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Tural Dadashov
Azerbaijan National Academy of Science
PhD student
tural1995pa@gmail.com

A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF SECURITY DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Abstract

The South Caucasus region holds significant geopolitical and geoeconomic importance within the broader Eurasian context. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the security dynamics in the South Caucasus, focusing on the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. Highlighting the region's complex geopolitical framework, the study delves into the implications of these events on the security landscape, emphasizing the region's pivotal role in the broader security architecture. The analysis identifies key factors shaping the security environment, including unresolved ethno-political conflicts, foreign interference, and the strategic positioning of the region. Moreover, it underscores the detrimental impact of these conflicts on regional stability and development, emphasizing the urgent need for resolution and reconciliation efforts to unlock the region's full potential and ensure lasting peace.

Keywords: *South Caucasus, security dynamics, regional security, geopolitics, regional actors, global players*

Tural Dadaşov
Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası
doktorant
tural1995pa@gmail.com

Cənubi Qafqazda təhlükəsizlik dinamikasının kompleks təhlili

Xülasə

Cənubi Qafqaz regionu daha geniş Avrasiya kontekstində mühüm geosiyasi və geoiqtisadi əhəmiyyətə malikdir. Bu məqalədə Cənubi Qafqazda təhlükəsizlik dinamikasının hərtərəfli təhlili, İkinci Qarabağ müharibəsinin nəticələrinə və davam edən Rusiya-Ukrayna münaqişəsinə diqqət yetirilir. Tədqiqat regionun mürəkkəb geosiyasi çərçivəsini vurğulayaraq, bu hadisələrin təhlükəsizlik mənzərəsinə təsirlərini araşdırır və regionun daha geniş təhlükəsizlik arxitekturasında əsas rolunu vurğulayır. Təhlil təhlükəsizlik mühitini formalaşdıran əsas amilləri, o cümlədən həll edilməmiş etno-siyasi münaqişələr, xarici müdaxilə və regionun strateji mövqeyini müəyyənləşdirir. Bundan əlavə, o, bu münaqişələrin regional sabitliyə və inkişafa zərərli təsirini vurğulayır, regionun bütün potensialını açmaq və davamlı sülhü təmin etmək üçün həll və barışıq səylərinə təcili ehtiyac olduğunu vurğulayır.

Açar sözlər: *Cənubi Qafqaz, təhlükəsizlik dinamikası, regional təhlükəsizlik, geosiyasət, regional aktorlar, global oyunçular*

Introduction

The South Caucasus region, with its significant geopolitical and geoeconomic implications in the broader Eurasian context, is of paramount importance. Its abundant natural resources, strategic geographical positioning, historical significance, and other attributes render it a pivotal player in contemporary geopolitical dynamics. The security of the South Caucasus region is not merely integral to its stability but also has extensive ramifications for the wider Eurasian expanse and the global stage.

The aftermath of the Second Karabakh War underscored the intricate geopolitical framework of the South Caucasus. While the conflict itself did not precipitate fundamental territorial alterations, it catalyzed the emergence of new geopolitical realities within the region. Furthermore, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, initiated in February 2022, has introduced an additional layer of complexity to the South Caucasus's geopolitical landscape.

These two elements - the repercussions of the Second Karabakh War and the persistent Russia-Ukraine conflict - are salient catalysts shaping the current geopolitical milieu in the Caucasus. Considering these developments, the geopolitics of the South Caucasus assume a central role in the overarching security architecture of the region. Consequently, acknowledging its status as a linchpin of the regional security system is not merely pertinent, but indispensable for a holistic comprehension of the geopolitical dynamics in play.

In summation, the security environment of the South Caucasus is molded by several primary factors. These encompass ongoing ethno-political and territorial conflicts within the region, which are further intensified by its diverse ethnic composition. Additionally, the foreign policies of regional states, their interrelations, and the conflicting interests of major global powers in this arena, play a significant role. The strategic geopolitical positioning of the South Caucasus, coupled with its abundant natural and energy resources, further convolutes its security landscape. An analysis of these factors elucidates the principal security challenges confronting the South Caucasus and provides invaluable insights into the region's complex dynamics.

