

The Geopolitical choices of Armenia amidst the transformation of Post-cold global order war

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the transformation of the Post-Cold War order, and its implications for Armenia. It argues, that after the **2007-2008** world financial crisis, the Unipolar Post-Cold War order started its transformation towards multipolarity. This transformation triggered the geopolitical competition between great powers, such as the US, China, and Russia, while the war in Ukraine brought the West and Russia to a direct confrontation. The relative decline of the US as the world sole superpower resulted in the rise of power struggle for regional dominance adding instability in different corners of the world. Located in the strategic crossroad between Russia, Middle East, Europe and Central Asia, South Caucasus has become one of the battlefields between global and regional powers vying for influence and domination. In the backdrop of rapidly changing global and regional context, Armenia faces two primary choices. To become a Western bulwark against Russia, assuming the role of Georgia under the president Saakashvili, and fostering partnership with Turkey and Azerbaijan to balance against Russia and Iran, or to strengthen its relations with Russia, India, and Iran, seeking to balance Turkey's and Azerbaijan's growing regional ambitions and preventing the transformation of Armenia into Azerbaijan's and Turkey's political and economic backyard.

KEYWORDS: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, India, Russia, Turkey, United States

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Introduction. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union have ushered in hopes of humanity's happy and harmonious future. The ideas such as "End of history" (Fukuyama, 1992) became very popular both within academic circles and policymakers. There was a widespread belief that the entire planet would live under liberal democracy, and interstate conflicts will become bad memories from history. The last decade of the 20th century seemed to confirm those hopes. The EU and NATO enlargement, market reforms in former socialist states, cooperative relations between Russia and the West, and the growing US – China economic cooperation have seemingly justified hopes for establishing the world united under the banner of liberal democracy. The US enjoyed its absolute hegemony defined as a "Unipolar moment" with no apparent candidate to challenge its supremacy. Washington embraced the grand strategy of liberal hegemony, which was in one way or another implemented during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations.

However, the beginning of the XXI century crushed these hopes. Russia – West relations started to deteriorate after the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, while the 2014 Crimean crisis brought bilateral relations to the lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, astonishing Chinese economic growth and the emergence of the multi-million middle class did not bring about political changes in China.

The Transformation of Post-Cold War global order

The turning point for the start of the transformation was the 2007-2008 world financial crisis. It started in the US and shook the Western-dominated international financial system. It coincided with the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, which proved the ascent of China. The old mechanisms such as G-7 and later (for some time) G-8 were unable to implement effective global governance, and the first summit of the G-20 in November 2008 was the harbinger of an upcoming tectonic shift in the world order (Declaration, 2008). The establishment of new multilateral organizations such as BRICS and India and Brazil's rapid growth were clear signs that the world was drifting away from the "Unipolar Moment" towards a more complex multi-polar world.

The emergence of the "Multi-polar world order" will inevitably trigger regional instability and the rivalry for regional hegemony. The absence of the world hegemon or the "world policeman" means that the second-tier states will be more inclined to use coercion as the primary tool to push forward their national interests. These states now enjoy much more flexibility in choosing their alliances and playing one great power off another.

One of the best examples of this situation in Turkey. Being fully anchored in the US sphere of influence during the Cold war, Turkey now effectively balances between the US and Russia, opposing

Washington in Syria, and Kremlin in the Black Sea region. The Greater Middle East is a good example depicting the rivalry for regional hegemony between Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, while external players such as Russia, the US, and China seek to push forward their national interests.

If an emerging multi-polar world creates new possibilities for the second-tier states, the small states face growing challenges and threats. The rivalry for regional hegemony, growing instability, the erosion of accepted rules and norms, and the emphasis on coercion in interstate relations create complex problems for small states. It is especially valid for small states which are located on the fault lines of great powers. They may quickly become the “gray zones” or “areas of hybrid operations” with possible proxy wars and permanent instability.

