrastructure projects. This potential may be used only after the so-called de-blockade, which will give Russia an opportunity to wield more influence over local and regional infrastructure projects. This will be possible only after an increase in the level of confidence in relations with the strategic partner, particularly within the frameworks of the realities established after the 2020 Artsakh war. One of the essential elements connecting Armenian

and Russian societies is the Armenian community in Russia. The Diaspora members will probably make their own contributions towards the improvement of bilateral relations through non-traditional diplomacy tracks.

The asymmetry in relations between the two countries is perfectly visible in different spheres; for example, Russia is Armenia's biggest trade partner, but Armenia is far from high on Russia's list of trade partners. Despite the fact that both states have their own approach to and role in regional processes and that their views may be different, Armenia is still Russia's primary partner in the South Caucasus.

Georgia

Georgia-Russia relations depend on several factors, including the South Ossetia and Abkhazia issues. In the early 1990s, Russia was involved in the negotiations over South Ossetia and Abkhazia which resulted in the Sochi and Moscow agreements. Russia also had a military presence in Georgia at that time. Internal factors such as the second Chechen campaign and the nearly uncontrolled Pankisi gorge became reasons for reducing the level of relations. After the Rose Revolution in 2003 and further negative developments in bilateral relations, both sides lost some leverage with which to influence the other. At the same time, Russian capital is still found in the Georgian energy and communication sectors.

Despite the fact that after 2008 Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Russia and Georgia seemed to be on the poorest level of relations, in reality, both states understand the challenges of their own national security issues that the other side eliminates. Relative stabilization was seen after the 2012 elections with the elected Georgian Dream coalition and Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. In 2014, there was an economic activation (regular flights being resumed and an embargo canceled), but over the last few years, negative changes have been seen. The ideal of the Georgian political mainstream is a democratic unitary state throughout the borders of the Georgian SSR integrated into Western security structures. The Georgians' "European Choice" is viewed by Russia as an anti-Russian step. That is the main problem of the Russian attitude toward its near abroad.

In spite of the current low level of relations, Georgia and Russia have the same challenges in the face of terrorist entities that pass through from the Middle East conflict zones. The strengthening of Turkey also is a challenge for Georgia with its Muslim-populated regions and an economy that partly depends on Turkey's goodwill and investments. The less Russia is involved in the region the less options and alternatives Georgia has in its relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan

As to bilateral relations, their development in the first years after independence was painful, both countries adjusting to the new realities with difficulty. In December 1991, Russia closed its border with Azerbaijan in association with the operation called the "restoration of constitutional order in Chechnya", based on the Russians' charge that Baku was rendering military assistance to Chechnya. After 1994, Azerbaijan started to become an actor in international relations due to its opportunities as an energy supplier. The reduction of Russian positions in the Caspian Sea after the dissolution of the USSR was tremendous despite the internal situation after the Artsakh (NK) conflict in 1994 and the Russian leverage in that issue. In 1997 Azerbaijan became a member of GUAM and in 1999 left the CSTO. Years later, relations improved, and in 2001 the president of Russia paid the first official visit to Azerbaijan. Russia tried to support bilateral relations, for example, during 1995 and 2009 the Russian Lukoil invested over US\$1 billion. There is also Russian capital in the financing system of Azerbaijan (VTB and Uralsib banks). In total, more than 500 Russian companies are doing business in the Azerbaijani market, among them over 170 companies with only Russian capital and 237 joint ventures such as AzRosPromInvest and HazarLada. The problem of the Samur River on the border was solved in 2010 with the agreement on delimitation. In a different instance, Azerbaijan demanded a sharp increase in the rent Russia was paying for the Soviet-era Gabala radar station. The station was part of the Soviet and later Russian strategic early warning system. Azerbaijan stuck to its price demands and the Russians eventually closed the station at the end of 2012.

Since its independence, Azerbaijan has become more dependent on Turkey. In reality, Turkey has become a proactive power in the region, especially after the Artsakh war in 2020. It was the first time in the Russian near abroad when Russia's weakened influence in a former USSR state was replaced by rising Turkish influence. And it was an exceptional instance of Russian tolerance of a NATO member in its near abroad. Another principle point about Russia-Azerbaijan relations is that since the Artsakh war in 2020 Azerbaijan no longer protects Russian borders from radical elements. Moreover, the country may become a hub for such radical elements, taking into consideration the citation of Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia Sergey Naryshkin that thousands of terrorists were relocated into the conflict zone. Nowadays Russia-Azerbaijan relations are formally characterized as a partnership.