The South Caucasus continues to grapple with "frozen" ethno-political conflicts, such as the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict (inclusive of Abkhazia), the Ossetian-Georgian conflict (over South Ossetia), and post-conflict issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan. These unresolved conflicts, simmering under tense conditions, pose a significant burden on the regional states and effectively impede progress and development, thereby negatively impacting regional security.

One of the most detrimental aspects of these conflicts is the enduring influence of external power dynamics. The involvement of external actors or power centers has resulted in a stalemate, obstructed the path to a meaningful resolution, and intensified regional instability. Consequently, the South Caucasus states, specifically Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, find themselves ensnared in a complex matrix of foreign interference, which hampers their capacity to chart an independent course and fosters a sense of dependence.

Moreover, these ethno-political conflicts, while exhibiting certain commonalities in their origins and developmental dynamics, also display distinct characteristics and outcomes. A shared feature, however, is their role in thwarting peacekeeping efforts and perpetuating instability. The existence of these conflicts has prompted regional states to adopt a cautious and defensive posture, often seeking integration into geopolitical centers such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a protective measure against foreign aggression.

In essence, unresolved ethno-political conflicts in the South Caucasus not only obstruct progress and development in the region but also perpetuate a cycle of uncertainty and vulnerability exploited by foreign destabilizing actors. The resolution of these conflicts and the promotion of authentic reconciliation are critical to unlocking the region's full potential and ensuring enduring peace and stability.

Upon examining the historical aspects of ethnic and territorial conflicts in the South Caucasus, one can observe striking parallels, particularly during the early 1990s. This period was characterized by active military operations stemming from ethno-political conflicts that engulfed all three Caucasian republics, leading to severe political, economic, and social crises for the states within the region. The human cost of these conflicts was staggering, with fatalities exceeding fifty thousand and tens of thousands injured. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands were displaced, forced into a state of homelessness and uncertainty (Cornell, 2004: 124).

It is noteworthy that the conflict involving Armenia resulted in the loss of more than twenty thousand lives and the displacement of nearly 800 thousand individuals, either internally or as

refugees. These unresolved conflicts continue to cast a shadow over the region's security environment, posing ongoing threats and challenges.

In addition to the conflicts of the early 1990s, potential hotspots for ethnic conflict persist in the region, as exemplified by the situation in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia. Despite the complex ethno-political processes currently unfolding in these regions, the risk of escalation into open conflict remains palpable.

In summary, the unresolved status of these conflicts and the potential for further unrest underscore the fragility of the South Caucasus's security environment. Addressing these issues and fostering sustainable peace and reconciliation are crucial to mitigating future destabilization risks and ensuring the region's overall security and prosperity.

The South Caucasus region is distinguished by its high level of ethnic diversity, which profoundly influences its socio-political dynamics. The region is home to numerous ethnic groups who speak a variety of languages from the Caucasian, Indo-European, and Turkic language families, forming a mosaic of ethnic communities. However, in the South Caucasus republics of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, the three predominant ethnic groups are Azerbaijani Turks, Georgians, and Armenians, respectively (Herzig, 1999: 2).

In Azerbaijan, Ethnic Turks constitute the majority, comprising 91.6% of the total population, while smaller percentages belong to other ethnic groups such as Lezgis, Armenians, Talysh, and Russians. Georgia exhibits more pronounced ethnic diversity, with Georgians making up approximately 83.8% of the population, and the remainder consisting of various ethnic groups, including Azerbaijani Turks, who represent one of the largest minorities at about 6.5% of the population (State Department for Statistics of Georgia, 2003).

Armenia, on the other hand, is characterized by its relative homogeneity, with Armenians making up 97% of the population, rendering it one of the few mono-ethnic states globally. The ethnic composition of Armenia is marked by its uniformity, with ethnic minorities constituting only 3% of the population.

It is important to note that ethnic groups in the South Caucasus often reside in specific geographical areas that can be politically and administratively organized. For instance, autonomous regions such as South Ossetia in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan were established to cater to the interests of certain ethnic groups.

