

Igor Kveselava, ScD in History

Georgian Technical University, Georgia

Amiran Khevturiani, ScD in International Relations

Georgian Technical University, Georgia

RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Along with the disappearance of the Soviet Union from the political map of the world, two major geostrategic macroregions were formed, such as the Wider Europe and the Greater Middle East. The intersection of the interests of these two geopolitical giants takes place over the South Caucasus, which is why political scientists place it on the periphery of both Greater Europe and the Greater Middle East. In general, the issue of the South Caucasus is one of the most difficult and at the same time topical in modern international relations. Its geopolitical significance is growing to the extent that its control means gaining influence over the military-political and economic processes in the Middle East and Central Asia. At the present stage, the Russian Federation, which fully controls the northern part of the Caucasus, considers controlling of its southern part as vital importance, since the seeming tranquility, implementing with the brutal force, in the North Caucasus does not give it a sense of solid stability.

Keywords: Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, geopolitics, security.

In the context of the formation of the New World Political System, the fundamental national interests of Russia, both regionally and sub-regionally, are linked to the problems and challenges that it had, as a political heir, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the loss of such a huge part of the territories, it remains the world's largest country, the sixth-largest country with a population, and its nuclear potential keeps Russia the status of a superpower.

The foreign policy and interests of the Russian Federation are more or less interesting to any country of the world, regardless of the geographical situation. This is especially important for its so-called Near Neighborhood countries, among which the South Caucasus countries (Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia) occupy a special place. In general, the issue of the South Caucasus is one of the most difficult and at the same time topical in modern international relations. Its geopolitical significance is growing to the extent that its control means gaining influence over the military-political and economic processes in the Middle East and Central Asia. That is why the interests of many regional or non-regional countries have always been intersecting in this strategically important region.

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Russian Caucasiologists consider the Caucasus region a strategic destination. History remembers a lot of bloody confrontation for obtaining the influence of the region, even when oil did not play a crucial role in world politics. The various action plans for pipeline construction emphasize its enormous geostrategic importance. Although the economic efficiency of the region is not the sole and decisive priority in international relations, it may even be sacrificed to geopolitical interests, which often happens. The geopolitical uniqueness of the Caucasus is also manifested in the fact that it is the center of the crossroads of civilizations; Gaining influence on the region gives unique opportunities to expand the geographic area of influence.

From the standpoint of the "Eurasianists", the geopolitical model of the Caucasus region is presented as follows:

¹ Kemp, G., Harkavy, R. (1997). *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East*. Brookings Institution Press, 512.

Caucasus – This is a unified geopolitical system that geographically coincides with the so-called "Rimland". It is the most complex combination of different nations, cultures, and religions. Practically, elsewhere in the Caucasus, the administrative borders do not coincide with the settlements of ethnic groups. It is precisely this ethnic and territorial configuration that weakens it, in terms of security. External forces, in various ways, tend to easily escalate the political situation in the region, which is a direct challenge to Russia. That is why, in the works of American geopolitics, the North Caucasus is unambiguously considered the sector from which the process of Russian disintegration will begin¹.

Of course, such a radical view of Russia's leading geopolitical ideology, on the one hand, points to the geostrategic importance of the South Caucasus region, and on the other hand, points Kremlin to the imminent threats to national security. Theoretically, in the position of the Eurasianists, we can read a kind of recommendation to Russia's ruling political force, which may mean limiting the sovereignty of regional actors and the need to return them quickly to Russian political orbit, which Moscow, in principle, deliberately pursues: "Our core vital interests in the field of economy, defense and security is concentrated in the space of CIS, and the protection of the rights of our citizens living in this area, are fundamental to the country's national security². As for Transcaucasia (South Caucasus), Russia has never thought about leaving this territory, on the contrary, our goal is to strengthen our position in this crucial region"³.

This is precisely how the post-Soviet space, including the importance of the South Caucasus region, was assessed by Vladimir Putin presenting at the third Russian-Armenian regional forum in Gyumri in 2013.

The collapse of the Soviet Union hugely undermined Russia's geopolitical situation. Politically and economically demoralized Russia, despite numerous internal or external problems, started to restore its lost position in the post-Soviet space. Although it lacked "positive" leverages, both ideologically and economically, it could launch such "negative" tools as – to provoke ethnic conflict.

In the early 1990s, soon after independence, the young republics of the South Caucasus began to express their foreign-policy orientation. Azerbaijan, as a related state, immediately caught the eye of its historical ally, Turkey. Georgia took the course to the west, and Armenia, which never hid its sympathy for Russia, eventually chose the latter. It is possible to assume that three different foreign policy vector may be one of the reasons for not creating a regional security system, which in the end gave us a political situation as we have today: nowadays, in the international system South Caucasus rightly is considered as the center of "hot spots", which is clear, jeopardizing the political and economic stability.

Naturally, other regional or non-regional countries, besides Russia, have their interests in the South Caucasus region, such as the USA, Turkey, Iran, Israel, Great Britain, France, Germany, China has been noticeably active lately. These interests can be economic, political and geopolitical, which is quite normal in international relations, but not for Russia. The country is especially jealous of the US. The Kremlin believes that Washington, along with its traditional allies, is trying to drive Russia out of the region and establish its hegemony. "American politicians are inclined, to declare Latin America and Europe as a zone of vital interest to the United States when they are not ready to recognize Russia's interests in its near neighborhood"⁴.