Two South Caucasus states, like some other former USSR republics, found their path to independence through breaking off from the Soviet core. Separation from the mother state is always damaging and resource intensive. But the seeming logic is the following: Preserving better relations leads to dependence and fewer opportunities for formerly dependent states in establishing new strategic partnerships.

There are a few options available for self-extraction from these asymmetric relations:

- 1) to cut down relations;
- 2) to continue developing until the states become nearly equal in various measures (for example, political, economic, military and demographic), at least on some points;
- 3) to wait until one (the former mother state or dependent one) or both states disappear or change cardinally;
- 4) to witness a significant change in the global or regional order, which could be the probable result of the third point,

Three South Caucasian states are currently moving towards different types of relations. Georgia and Russia have reduced their relations, representing a "no win" or "lose-lose" situation. After the 1994 "Contract of

the Century”, Azerbaijan started to develop its own oil-based relations with the West, weakening its ties to Russia but remaining dependent on the Artsakh issue. Armenia currently is the most dependent South Caucasian country in terms of its relations with Russia, and it is difficult to see any other option for the next few years, especially after the Artsakh war of 2020.

Post-Soviet states are moving away from their Soviet past mainly through the rise of national identity, which is also linked to culture, traditions, and language. In many cases, aspects of the post-Soviet shift include anti-Soviet features. In many of the states in Russia’s near abroad, the post-Soviet period has been characterized by de-Sovietization and de-Russification. In some cases, the latter is due to natural reasons such as the migration of Russians and the growth of the local population. In the South Caucasus, the growth of the local population was seen in Azerbaijan.

Alongside the well-known international platforms of the CSTO and EAEU, Russia also expands its policy on its near abroad through such ideas as the Russian World. The concept of the Russian World encompasses numerous Russian-speaking communities inside Russia’s near abroad, ethnically Russian communities (a factor carelessly forgotten by the Russian authorities in the early 1990s but which became one of the key factors in Putin’s Russia in the case of Crimea) and parts of Orthodox world.

Organizations such as The Gorchakov Fund and Rossotrudnichestvo (The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), which in foreign countries is currently called Russian home and is mostly represented by the Russian Center for Science and Culture, are the main providers of Russian soft power in the South Caucasus region as well as other places.

In conclusion, Armenia is currently a country that is highly dependent on Russia while Georgia is deepening its relations with the West and Azerbaijan is deepening its relations mainly with Turkey.

Going back to one of the key questions: Why has neither Russia nor any given South Caucasian state succeeded in developing a proper strategy towards the other? When I asked this question at a summer school, one of

the participants answered that it was mainly because of nationalism. I will mention here key additional reasons for each state:

- Russia always has more important problems.

Relations with the EU, United States, China and numerous other states have far more influence on the contemporary Russian economy and policies than relations with the South Caucasian countries.

- Armenia does not see the need to do so because of the attitude it has adopted that it can change nothing globally. Being land-locked geographically and blockaded politically and economically by Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia has very few opportunities to change its political vector. Besides, the Armenian authorities have not succeeded in elaborating a working roadmap for the key foreign policy points, including the Artsakh issue. That is one of the reasons why other states, particularly Armenia's partners, including Russia, cannot share the Armenian position on that problem, or even find a partial concordance with the Armenian approach on certain topics.

- Georgian authorities do not want to find anything in common with their Russian colleagues because attempts to improve relations with Russia are unpopular and appear illegitimate. At the same time, Georgia enjoys its relations with the EU, Turkey, China and other states which are also its main trade partners.

- Azerbaijan also places emphasis on its relations with other actors. Military cooperation with Turkey, the procurement of Israeli armaments, petroleum-related projects and numerous other factors are lowering the significance of Russia-Azerbaijan relations for Azerbaijan itself.

During the examination of bilateral relations, it becomes obvious that Russia has no strategy for its relations with the South Caucasian countries and the South Caucasian states do not have a strategy for their relations with Russia either although there have been some attempts to create visions and follow them. One of the reasons for this lack of any strategy is that the former USSR republics, sharing a common past, make the same mistake of presuming they know each other and there is no need to "waste resources" on the examination of an opponent and evaluation of its primary interest. For a formerly dependent state or mother state this approach may result in losing

once loyal partners, and for formerly dependent states it could entail territorial and/or sovereignty loss.

Russia is continuing its predictable policy as mentioned in its 2021 National Security Strategy. In its other main foreign policy document, the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, we find the cross-cutting theme of the preservation of the UNSC's role in international relations on a global level and the importance of the CIS, CSTO and EAEU for Russia at the regional level. The Russian policy-shaping papers consistently repeat the idea of being predictable, coherent and sequential. Today, Russia is continuing along its stated path with no essential changes and wants to adhere to its foreign policy principles with more predictable neighbors and partners.