However, external factors have significantly influenced the political organization of ethnic groups within Azerbaijan and Georgia, particularly Armenians, Ossetians, and Abkhazians. This has resulted in political tensions, economic challenges, and social unrest within these republics, underscoring the intricate interplay between ethnic diversity, political organization, and external influences in the South Caucasus.

In conclusion, the ethnic diversity of the South Caucasus region shapes its social, political, and economic landscapes, contributing to both its richness and complexity. The historical and contemporary dynamics of ethnic relations in the region underscore the importance of understanding and navigating these complexities for the attainment of sustainable peace and stability.

Upon examining the interrelations between the South Caucasus states - Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, a comprehensive analysis reveals that security considerations are the predominant factor. Beyond the geopolitical and economic dimensions, socio-cultural and spiritual aspects interact in intricate ways, significantly influencing the region's dynamics.

Through the lens of the realist paradigm, it becomes evident that the apprehension stemming from the enduring conflict profoundly shapes the foreign policy agendas and military strategies of both Azerbaijan and Armenia. The strategic gains accrued by Armenia over time because of the occupation, encompassing military-strategic, political, and economic advantages, have bolstered its regional standing. However, this territorial dispute concurrently strained relations with Azerbaijan, engendered an environment of insecurity and mutual distrust, and led Armenia into a geopolitical impasse.

Moreover, foreign power centers wield significant influence by intervening in regional politics, either exacerbating existing tensions or bolstering diplomatic initiatives for conflict resolution. These foreign actors often pursue their own strategic interests, thereby further complicating the regional landscape.

Over the past three decades, Azerbaijan has implemented a proactive policy in the South Caucasus, particularly excluding Armenia from the primary geopolitical and geoeconomic initiatives. Consequently, Armenia finds itself increasingly isolated with limited participation in regional projects. This deliberate strategy not only marginalized Armenia but also significantly impacted its relations with Russia and Turkey.

Armenia's escalating dependence on Russia for political, economic, and military support underscores the repercussions of its isolation from Azerbaijan-led regional initiatives. Additionally, the strained relations between Armenia and Turkey, partially influenced by Azerbaijan's assertive stance, have further exacerbated Armenia's isolation.

The loss of Karabakh and its surrounding territories significantly weakened Armenia's regional influence. The outcomes of the Second Karabakh War underscored the radical shift in regional power dynamics and further intensified the marginalization of Armenia.

In general, Azerbaijan's ambitious policy in the South Caucasus has resulted in the isolation of Armenia from the main regional events. This isolation, coupled with Armenia's dependence on Russia and strained relations with Turkey, highlight the significant consequences of Azerbaijan's proactive approach to regional dynamics.

Over the past thirty-two years, Azerbaijan-Georgia relations have evolved significantly, primarily due to the influence of regional geopolitical dynamics and geoeconomic processes. The convergence of geopolitical, economic, and security interests has naturally positioned Baku and Tbilisi as strategic allies in the region.

Georgia's strategic geographic location offers unparalleled opportunities for Azerbaijan's energy transmission corridors, serving as the primary conduit for energy exports to global markets. Azerbaijan collaborates closely with Georgia, capitalizing on these opportunities by bypassing routes passing through Armenia, Iran, and Russia. Both countries jointly spearheaded energy and transport projects within TRASEKA, including the Baku-Supsa, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines, as well as the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and the Great Silk Road framework, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway.

As a result of these collaborative efforts, Azerbaijan and Georgia effectively ensured their energy security and created reliable access routes to Europe and Turkey. Importantly, these energy projects not only enhanced the energy security of Azerbaijan and Georgia but also played a crucial role in strengthening the energy security of Europe, where Turkey serves as a significant transit hub.

In addition, it is necessary to take into account the importance of ethnic Azerbaijanis living compactly in Georgia. This demographic aspect adds another layer of complexity to Azerbaijan-Georgia relations, emphasizing the importance of cultural ties and shared heritage between the two peoples.