The war in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine brought Russia – West relations to the lowest point since the early Cold War years of the 1950s. Discussions about the emergence of Cold War 2.0 were prevalent among experts and the academic community well before February 24, 2022. The starting point was perhaps President Putin’s famous 2007 Munich security conference speech (Speech, 2007). However, the current confusion in global geopolitics is quite different from the original Cold War. In the second part of the 20th century, the world was bipolar, as the US and Soviet Union were fighting each other. Many countries sought to avoid this confrontation through membership in the Non-Aligned Movement, but it never became a third pole. Now the situation is much more complicated. As the US and Russia are facing each other in the new rendition of a Cold War, the world is far away from being bipolar. It may eventually end with a new bipolar system, but Russia will not be among the top two players. If bipolarity ever returns, the US and China will be the building blocks of that system.

Meanwhile, as war rages in Ukraine, the US – China confrontation continues. When the Obama administration announced its “Pivot to Asia” in 2011, it was a clear message that the US viewed China as the primary strategic competitor (Lieberthal, 2011). The famous words of Obama about Russia being a regional power reflected the US perception that Russia was no longer a serious threat but rather a spoiler (Barack Obama, 2014). The 2014 Ukraine crisis made some amendments to US strategic thinking, partly bringing US focus back to Europe. The 2017 and 2022 US national security strategies issued by the Trump and Biden administrations describe both Russia and China as the revisionist countries, seeking to undermine the existing international order (US, 2017; National Security, 2022). If China is described as the only country with the necessary resources to challenge the US global leadership in the long run, Russia

is depicted as the major short-term threat. Thus, even if the “Cold War” metaphor is valid for 2022, perhaps we should speak about two simultaneous Cold Wars: US – Russia and US – China.

This feature alone makes current geopolitics a messy place, but the reality is even more complex. As the US simultaneously seeks to contain Russia and China, other players have entered the game. They are not anti-American but do not want to fight Russia and China. India is perhaps the best example of this new, rising star in international relations. It develops strategic partnership with the US, is a member of QUAD, and simultaneously pushes forward strategic cooperation with Russia. India did not join anti-Russian sanctions and continues cooperation in economic and defense industries areas. For more on Indian foreign policy, see: (Tharoor & Saran, 2020; Jaishankar, 2020). There are other emerging players, too, such as Brazil, which seeks to keep a balance between “fighting elephants.”

All these transformations occur within the bigger transition framework from a unipolar to multipolar world order. Perhaps no one knows when and how this transition will end. The transition from unipolarity to multipolarity creates ambiguity and raises a sense of insecurity in the world. Meanwhile, the growing transnational threats, such as climate change, food insecurity, and pandemics, require joint efforts of all major players.

Another prominent feature of the current phase in world history is the growing significance of digital technologies. They have penetrated everywhere, from aviation to healthcare, from the military industry to smart home systems. It seems that digital technologies have the power to unite people and bring states together. However, in reality, along with real or perceived “Cold War 2.0,” technological warfare is underway. The US imposed numerous sanctions to prevent the transfer of state-of-the-art digital technologies to China, launching so-called “Chip wars” (Gordon, 2022). The growing disruption of global supply chains and efforts towards “US-China economic decoupling” may create a “digital curtain,” dividing the West from China and potentially from Russia, Iran, and other countries.

The establishment of the new “physical and digital iron curtains” has significantly decreased the speed of globalization, a phenomenon that swept the world in the 1990s and early 2000s. Instead of globalization, more and more pundits now speak about regionalization, the emergence of a few regions with different sets of rules and norms.

The only constant thing in current geopolitics is permanent instability. The relative decline of the US does not allow Washington to lead the world as it did in the 1990s. Meanwhile, China is far from assuming a leadership role. Russia seeks to re-instate itself as a great power, and India speaks against the return of Unipolarity and the creation of new US – China bipolarity. After February 2022, Europe put aside

considerations about Europe's strategic autonomy and rallied behind the US against emerging geopolitical threats. The world comes closer to being a jungle again, and no safe garden exists where to hide. While great and middle powers are vying for influence and power, small ones should be cautious to avoid being wiped off the map.

Geopolitical conundrum of Armenia

The Russia – Ukraine war has sidelined all other conflicts in the post-Soviet space and beyond. However, regional geopolitics has not disappeared, and while the world's attention is focused on Ukraine and the ensuing Russia – West confrontation, regional conflicts continue with their dynamics. The Karabakh conflict is not an exception here.