РОЛЬ РОССИИ И ТУРЦИИ В ФОРМИРОВАНИИ СИРИЙСКО-ЛИВИЙСКОЙ КОНФЛИКТНОЙ ОСИ ВОСТОЧНОГО СРЕДИЗЕМНОМОРЬЯ

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Интерес России к средиземноморскому региону насчитывает уже более 250 лет – по меньшей мере, его можно отсчитывать от 1769 г., когда в этот регион была отправлена первая Архипелагская экспедиция. И.М. и Е.Б. Смилянские – авторы, пожалуй, наиболее авторитетного исследования об этом периоде, отмечали: «едва ли можно согласиться с теми авторами, которые видели в средиземноморской политике Екатерины II способ решения только «восточного вопроса». Средиземноморская политика России была многогранной: она значительно способствовала развитию многообразных контактов Российской империи с государствами региона, взаимоотношений России с европейскими державами, наконец, не только политическому, но и социо-культурному освоению пространства Средиземноморья подданными российской императрицы»².

Уже в этой цитате обозначена некоторая двойственность, которая отличала отношение российских политических элит к Средиземноморью, как во времена Екатерины Великой, так и в последующие столетия.

На протяжении всего этого времени Средиземноморье, в общем и целом, не рассматривалось как специфический регион.

С одной стороны, оно воспринималось как западная оконечность Ближнего Востока, хотя границы последнего на разных

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² И.М. Смилянская, М.Б. Велижев, Е.Б. Смилянская. Россия в Средиземноморье. Архипелагская экспедиция Екатерины Великой. Под общей редакцией Е.Б. Смилянской — М.: «Индрик», 2011. С.11-12.

этапах чертились по-разному. Соответственно, политика в Средиземноморье могла рассматриваться как элемент «восточного вопроса», а могла, как производная от политики Советского государства в арабском мире, развивавшейся, в свою очередь, в логике сначала антиколониализма, а затем развития биполярной системы международных отношений.

С другой же стороны, Средиземноморье могло рассматриваться как южное «подбрюшье» Европы, и в таком случае политика в этом регионе оказывалась вторичной уже не по отношению к Ближнему Востоку, но по отношению к южной Европе.

Особенно ясно эта амбивалентность восприятия средиземноморского региона видна, когда мы обращаемся к развитию отношений со странами Магриба, неизменно воспринимавшимися как некая двойная периферия – одновременно и Ближнего Востока, и Южной Европы. На эту периферию проецировались представления о социокультурных чертах, идентичности, стратегиях политического развития, безопасности региональных центров.

Подобные особенности пространственно-политического восприятия региона, как представляется, необходимо учитывать, когда мы ставим себе задачей проанализировать политику России в Сирии и в Ливии именно в средиземноморском контексте.

Политика России в Сирии и ее региональный извод

Сирия всегда воспринималась Россией, как государство, прежде всего, ближневосточное и только потом средиземноморское. Соответственно и «возвращение России в Сирию», начавшееся в 2015 г. с провозглашением операции российских ВКС рассматривалось в Москве, главным образом, в контексте общего возвращения на Ближний Восток, хотя восприятие сирийской кампании внешними наблюдателями и могло быть иным.

Характерно в этом отношении, что не вполне четко артикулированные задачи Москвы в рамках этой операции, получили несколько интерпретаций. Самая популярная из них для российской аудитории была связана с необходимостью «борьбы с терроризмом на

дальних подступах»³. Вместе с тем внешние наблюдатели зачастую акцентировали внимание на стремлении Кремля усилить свое присутствие в Средиземном море, защитив военно-морскую базу в Тартусе и не допустив того, чтобы российский флот оказался заперт в Черном море⁴. Наконец, третья интерпретация, увязывавшая операцию со стремлением вернуть себе статус великой державы⁵, подспудно имплементировала военную кампанию как в ближневосточный, так и (в меньшей степени) в средиземноморский контекст.

Сегодня, спустя шесть лет после начала кампании, можно констатировать, что, какую из этих трех интерпретаций ни выбирай, все они, так или иначе, были реализованы, что имеет множество последствий.

Наиболее значимым из них для российской политики, как представляется, можно считать следующие.