In summary, Azerbaijan-Georgia relations are an embodiment of strategic partnership based on common geopolitical, economic and security interests. Through joint energy and transport initiatives, both countries have not only strengthened their energy security, but also contributed significantly to regional stability and Europe's broader energy security goals. In addition, the presence of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia emphasizes the depth of cultural and historical ties that further strengthen the bilateral relations between the two countries (Eyvazov, 2004: 18).

The nature of the relations between Tbilisi and Yerevan is shaped by a multitude of factors, including geographic proximity, economic interests, cultural and historical ties, regional geopolitical dynamics, and the presence of an ethnic Armenian community in Georgia. However, it is evident that the negative aspects of these relationships often supersede the positives.

Armenia's strategic alliance with Russia in the region and the existence of the ethnic Armenian community in Georgia, particularly in the Javakheti region, pose significant challenges. The perceived separatist sentiment within this community and its potential exploitation by official Tbilisi as a point of contention exacerbate tensions between the two nations.

As articulated by the political scientist S. Cornell, the depiction of Armenia as Russia's "Trojan horse" in the Caucasus underscores the profound suspicions and mistrust between Yerevan and Tbilisi (Cornell, 2000: 395). This perception contributes to the ongoing deterioration of bilateral relations between Armenia and Georgia and ultimately influences broader regional dynamics, including relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia, both bilaterally and within the framework of GUAM (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated January 10, 2000, No. 7).

In summary, while Tbilisi-Yerevan relations are influenced by various factors, including geographic, economic, and cultural considerations, the presence of the ethnic Armenian community in Georgia and Armenia's alliance with Russia play a pivotal role in shaping the essence of these relations. The acceptance of Armenia as a reliable representative of Russia in the region further complicates bilateral relations and engenders constant tension and difficulties in the relations between the two nations. This analysis underscores the complexity of the geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus and the challenges inherent in fostering stability.

Several major power centers in the South Caucasus safeguard their interests primarily based on geopolitical and economic considerations. These power centers can be categorized as follows, with Russia, Iran, and Turkey being particularly influential entities:

1. Russia: With historical ties and entrenched interests in the region, Russia perceives the South Caucasus and the Caspian basin as its "near abroad" (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, 2000). Moscow's foreign policy doctrines underscore its sphere of influence in these areas, with the objective of curtailing Western influence and preserving historical dominance. Despite the evolution of Russia's geopolitical position since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it remains a formidable player, albeit with diminishing dominance.

2. Iran: Iran, which shares historical and cultural ties with the South Caucasus, endeavors to safeguard its interests in the region. Tehran opposes Western influence and collaborates closely with Russia to counter threats from NATO, the US, and the European Union. Iran's strategic partnership with Russia fortifies its position as a significant power center in the South Caucasus.

3. Turkey: Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Turkey wields substantial influence in the South Caucasus. Ankara engages in economic partnerships, cultural relations, and security cooperation in the region with the aim of enhancing its regional standing. Although it lacks the historical stronghold of Russia and Iran, Turkey's strategic interests align closely with those of Azerbaijan and Georgia, thereby contributing to its influence in the South Caucasus.

While other actors such as the United States and the European Union have vested interests in the region, their influence is relatively nascent compared to the traditional players. These Western actors often find themselves at odds with Russia and Iran over geopolitical dominance and influence in the South Caucasus.

Iran, a principal actor in the South Caucasus, consistently devotes significant attention to Azerbaijan. The geopolitical significance of Azerbaijan for Iran is multifaceted, shaped by an amalgamation of historical, cultural, and strategic factors.

Key Factors

1. Demographic Overlap: A substantial Azerbaijani population, exceeding 30 million individuals, resides in Iran. Tehran expresses apprehension about the potential integration of these Azerbaijanis with their compatriots in Northern Azerbaijan (in the Republic of Azerbaijan). The prospect of irredentism is perceived as a major concern for Iran, prompting it to closely monitor events on its northern border.