The 2020 Karabakh war has upset the status quo in the South Caucasus. The defeat in the war has significantly reduced Armenia's geopolitical potential and has diminished Armenian role in the region. Currently, Armenia faces formidable challenges and growing ambiguity in its foreign and security policy, which have been multiplied by the war in Ukraine. Should Armenia accept the loss of Nagorno Karabakh and push forward the normalization process with Azerbaijan and Turkey at any cost or should it elaborate and implement a strategy to prevent the final loss of Karabakh while simultaneously seeking normalization with its neighbors? What are the prospects of Armenia – Russia relations after February 2022, and what will be the long-term (15–20 years) implications of potential Azerbaijani and Turkic economic penetration into Armenia in case of full normalization of relations?

Two primary options for Armenian foreign policy

- ***Acting as a Western bulwark against Russia***

As the blockade of Nagorno Karabakh imposed by Azerbaijan entered its third month, the Armenian government increased the level of criticism of Russia. The new phase of anti-Russian rhetoric was launched by the secretary of the Security Council, who, in late December 2022, claimed that Russia was using the closure of the Lachin Corridor to force Armenia to join the union state of Russia and Belarus (Stepanian, 2022). Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denounced his comments as provocative and insisted that Russian officials have never told Yerevan to join the Russian-Belarusian union state (Staff, Asbarez. (2022)). While refraining from directly accusing Russia of participating in the closure of the Lachin Corridor, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan criticized Russia and its peacekeepers for becoming a “silent witness” to the depopulation of Nagorno-Karabakh (Pashinyan, 2022).

During his January 10, 2023 press conference, Pashinyan stated that if it becomes clear that, due to objective or subjective reasons, Russia is unable to fulfill its commitments, it should ask the UN Security Council to either grant an international mandate to the Russian military contingent or send a new multinational peacekeeping mission to Nagorno-Karabakh (Prime Minister, 2023). However, in the current international environment of Russia-West confrontation, it is implausible that the Western powers in the UN Security Council will agree to provide an international peacekeeping mandate for Russian forces. Meanwhile, during the same press conference, Pashinyan argued that in contact with Western countries, Azerbaijan explained its aggressive actions against Armenia with fears that Armenia and the Russian Federation could jointly take aggressive actions against Azerbaijan, and they were taking preventive actions. Pashinyan stated that the Armenian government drew the attention of Russian colleagues to the fact that in the absence of a Russian response, it turned out that the military presence of the Russian Federation not only did not ensure the security of the Republic of Armenia but also created a threat to its security.

On January 12, 2023, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova stressed that the statements from Yerevan that the Russian presence posed a threat to the security of Armenia were absurd. According to Zakharova, for decades, Russian soldiers and border guards have significantly contributed to ensuring Armenia's security, guarding its borders (Maria Zakharova, 2023). The current authorities of Armenia announced earlier that the military presence of the Russian Federation in Armenia corresponds to the country's national interests.

Anti-Russian sentiments have been on the rise in Armenia in the last decade. Russian actions and inactions during the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war, as well as during Azerbaijani aggressions against Armenia in May, November 2021 and September 2022, as well as military escalations along the Nagorno Karabakh-Azerbaijan line of contacts in March and August 2022, have significantly increased anti-Russian feelings in Armenia (Survey, 2022). Constant criticism by high-level Armenian officials against Russia, blaming the Kremlin for not supporting Armenia against Azerbaijan and sometimes using Azerbaijan as leverage to force Armenia to provide concessions to Russia have worsened Russia's image in Armenia.

Ordinary citizens in Armenia would contend that if, according to Armenian officials, Russia often acts with Azerbaijan against Armenia, it means that Russia is not Armenia's friend; Russia is Armenia's enemy. This logic then implies that Armenia should not be a part of military and economic alliances with its enemy, and the troops of its enemy should not be stationed in Armenia.