Во-первых, Россия получила постоянное военное присутствие на Ближнем Востоке и в Средиземном море. По мнению ряда аналитиков, это присутствие требует дальнейшего развития⁶, которое может реализовываться либо в средиземноморском бассейне, либо в бассейне Индийского океана. В русле рассмотрения первого сценария находятся многочисленные спекуляции⁷ о стремлении Москвы обзавестись глубоководной морской базой в Средиземном море,

³ Совет Федерации дал согласие президенту России на использование ВС РФ в Сирии // ТАСС. 30.09.2015. <https://tass.ru/politika/2302922>

⁴ Delman E. The Link Between Putin's Military Campaigns in Syria and Ukraine // The Atlantic. 02.10.2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/navy-base-syria-crimea-putin/408694/>

⁵ Taylor P. Putin's 'realpolitik' aims to make Russia indispensable // Reuters. 24.11.2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-indispensable-a-idUSKBN0TD1RQ20151124>

⁶ Coffey L. Russia's emerging naval presence in the Mediterranean // Al-Jazeera. 27/05/2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/05/russia-emerging-naval-presence-mediterranean-160526074150359.html>

⁷ Sagall M. Russia Seeks Another Mediterranean Naval Base in Libya // Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

Israeli Security, Regional Diplomacy, and International Law. 22/01/2017.

<https://jcpa.org/article/russia-cultivates-strongman-libya-seeks-another-mediterranean-naval-base/>

вероятнее всего в Ливии. Несмотря на то, что связанные с этой идеей публикации периодически появляются в мировой прессе⁸, они все же не находят пока что никаких не только фактических, но и логических подтверждений. В самом деле, реализация сложного и долгосрочного проекта на территории Ливии сегодня кажется невозможной в силу непредсказуемости развития конфликта в этой стране, Тунис и Марокко, имея статус союзника США вне НАТО, не могут пойти на подобное сотрудничество с Россией, относительно Алжира и Египта о подобных планах речи никогда не шло. Более правдоподобным выглядит второй сценарий. При том, что одним из косвенных результатов сирийской кампании стала интенсификация ВТС со всеми странами ближневосточного региона⁹, особенно активно оно развивается с Турцией и Египтом¹⁰. В 2017 г. было подписано предварительное соглашение¹¹, разрешающее российским ВКС летать в египетском воздушном пространстве и использовать военные базы страны. В случае его полной реализации Россия могла бы сконцентрировать в Египте самый крупный¹² для всех североафриканских государств иностранный военный контингент. Подобное развитие событий хорошо монтируется с характерным в

⁸ After Syria's Tartus port, Russia eyes Libya's Mediterranean port of Tobruk // PostSEurope. 28.04.2019. <https://www.portseurope.com/after-syrias-tartus-port-russia-eyes-libyas-mediterranean-port-of-tobruk/>; Bibbo B. What is Russia's endgame in Libya? // Al-Jazeera. 22.01.2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/01/russia-endgame-libya-170116061913370.html>

⁹Заквасин А., Комарова Е. «Чистый и прозрачный бизнес»: почему западные санкции не повлияли на экспорт российского оружия // RT. 14.09.2019. <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/668262-ekspport-oruzhie-sankcii-shugaev>

¹⁰ Степанов А. Стратегия партнерства // Российская газета. 12.11.2019.

<https://rg.ru/2019/11/12/shojgu-obsudil-voenno-tehnicheskoe-sotrudnichestvo-rf-i-egipta-v-kaire.html>

¹¹Isachenkov V. Russia negotiates deal for its warplanes to use Egypt bases // AP News. 30.11.2017.

https://apnews.com/bdfae4502ca74c1eacdbf6d32252e8f4?utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=AP

¹² Там же.

последнее время для Москвы акцентированием внимания на африканском направлении внешней политики¹³.

Во-вторых, в результате сирийской кампании Россия оказалась глубоко втянута в сложное переплетение ближневосточной политики, став отчасти не только внешним по отношению к региону актором, но и непосредственным участником региональных отношений. При том, что в теории свойственный Москве подход «дружить со всеми» в этих обстоятельствах должен встречать на своем пути все большие трудности, пока что он продолжает реализовываться. При этом наиболее сложными узлами становятся ирано-израильский, палестино-израильский, турецко-сирийский и турецко/катарский-саудовско/египетский.

В-третьих, подтвердив статус великой державы, Россия по факту взяла на себя ответственность за участие в реорганизации региональных подсистем международных отношений¹⁴. С этим были связаны не только озвученные МИД РФ предложения по созданию Зоны коллективной безопасности в Персидском Заливе¹⁵, обновленные в 2021 г., но и целый ряд более частных инициатив, в том числе, связанных с достижением межпалестинского единства (три раунда межпалестинского диалога в Москве в 2010, 2017 и 2019 гг.), посреднические усилия на ливийском направлении (встреча Ф.Сарраджа и Х.Хафтара в Москве в январе 2020 г.) и др.