2. Common Religious and Sectarian Affinities: Azerbaijan and Iran share common religious and sectarian values, primarily within the Shiite Muslim tradition. This spiritual kinship fortifies

cultural ties and facilitates diplomatic contact. However, it also underscores the delicate equilibrium between cooperation and competition.

3. Historical and Cultural Ties: Azerbaijan and Iran are united by centuries of shared history. Common linguistic roots, cultural exchanges, and historical interactions have left an indelible mark. While these ties foster goodwill, they also introduce complexity into the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

4. Strategic Corridor: Azerbaijan's geographical position holds strategic importance for Iran. Serving as a corridor connecting the Caspian Sea in the north and the Moscow-Tehran axis in the south, Azerbaijan facilitates trade, energy transit, and regional connectivity. Iran recognizes the pivotal role played by Azerbaijan in shaping regional dynamics.

5. Resource Wealth: Azerbaijan's abundant natural resources, including oil and gas reserves, attract Iran's attention. Energy cooperation, economic partnerships, and joint ventures underscore the pragmatic calculations that govern bilateral relations.

6. Iran's Geopolitical Calculations: Iran's approach to Azerbaijan is multifaceted. While Tehran perceives an independent, secular, and economically vibrant Azerbaijan as a potential security threat, it also seeks avenues for cooperation. The delicate balance between containment and engagement determines Iran's policy choices.

7. Complexities and Disputes: Despite shared interests, tensions occasionally mar relationships. Iran's comprehensive relations with Armenia, often used as diplomatic leverage against Azerbaijan and Turkey, exemplify this complexity. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and divergent foreign policy trajectories further strain relations. Iran and Azerbaijan must navigate the complex web of geopolitical interests with caution. While historical ties and pragmatic considerations drive cooperation, differing security imperatives sometimes strain their relationship.

Turkey, as a significant power center, has crucial strategic interests in the South Caucasus region. Situated at the juncture of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, this area plays a pivotal role in shaping regional dynamics. This article delves into the multifaceted dimensions of Turkey's engagement in the South Caucasus, emphasizing geopolitical, geoeconomic, energy, and security considerations.

Geopolitical Significance

2. Regional Access Point: The South Caucasus, comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, shares borders with Turkey, Russia, and Iran. Its strategic location renders it a nexus of regional interactions. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkey was among the first nations to recognize the independence of these three South Caucasus countries. Ankara's historical ties with the region, dating back to the Ottoman era, have shaped its approach.

3. Union with Azerbaijan: Azerbaijan is deemed the most critical state of the South Caucasus. Shared historical roots, language, and cultural proximity forge a robust bond between Turkey and Azerbaijan. In addition to geopolitical harmony, territorial unity contributes to regional stability and cooperation.

Geoeconomic Considerations

1. Energy Center: Turkey's energy security is largely reliant on foreign sources, necessitating diversification and reliable supply routes. The South Caucasus region, situated at the heart of Eurasia's energy and transport corridors, holds significant importance. Turkey aspires to become an energy hub that facilitates the flow of resources between Russia, Europe, and the Caspian Sea. The Southern Gas Corridor, a notable infrastructure project, bolsters Turkey's role in this respect.

2. Azerbaijan as a Bridge: Azerbaijan serves as an important bridge connecting Turkey with Central Asian republics. Ankara maintains vital relations with the Caucasus and all of Central Asia through Azerbaijan. This strategic partnership not only strengthens economic ties but also bolsters regional stability.

3. Southern Gas Corridor: The completion of the "Southern Gas Corridor" has augmented the importance of Azerbaijan in ensuring Turkey's energy security. This ambitious pipeline system transports natural gas from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz field to Europe, reducing Turkey's dependence

on other suppliers. Azerbaijan's central role in this project underscores its strategic value for Turkey.

4. Oil and Gas Reserves: Although Turkey does not possess significant oil and gas reserves, Azerbaijan's abundant reserves compensate for this deficiency. Close cooperation between the two fraternal countries in the exploitation of these resources fortifies their bilateral relations.