In recent years, despite the positive developments in Russian-Turkish relations, which have been largely driven by a shift in common interest in the Syrian issue, Russia, after the United States, is most concerned about its activity in the region. Turkey is a NATO member, it is Azerbaijan's strategic partner and has political and economic interests in the region. At the same time, it has a difficult relationship with Armenia, the mainline of opposition goes in the early 20th century on the issue of recognition of the "Armenian genocide" in the Ottoman Empire, which Turkey has not yet recognized and openly opposes such formulation.

Iran is also one of the main actors in the region. Historically the Caucasus and the Caspian region have been the main springboard for the Russo-Iranian confrontation, but since the emergence of a new player in the region as the US, historical reality has changed.

Against the backdrop of the Iran-US confrontation, new perspectives have emerged in the development of Russian-Iranian relations. Iran has a good relationship with Armenia (which is a Russian ally in the region), and has a very pro-Armenian stance in the Karabakh conflict, while traditionally has a tense relationship

¹ Дугин, А.Г. (2005). *Геополитика как эффективный метод современной российской политической теории и практики*, 984.

² Указ об утверждении Стратегического курса Российской Федерации с государствами – участниками Содружества Независимых Государств 1995 (Президент РФ). *Российская газета*, сент.

³ Выступление на заседании Российско-армянского межрегионального форума, Гюмри (2013). <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19733>>.

⁴ Стратегия национальной безопасности США в новом тысячелетии (2000, январь, 20). *Независимая газета*.

with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Under the current geopolitical configuration, Iran, despite its traditional historical interests, is, unlike Turkey, refraining from substantial activation in the South Caucasus because of the Russian factor.

In international relations, the military-political component has traditionally been an essential element for Russia in the realization of strategic goals. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was forced to reduce the number of military facilities and bases worldwide, leading to a severe financial crisis and political instability in Russia at that time. In such circumstances, the Kremlin decided to focus on the post-Soviet space and maintain its military presence as much as possible. One of the first orientation in this regard was the South Caucasus.

After the withdrawal of troops from Eastern European countries, Germany and the Baltic states, it was the South Caucasus turn. Military bases in Vaziani, Batumi, and Akhalkalaki have been shut down in Georgia since 2007, but the Gudauta base remained untouched, the closure of which was also determined by the agreement reached at the OSCE Istanbul Summit on November 17, 1999, but Russia did not fulfill that promise, as it was expected.

Since the August war of 2008, Russia has significantly increased its military potential in Georgia at the expense of the occupied territories. With the agreement reached with the so-called leaders of separatist regions, on September 15, 2009, it has legitimized military units already deployed in these regions. Specifically, the 7th Russian base was deployed at the Gudauta military base in Abkhazia, where about 4,000 servicemen are serving. 4000 troops were also deployed in the territory of the so-called "South Ossetia", in Tskhinvali and Java regions.

Armenia is the most important Russian military outpost in the South Caucasus. The 102nd Russian military base deployed in the city of Gyumri is one of the most important elements in terms of military-political cooperation. It was created under the Agreement on the Legal Status of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation located in the territory of Armenia on August 21, 1992, and the agreement signed between the leaders of two countries on March 16, 1995¹. The base has 5,000 personnel. It is noteworthy that Moscow does not pay the rent for the use of the base. Moreover, it is also partially financed by the Armenian budget².

Azerbaijan is the only South Caucasian state where Russia does not have military bases today. Its territory was soon abandoned by Russian troops after the collapse of the USSR. The last outpost they retained on its territory until 2012 was the Gabala radar station, which, according to official reports, was closed due to a lack of agreement on the amount of lease between the parties.

Russia's economic interests in the South Caucasus are also specific. Its economic interests are hostages to its political goals. Economic leverage in the hands of Russia is usually a powerful political tool and a means of manipulation. Moreover, to punish the disobedient neighbors, it does not refuse to carry out various economic diversions, which, in the case of Georgia, have already been confirmed by the country's official authorities. Consequently, its international authority is also significantly undermined in this respect.

In the backdrop that Russia occupies 20% of Georgia's territory, the deployment of the country's most important economic objects raises many questions about security. In today's reality, not a small part of the Georgian business depends directly on the Russian capital. In addition to the unfairness, there is also the risk of having a unilateral visa regime with the occupying country: Russian citizens are free to cross the border into our country when our citizens cannot do the same. Moreover, their soldiers, deploying at the border, which are subordinated to the Russian Security Service, deprive our internally displaced citizens of the right to move freely within our internationally recognized territories.

Russia, which has vital interests (geopolitical, geoeconomic, military, energy) in the South Caucasus, is making every effort to regain full control over the region. The probability of this, according to the factor of the balance of forces in the region, is quite high. If such a thing happens, it will inevitably continue in the rest of the post-Soviet space, as we have seen in the example of Ukraine. Also, as a transcontinental zone between Europe and Asia, the South Caucasus is unique as it is the shortest route to Asia, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Persian Gulf, as well as for Turkey and the Panturkic groups, it is the main key towards "Turan". That is why Russia in every way is opposed to enhancing the influence of competing countries in the region, considering it as an area of exclusive influence. Unresolved ethno-territorial conflicts, as a mechanism and instrument of effective impact, continue to serve Russia's strategic interests in the region. And if we consider the importance and scale of the military bases in the occupied territories of Armenia and Georgia, then Russia's geopolitical advantage over its competitors grows drastically.

¹ 102-я российская военная база. *Википедия*. <<https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/102>>.

² Объяснение: российская военная база. <<https://mediamax.am/ru/newsparzabanaum/13078>>.

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