В-четвертых, Россия апробировала в Сирии ряд военно-политических и дипломатических инструментов внешней политики, которые могут использоваться и уже используются и в других регионах. Среди них: посреднические альянсы с участием

¹³ Кулькова О. Что Россия может предложить Африке // РСМД. 14.08.2019. <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/chto-rossiya-mozhet-predlozhit-afrike/>

¹⁴Эта тема широко обсуждалась в российском экспертном сообществе. См. напр. серию публикаций РСМД: <https://russiancouncil.ru/projects/regional/middle-east/>

¹⁵<https://www.mid.ru/rossijskaa-koncepcia-kollektivnoj-bezopasnosti-v-zone-persidskogo-zaliva>

региональных игроков (Астанинский формат), развитие военной дипломатии¹⁶, гибридный характер военного присутствия¹⁷ и др.

Все эти последствия сирийской кампании сегодня определенным образом влияют на политику России и в других частях региона, едва ли не более всего, в Ливии.

Россия в Ливии: сирийские проекции

В то время, как Сирия и объективно и с точки зрения российского восприятия глубоко интегрирована в ближневосточную подсистему международных отношений и менее – в средиземноморскую, Ливия и в той, и в другой оказывается элементом периферийным. Это проявляется не только в том, что для ключевых региональных и внерегиональных акторов ливийский конфликт играет меньшую роль, чем, например, ситуация в Сирии, но и в том, что в Ливии раз за разом проигрываются уже будто бы знакомые ситуации, используются механизмы, применявшиеся и ранее, а политика внешних по отношению к конфликту игроков остается зависимой от отношений между ними в других пространствах, в том числе, в сирийском.

Не останавливаясь на изложении динамики ливийского конфликта в последние десять лет, выделим некоторые его черты, ярко проявившиеся в последнее время.

Конец 2019 – начало 2020 г. были ознаменованы переходом ливийского конфликта в новую стадию, причем пандемия COVID-19, которая, по идее, могла бы замедлить этот процесс, в реальности серьезным образом на него не повлияла.

В целом новая стадия конфликта характеризовалась следующими чертами.

Во-первых, конфликт впервые с 2011 г. стал действительно региональным, причем региональным дважды. Это было связано, во-

¹⁶ Verbitskaia T.V. Military diplomacy and Russia's policy in Syria. *Comparative Politics Russia*. 2017;8(3):45-51. <https://doi.org/10.18611/2221-3279-2017-8-3-45-51>

¹⁷ Heistein A., Michlin-Shapir V. Russia's Hybrid-Warfare Victory in Syria // *The National Interest*. 19.05.2016. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russias-hybrid-warfare-victory-syria-16273>

первых, с прямым введением в страну турецкого военного контингента¹⁸ и угрозой ввода контингента египетского¹⁹, во-вторых, с переброской вооруженных сил из Сирии²⁰, в-третьих, с завязыванием сложного узла противоречий в восточном средиземноморье в связи с подписанием соглашения о морских границах между Турцией и ПНС²¹. Таким образом, укрепилась связь между сирийским и ливийским конфликтами и одновременно произошло втягивание восточного Средиземноморья в ближневосточную конфликтную логику.

Во-вторых, произошло изменение ситуации на земле и ослабление позиций ЛНА²². Это имело два следствия. С одной стороны, обозначился конфликт между военными и гражданскими властями на востоке страны²³, а с другой, усилилась тенденция к фактическому разделению страны на Запад и Восток. При этом признаки стремления Востока к повышению своей международной субъектности обозначились уже раньше, когда в Дамаске было открыто посольство Временного правительства Ливии²⁴, ЛНА была переименована в Ливийские арабские вооруженные силы²⁵.

¹⁸ Marcus J. Libya conflict: Turkish MPs approve bill to send troops // BBC. 03.01.2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50975494>

¹⁹ Парламент Египта одобрил ввод войск в Ливию // DW. 20.07.2020.