As previously mentioned, Turkey continues to bolster its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia and perceives Azerbaijan as a natural ally to enhance its geopolitical position. Consequently, Turkey collaborates extensively with Azerbaijan across numerous sectors. However, Turkey's geostrategic interests in the region often clash with those of other regional and global powerhouses, leading to conflicts of interest.

Simultaneously, Georgia occupies a significant position in Turkey's Caucasus geostrategy. The ongoing geopolitical dynamics in the region render the strategic alliance between Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan not only desirable but also inevitable. This tripartite alliance is shaped by the mutual influence of regional power centers and the pursuit of shared geopolitical interests.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the states of the South Caucasus emerged as sovereign entities within the framework of international law, thereby attracting considerable geopolitical interest. Notably, the United States has been proactive in implementing policies to safeguard its interests in the region. Three primary factors have shaped Washington's foreign policy towards the region over the past three decades: the region's geostrategic importance, security landscape, and abundant energy resources.

The region's strategic location between the seas further amplifies the geopolitical interests of the United States. The doctrine of "maritime supremacy" holds a significant place in American geopolitics. According to the theory proposed by renowned American political scientist Alfred Thayer Mahan, the US, in its quest to augment its global influence, should prioritize access to and control of the world's seas in its foreign policy strategy. This doctrine underscores the crucial role of naval superiority in shaping the US approach to the region.

Indeed, the escalating geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus for the United States can be attributed to several key factors. These include the region's role as a strategic corridor in the Eurasian landscape, its status as a gateway to Central Asia, its strategic position between Russia and Iran, and its rich energy resources. Additionally, the region's proximity to areas of Washington's strategic interests enhances its geopolitical value.

Taking these considerations into account, the United States is endeavoring to elevate its relations with the regional states to the level of strategic partnership. This is part of a comprehensive policy aimed at counterbalancing the influence of the Moscow-Tehran axis in the region.

Specifically, Washington perceives Russia as part of the "security belt" it is striving to construct around the region. This strategy emphasizes the strategic importance that the United States attaches to maintaining a robust presence and influence in the region, thereby highlighting the complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, and security considerations in shaping US foreign policy in the South Caucasus.

The European Union (EU) is a significant power with substantial geopolitical, geoeconomic, and security interests in the South Caucasus. The strategic geopolitical position of the South Caucasus region enables it to fall within the sphere of special interest of the EU.

The EU's geopolitical interests in the Caucasus are shaped by several factors:

1. The South Caucasus serves as an important transit corridor connecting the European region with Central Asia.
2. The region, especially Azerbaijan, possesses rich energy resources of strategic importance for the EU.
3. The EU's Eastern Partnership initiative and future integration prospects further underscore the importance of the region.

Collectively, these elements contribute to the EU's strategic focus on the South Caucasus and reflect the importance of the region in the broader geopolitical landscape. Given the region's potential role in energy security and regional stability, this focus is likely to persist.

In the complex geopolitical landscape of our region, the interests of two significant countries - Russia and Iran - intersect with the European Union (EU). The United States and the European Union (EU), whose interests largely overlap in this region, are emerging as the principal actors. It should be noted that these power centers, the USA and the EU, often adopt a strategy of coordination in their regional policies.

The strategic objectives of Washington and Brussels in the region can be succinctly expressed as reducing the influence of Russia and Iran in the South Caucasus, followed by integration into the Euro-Atlantic space. Concurrently, the policy of regional states to expand cooperation with the EU and its leading states is one of their main interests.

The European Union's (EU) international political stature, advanced economic development, commitment to civilized values, extensive diplomatic experience, and established communication channels between the states of the region and the "old continent" render this cooperation indispensable. This cooperation serves as a strategic instrument for the South Caucasus states in counteracting the adverse effects of regional power centers implementing a neo-imperial policy.

Furthermore, this cooperation is crucial in ensuring their active participation in the processes of global political, economic, and cultural integration, and in safeguarding territorial integrity. Consequently, the interplay of these factors significantly influences the geopolitical dynamics of the region.

Two pivotal events, the Second Karabakh War and the Russia-Ukraine War, have significantly reshaped the South Caucasus's security dynamics. This reshaping has led to new geopolitical realities.