Without making deep forays into the hypothetical possibility of American and French troops fighting a war against Azerbaijan in the territory of Nagorno Karabakh, which both countries strongly believe is part

of Azerbaijan, we should clearly understand that if Armenia leaves the CSTO and demands the withdrawal of Russian military base and border troops from Armenia, it will immediately transform Armenia into a hostile nation to Russia. Given the current geopolitics of the region, Armenia cannot be an enemy to Russia and a friend of the US, while continuing to be a friend to Iran. If this scenario becomes a reality, Armenia will also significantly worsen its relations with Iran. In many aspects, this scenario will transform Armenia into a Georgia of the first term of President Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2007), with clear pro-American and anti-Russian policies. Meanwhile, Georgia has cultivated a strategic partnership with Azerbaijan and Turkey, supported by the US, to resist Russia. Establishing the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan triangle, where Georgia was the weakest point and relied on Turkey and Azerbaijan, was the only realistic way to pursue the anti-Russian policy (Trabzon Declaration, 2012).

Despite tectonic changes in international security architecture for the last 20 years, the basics of geopolitics in the South Caucasus remain the same. The war in Ukraine simply sharpened the geopolitical choices faced by the regional states, as the collective West, including the EU, puts more efforts to decrease Russian influence in the South Caucasus (Bob Deen, 2023). Suppose Armenia wants to become anti-Russians, which also means an anti-Iranian outpost for the US in the region. In that case, Armenia should establish a strategic partnership with Azerbaijan and Turkey and rely on Ankara and Baku. Given the long-term strategic interests of Azerbaijan and Turkey, the only way to do that is to accept that no Armenians will live in Nagorno Karabakh. At the same time, Armenia will become a client state of Azerbaijan and Turkey under the joint Baku-Ankara protectorate.

- **Armenia – Turkey normalization process**

Meanwhile, after the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war, Armenia launched a normalization process with Turkey. The first attempt to normalize relations with Ankara took place in 2008-2009, and is known as ‘Football diplomacy’. Armenia and Turkey signed two protocols in Zurich in October 2009, but the process was stalled due to the Azerbaijan resistance. After the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war Azerbaijan stated that it would not oppose Armenian rapprochement with Turkey. Yerevan and Ankara appointed special representatives, who meet several times in 2022. Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan met with Turkish President Erdogan on October 6, 2022 in Prague, and Armenia sent humanitarian assistance to Turkey after the devastating earthquake in February 2023. However, despite initial positive developments, the process has not brought about any breakthrough. The primary reason is the Turkish position, that Armenia

– Turkey normalization is possible only after Armenia accepts Azerbaijani demands and signs peace treaty with Azerbaijan on Azerbaijani terms.

Meanwhile, Turkey continues its balanced policy towards the West and Russia. Turkey supports militarily Ukraine, but Ankara has not joined anti-Russian sanctions, becoming a significant hub for Russian economy. As Russia's economic dependence on Turkey grows, it puts restrictions on Russian potential actions against Azerbaijan to protect Armenia.

- ***Fostering relations with Russia, Iran, and India***

This scenario does not imply that Armenia should quit the normalization process with Turkey, reject the restoration of communications with Azerbaijan, or cancel the start of the border delimitation and demarcation process. On the contrary, normalization with both countries may help push forward the economic modernization of Armenia. It only implies that Armenia should take the necessary steps to prevent Armenia's transformation into an economic backyard of Turkey and Azerbaijan.

On the external front, Armenia should carefully assess the interests of the leading players in the region – Russia, the US, and Iran. Which countries are interested in preventing Turkey's dominance in the South Caucasus? As a mid-size power, Turkey is vying for regional influence in multiple areas and is seeking to have balanced relations with different poles, and Turkey's behavior in the current crisis is another proof of that strategy.

If Russia successfully resists the unprecedented pressure from the West and remains one of the main poles in the emerging multipolar world, its interests lie in balancing Turkish influence in its neighborhood, including the South Caucasus. It does not imply that Russia and Turkey will stop their economic cooperation. It simply means that Russia will seek to prevent Turkish dominance over the South Caucasus.

Iran is another middle power in the quest of its role in the new world order. Even if Iran and world powers reach an agreement to restore the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, Iran is unlikely to be a part of the American pole for the foreseeable future. Iran will continue to see the US as its main adversary and seek to restrict the US direct or indirect, via Israel and Turkey, influence in its neighborhood, including South Caucasus (Poghosyan, 2021). The most efficient way to do that in our region is to support Russia and balance Turkey.