<https://www.dw.com/ru/парламент-египта-одобрил-ввод-войск-в-ливию/a-54247470>

²⁰ Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian fighters deployed to Libya to support government // The Guardian. 15.01.2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/15/exclusive-2000-syrian-troops-deployed-to-libya-to-support-regime>

²¹ Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of National Accord-State of Libya on Delimitation of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean. <https://almarsad.co/en/2019/12/05/exclusive-full-text-of-the-gna-turkey-agreement-claiming-to-be-an-mou-revealed/#jp-carousel-3134>

²² Bocharov I. The War in Libya: Is the Defeat of Khalifa Haftar Complete // RIAC. 18.06.2020. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-war-in-libya-russia-s-time-is-approaching/>

²³ Shalhoub A. East Libya-based lawmakers reject Haftar's coup // AA. 25.05.2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/east-libya-based-lawmakers-reject-haftars-coup/1853017>

²⁴ I'adat iftitah al-safara al-libya fi Dimashq // SkyNews Arabiya. 03.03.2020. <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1325472-دمشق-اللبيبة-السفارة-افتتاح-إعادة>

²⁵ В некоторых публикациях ЛНА называют также (ошибочно) Ливийской национальной арабской армией и Ливийской арабской армией. Кроме того,

В-третьих, все форматы урегулирования в очередной раз продемонстрировали свою неэффективность. Решения Берлинской конференции, хотя и были частично имплементированы²⁶, тем не менее не привели к консолидации позиций внешних игроков в отношении Ливии. Одновременно с этим фактически провалилась деятельность Миссии ООН по поддержке Ливии, проявлением чего стала отставка со своего поста Гасана Саламе²⁷.

В-четвертых, особую значимость стали приобретать вопросы интерпретации конфликта, которая осуществлялась посредством четырех основных нарративов: 1) как борьба легитимного ПНС против негосударственного вооруженного формирования ЛНА²⁸; 2) как борьба обладающей электоральной легитимностью ПП и связанной с ней ЛНА против утратившего легитимность из-за истечения срока Схиратских соглашений ПНС²⁹; 3) как противостояние двух частично легитимных центров силы – правительства и парламента; 4) как противостояние множества игроков, каждый из которых использует доступные ему идеологические, политические, экономические, символические, международно-правовые и другие ресурсы. Подобную же ситуацию с несколько схоластическим спором о характере участников конфликта мы видим и в Сирии. Конфликт там интерпретируется одними как

существует предложение обозначать ее как Вооруженные силы Хафтара. См.: Majumdar Roy Choudhury L.; de Albuquerque Bacardit L.A.; Kadlec A. etc. Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1973 (2011) // UN Security Council. 29/11/2019.

https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2019_914.pdf. P.6.

²⁶ Lotfi F. Shoukry, Lavrov discuss Libya crisis as Egypt rejects mercenary deployment // Daily News. 21.07.2020. <https://dailynewsegyp.com/2020/07/21/shoukry-lavrov-discuss-libya-crisis-as-egypt-rejects-mercenary-deployment/>

²⁷ Спецпосланник ООН по Ливии ушел в отставку // Regnum. 02.03.2020.

<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2872910.html>

²⁸ Libya's GNA forces announce 'counteroffensive' to defend Tripoli // Al-Jazeera. 08.04.2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/libya-gna-forces-announce-counteroffensive-defend-tripoli-190407121535177.html>

²⁹ Eljarh M. Libya's Legitimacy Crisis: Hostage to the Skhirat Agreement // RIAC. 09.06.2020. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/libya-s-legitimacy-crisis-hostage-to-the-skhirat-agreement/>

борьба против авторитарного режима (нарратив Запада и сирийской оппозиции), а другими – как борьба государства против террористической угрозы (нарратив Дамаска и Тегерана). Каждый из нарративов поддерживается собственным набором аргументов, а принятие каждого из них предполагает собственную логику политического поведения.

В-пятых, наметилось более активное, нежели ранее воспроизводство в Ливии сирийского опыта. Использование всеми сторонами конфликта парамилитарес, прокси и гибридные войны, ситуативные альянсы, различные форматы посредничества, наконец, асимметричное партнерство государственных и негосударственных акторов, глобальных и региональных игроков – все эти лишь отчасти новые механизмы международных отношений уже применялись в Сирии и Ираке, отсюда были пересажены на ливийскую почву.

Все эти новые черты ливийского конфликта подталкивают Москву к некоторому переосмыслению ее политики на этом направлении.

Отношение Москвы к участникам конфликта в Ливии после 2011 г. колебалось между третьим и четвертым нарративами, допускающими сохранение, как любят говорить российские дипломаты, равноприближенной позиции³⁰.