The Second Karabakh War notably strengthened Azerbaijan's geostrategic position. This victory expanded Azerbaijan's political and economic opportunities, including the liberation of significant territory and restoration of borders with Iran and Armenia. Consequently, Azerbaijan emerged as the leading state in the South Caucasus, influencing regional processes.

The war also amplified Russia and Turkey's regional influence. Russia, as the primary mediator, played a crucial role in ending the war and ensuring Azerbaijan's military presence in Karabakh. Concurrently, Turkey, Azerbaijan's main ally, significantly increased its political and military influence in the South Caucasus.

In contrast, the new geopolitical realities post-war have been less favorable for the EU, US, and Iran. Their limited influence on the war's trajectory and outcome resulted in a decrease in their regional influence. The complex nature of post-conflict issues has led to inconsistent positions among these actors, underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of the post-conflict landscape in the South Caucasus.

The onset of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict instigated significant geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus. Despite its prominent role, Russia experienced a weakening of its influence due to substantial political, military, and economic losses, thereby creating a geopolitical vacuum that other powers endeavored to fill.

Prior to the Ukraine conflict, Russia was the sole mediator in the peace process involving itself, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Post-conflict, the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) emerged as principal mediators. The collective West, encompassing actors such as France, is striving to augment its regional role.

Intriguingly, recent actions by France, considered here as an independent geopolitical actor rather than a nation, have intermittently distanced it from the broader interests of the West. This suggests that France is operating as an independent power center with distinct interests in the South Caucasus. This underscores the complex interplay of geopolitical interests and power dynamics in the region.

The United States, one of the long-term actors in the region, has reaffirmed its commitment to the South Caucasus with various initiatives. These include:

1. Mediation efforts in solving post-conflict problems between Armenia and Azerbaijan.
2. Initiatives to deepen relations with regional states.
3. Inclusion of references to the South Caucasus in the National Security Strategy in October 2022 (White House, 2022).

This dynamic demonstrates the US's strategic interest in maintaining its influence and shaping the trajectory of the region.

As the main neighbor with historical relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran's strategic calculations in the region attract attention (FDD, 2021). Iran's approach is to take advantage of the vacuum created by the decline of Russia's influence and thereby prioritize the strengthening of relations with Armenia (Middle East Eye, 2023). This strategic emphasis includes multifaceted cooperation spanning the political, military, and economic-commercial spheres (Euractiv, 2022). The recent uptick in bilateral cooperation underscores Iran's effort to strengthen ties with Armenia, positioning it as a potential counterbalance to the emerging Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance (RUSI, 2021).

In addition, it is worth noting that the evolving geopolitical landscape in the region has led to the emergence of non-traditional power centers such as China, India and Pakistan. Their increased activity, spanning political, military, economic and logistical dimensions, means a change in regional dynamics and adds another layer of complexity to the geopolitical discourse. This emphasizes that the geopolitical realities of the region are multifaceted.

Conclusion

In light of evolving geopolitical dynamics, the persisting ethno-political and territorial conflicts in the South Caucasus remain a paramount concern, exerting significant influence on regional security. These conflicts, exemplified by the Georgian-Abkhazian, Georgian-Ossetian, and Armenia-Azerbaijan disputes, possess the potential to escalate into large-scale military engagements, thereby jeopardizing the region's security apparatus.

Following the Second Karabakh War, Armenia's stance on post-conflict matters warrants attention, particularly its reluctance to relinquish territorial claims against Azerbaijan and its adoption of a militaristic approach grounded in revanchist ideologies (13). Notably, Armenia's collaborations with nations such as Iran, India, and France to bolster its military capabilities raise apprehensions regarding the potential for heightened tensions and new conflicts in the region.

In conclusion, the persistence of factors undermining the South Caucasus' security framework casts a shadow over the prospects of achieving enduring peace, development, and institutionalization in the region. Urgent efforts are imperative to address these challenges and foster a climate conducive to sustainable stability and progress (International Crisis Group, 2006).

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