Thus, Russia and Iran are both interested to see less Turkish influence in the South Caucasus. They will not do that because they love Armenians or hate Turks, but because of their vital national interests. As we mentioned, Armenia should be interested in normalizing relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and the

government is making significant efforts in that direction. However, conventional wisdom suggests that Armenia should not want to see Turkish dominance in the South Caucasus. In this context, Armenia, Iran, and Russia have coinciding interests – to prevent Turkey from dominating the South Caucasus.

In this scenario, India is another state to work closely with. The Armenian and Indian nations share a long history of friendly interactions, and during their millennia-long relations, the two countries have never acted against each other. The vibrant Armenian community in India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries played a significant role in fomenting ties between the two people. At the same time, friendly relations between India and the Soviet Union contributed to the re-emergence of contacts.

However, history is not the primary bond between Armenia and India. As the global order passes through its most significant transformation since the end of the Cold War and the unipolar moment fades away, India is set to become one of the primary actors of the emerging multipolar world. Meanwhile, as Turkey under President Erdogan has embarked on the path to becoming a regional powerhouse in its neighborhoods, including Central Asia, South Asia, South Caucasus, Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East, and Western Balkans, India is increasingly concerned about the growing Turkey – Pakistan strategic partnership, which recently was enlarged by the inclusion of Azerbaijan (Pamuk, 2021). Turkey brought Pakistan into South Caucasus, and on December 10, 2020, as Azerbaijan organized so called victory parade, the Azerbaijani capital was full of Pakistani flags as a sign of gratitude to Pakistan for its support during the war (Baku, 2020).

The emergence of the Turkey – Pakistan – Azerbaijan partnership, which may very soon be transformed into a strategic alliance, brought the South Caucasus into the focus of Indian foreign policy. As Armenia faces pressure and military blackmail from Azerbaijan and Turkey it is well suited to become an indispensable partner for India in the South Caucasus, to play a role of buffer against Turkey.

The friendly relations between Armenia and Iran and India's interest in using Iran as a country to reach Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Europe add additional geopolitical and geo-economic value to Armenia – India relations. Iran, like India, does not want to see Turkish dominance in the South Caucasus and is extremely concerned about the growing Panturkism fever spreading in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. As India pursues a balanced policy in the Russia – West confrontation, growing Armenia – India relations will not raise many concerns in Moscow. The Kremlin may not view a potential Indian involvement in the South Caucasus as detrimental to its interests, which cannot be said for the EU, and especially the US activities.

The Armenia – India partnership also has a geo-economic dimension. Since 2016 Armenia and Iran, along with Georgia, Bulgaria, and Greece, have been negotiating the launch of the “Persian Gulf – Black Sea” multimodal transport corridor to connect Iran with Europe. The US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and re-imposition of American sanctions created additional obstacles for this project, but it did not lose its significance. India is looking to establish new India – Europe transport routes. As reaching Europe via Iran and Russia (International North-South Transport Corridor) seems unlikely due to Western sanctions imposed on Russia, the “Persian Gulf – Black Sea” corridor may become a valuable platform for India to reach Europe via Iran, Armenia, and Georgia (Poghosyan, 2023).

Conclusion. The transformation of Post-Cold war world order has triggered the rising competition between great powers for global and regional influence. The Russia – Ukraine war resulted in direct West – Russia confrontation, with no obvious ways of normalization of relations. The changes in global and regional orders have impacted many areas in the world, and the South Caucasus is not an exception. Located in strategic crossroad, region has witnessed the increase competition between regional and global actors. As Armenia seeks to overcome the implications of its defeat in 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war, it faces tough geopolitical choices amidst unprecedented Russia – West confrontation. It may choose to become a Western bulwark against Russia, assuming the role of Georgia under President Saakashvili. This way will result in complete loss of Nagorno Karabakh and transformation of Armenia into Azerbaijan and Turkey economic and political backyard. Another option for Armenia to foster its partnership with Russia, Iran, and India to resist coercive diplomacy of Azerbaijan and Turkey. Given the dynamic changes in regional geopolitics, Armenia does not have much time to make a final decision.

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