За последние годы Москва перешла от звучавших рефреном упреков НАТО в развале ливийской государственности к выстраиванию относительно плотной и диверсифицированной сети контактов с самыми разными участниками ливийского политического процесса. В конце 2019 — начале 2020 гг. вроде бы появились признаки того, что Кремль склоняется к усилению поддержки Востока страны (об этом косвенно свидетельствовало, в частности, открытие посольства Киренаики в Дамаске). Проблема, однако, состояла в том, что переход от равноприближенности к поддержке одной из сторон требовал принципиального пересмотра вопроса о легитимности участников конфликта, чего сделано не было. Более того, в ситуации

³⁰ Братерский А. Авторитет Кадырова в мусульманском мире внушительный // Газета.ru 20.09.2017. https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2017/09/20_a_10898510.shtml

роста напряженности между главой Палаты представителей в Тобруке Агилой Салехом и лидером ЛНА Халифой Хафтаром в апреле 2020 г. Москва откровенно отказалась поддержать последнего³¹.

Некоторая половинчатость и кажущаяся импульсивность российской политики в Ливии, по всей видимости, объясняется общим представлением о периферийности этого внешнеполитического направления, подталкивающим к политическому оппортунизму и стремлению к приобретению краткосрочных выгод.

Вместе с тем все большее втягивание России в сложную мозаику ближневосточной реальности, ставит ливийское направление политики в зависимость от отношений Москвы с Турцией, Египтом, ОАЭ, государствами-членами ЕС и другими акторами, для каждого из которых Ливия по тем или иным причинам оказывается важнее, чем для Кремля.

Подобное давление внешней среды, сделавшее в начале 2020 г. необходимым противостояние Турции и фактически подтолкнувшее к сближению с ОАЭ привело к ряду демаршей на ливийском направлении.

Одновременно с этим формирование за прошедшие годы плотной сети контактов в Ливии российскими деловыми и политическими кругами, вероятно, создало для ряда ливийских игроков каналы лоббирования собственных интересов в Москве. В совокупности со стремлением сохранить возможность инструментального использования ливийской повестки, не втягиваясь глубоко в беспросветный процесс урегулирования, это создало эффект мнимой порывистости российской политики, при которой внезапно предпринимаемые яркие шаги не получают внешних последствий.

При нормальном течении обстоятельств, по всей видимости, Москва и дальше старалась бы сохранить сформировавшийся своеобразный стиль. Но пандемия COVID-19 и срыв ОПЕК+ внесли здесь свои коррективы. Россия оказалась крайне заинтересованной в

³¹Зубков Р. СМИ узнали о реакции России на заявления Хафтара о переходе власти в Ливии // Вечерняя Москва. 28/04/2020. <https://vm.ru/news/797000-smi-uznali-o-reakcii-rossii-na-zayavleniya-haftara-o-perehode-vlasti-v-livii>

укреплении своего положения в ближневосточном регионе, средством чего могло бы быть наращивание влияния на ситуацию в Ливии, что позволило бы было более эффективно использовать ливийскую повестку в отношениях с третьими странами, прежде всего с государствами ЕС и Турцией.

Турция в Ливии – не Россия в Сирии

Еще одним важным измерением сложившейся в 2020 г. ситуации в рассматриваемом регионе стало, конечно, уже упомянутое ранее более глубокое втягивание Турции в ливийские дела. До некоторой степени справедливым будет сказать, что именно оно было драйвером и перенесения на Ливию некоторых элементов Сирийского конфликта, и формирования узла противоречий в Восточном Средиземноморье, повышения российской активности на ливийском направлении.

Некоторые авторы отмечают схожесть турецкой политики в Ливии с действиями Москвы в Сирии.

Обе военные операции были направлены, среди прочего, на повышение значимости государств в системе международных отношений; в обоих случаях операциям предшествовало формальное приглашение официальных властей; обе операции носят ограниченный характер и, по некоторым данным, сопровождались использованием парамилитарес; в обоих случаях операции были направлены на защиту государственности и территориального единства стран.

Вместе с тем, между ними есть и существенные отличия, определяющие характер дальнейшего течения конфликтов едва ли не больше, чем черты сходства.

Прежде всего, Сирия и Ливия играют принципиально разные роли во внешней политике России и Турции. Сколь бы ни была важна Сирия для России, нельзя забывать, что в целом Ближний Восток рассматривается Москвой как второстепенный по значимости

регион³². Ливия же периферийна даже в рамках ближневосточного направления. В то же время для Турции обе эти страны относятся к сфере непосредственных интересов Анкары.

Политика России в Сирии носит в целом чрезвычайно прагматический характер и почти не сопровождается отстаиванием тех или иных идеологических интересов. Это позволяет в Москве активно развивать отношения не только с союзниками Дамаска, но и с его противниками – от Израиля до Дохи или Анкары. В отличие от этого турецкая политика на ливийском направлении в значительной степени идеологизирована и во многом связана с поддержкой Братев-мусульман, что на протяжении длительного времени было очевидным препятствием для выстраивания диалога с другими региональными акторами – Египтом, ОАЭ, Саудовской Аравией.

Сирийская операция Москвы лишь по необходимости сопровождалась ее вовлечением в хитросплетения региональных противоречий. Однако для Турции Ливия изначально является производной иных направлений политики: стремления укрепить свои позиции в Сирии и изменить статус-кво в Восточном Средиземноморье³³.

Кроме того, принципиально различаются обстоятельства места и времени. Турция 2020 г. совсем не похожа на Россию 2015 г. В то время как российское общество шесть лет назад, еще вдохновленное присоединением Крыма, готово было поддержать военную кампанию вдалеке от российских границ, турецкое общество, все более критически настроенное в отношении правящей элиты и страдающие от негативных последствий конфликта в Сирии вполне может оказаться более критичным.

Наконец, различается ситуация внутри самих стран. В то время как Москва имела дело с более или менее хорошо организованным

³² Это напрямую следует из Концепции внешней политики Российской Федерации, утвержденной в 2016 г. https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkBVZ29/content/id/2542248

³³ McKernan B. Idlib to Tripoli: Turkey moves to dominate eastern Mediterranean // The Guardian. 26.05.2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/26/from-idlib-to-tripoli-turkeys-grab-for-influence-in-libya>

правительством в Дамаске, доказавшим не только свою способность выстоять в ходе гражданской войны, но и вполне успешно справлявшимся с поддержанием жизнедеятельности основных институтов, Анкаре приходится иметь дело с чрезвычайно слабым правительством, опирающимся на весьма сомнительную легитимность и почти не работающие институты.

Совокупность всех этих обстоятельств позволяет прийти к следующим выводам.

Во-первых, складывающийся в Восточном Средиземноморье узел противоречий основывается на распространении на этот регион общей ближневосточной конфликтности и укрепления взаимосвязи между Сирийским и Ливийским конфликтами, во многом, в результате внешнеполитических действий Анкары. Элементами этого нового узла противоречий помимо Сирии, Ливии и Турции оказались все страны субрегиона, а также до некоторой степени Россия.

Во-вторых, не оказывая непосредственного влияния на ситуацию в Сирии, это вело к усложнению структуры Ливийского конфликта, перспективы урегулирования которого оставались туманными в 2020 г. и не стали яснее в 2021 г., когда силами международных посредников в Ливии было сформировано Правительство национального единства, к концу года вступившее в конфликт с властями на Востоке страны и оказавшееся неспособным ни организовать выборы, ни подготовить конституцию в установленные сроки. Спекуляции относительно возможности репродуцирования здесь опыта Астаны не выдерживают критики в силу трех обстоятельств: разной ситуации на земле и отсутствия в Ливии функционирующего правительства; присутствия в стране лишь турецких вооруженных сил, что делает невозможным эффективное давление на стороны конфликта со стороны международных посредников; наличия идеологической составляющей в турецкой политике, что затрудняет возможность диалога с иными региональными игроками.

В-третьих, участие в ливийских делах, хотя и может использоваться Москвой в том числе для развития отношений с

иными игроками региона (прежде всего Турцией), тем не менее остается второстепенным для России.

Наконец, в-четвертых, стремясь укрепить свое положение на Ближнем Востоке, и рассматривая Турцию как важного участника региональной системы отношений, Москва вполне вероятно может попытаться взять на себя посредническую роль в выстраивании восточномедиземноморской архитектуры отношений. Важными факторами такого развития событий будут повышение значимости для этой архитектуры тех региональных игроков, которые будут маргинализированы в случае иного (например, американского) посредничества, прежде всего, Сирии.

В 2021 г. ситуация в регионе получила, на первый взгляд, новое развитие. Еще осенью 2020 г. частично в логику ближневосточных противоречий оказался втянут Южный Кавказ. В Ливии в 2021 г. было сформировано очередное правительство, оказавшееся не успешнее прежних. Наметилось некоторое потепление отношений между Турцией и Египтом, с одной стороны, и между Турцией и ОАЭ, с другой. Началась постепенная эскалация напряженности в Магрибе: фактическое отстранение от власти исламистской партии ан-Нахда в Тунисе, разрыв дипломатических отношений между Марокко и Алжиром. Некоторые кризисные явления отмечаются внутри самой Турции.

И тем не менее, несмотря на все эти важные факторы, подчас кардинально меняющие расклады сил на локальном и субрегиональном уровне, общие тренды региональных отношений, выделенные в настоящей статье, остаются неизменными.

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