



RUSSIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Armenia–Russia Relations: the Revolution and the Map

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Abstract

Two polar viewpoints dominate discourses around Armenia's foreign policy. One is that the Velvet Revolution should have led to a U-turn in a pro-Western and anti-Russian direction. The other is that there is no alternative to Armenia's pro-Russian stand. Disappointingly for many, the post-revolutionary authorities of Armenia appear to have moved from the first to the second in a matter of months. This article argues that the polarity is exaggerated: while a power rotation could not change Armenia's foreign policy priorities, dictated as they are by Armenia's surroundings, the existence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the sealed borders with Turkey, some change is possible and inevitable as a new generation of elites accedes to power. Unlike their predecessors who grew up and came of age in the USSR, the new elites were raised in independent Armenia and operate within new geopolitical and geo-cultural paradigms.

Changing Expectations

Following the power handover in Armenia in April–May 2018, many observers, especially external ones, predicted significant worsening, or at least a major crisis, in Russia–Armenia relations. The forecasts were chiefly founded on the history of previous Color Revolutions: those in Georgia and Ukraine, for example, did not just cause a deterioration of relations with Russia, or, in Georgia's case, the severing of diplomatic ties. They led to wars, as a result of which Georgia and Ukraine lost parts of their territories. In these two countries and in Kyrgyzstan, the revolutions were viewed as efforts to break with the Soviet or post-Soviet past, moving from what is Soviet and archaic to something that is Western and modern: a change that amounted to a civilizational shift. Given the ongoing standoff between Russia and the West, it is logical to expect this transition to involve a country's putting some distance between Russia and itself.

In the run-up to the Velvet Revolution, this was also the vision held by Armenia's future prime minister Nikol Pashinyan and the opposition alliance that he led. As a member of parliament, Pashinyan voted against Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union. Later, the Way Out parliament faction that he lead actively campaigned for Armenia to leave the EEU on the grounds that it was a union of Asian, backward, un-modernized regimes. While this sounds simplistic, it makes sense within the post-colonial worldview, common in post-Soviet countries, in which modernization is synonymous with drifting away from the former parent state and/or becoming pro-Western. Through this lens, alliance with Europe is viewed as a cure to all things Soviet, whereas Russia is seen to project a Soviet imperialistic modality.

The U-Turn?

There was, however, another viewpoint, more common in Armenia and the former USSR than in the West, that no new regime in Armenia could choose an alternative foreign policy, simply because there was no choice to be had. Arguing that a complex combination of external factors precludes radical foreign policy changes in Armenia, proponents of this viewpoint appear to have triumphed shortly after Pashinyan's accession to power. The revolutionary leadership of Armenia made a U-turn in its statements about Russia in a matter of weeks. Not only does post-revolution Armenia's foreign policy represent (even admittedly) a smooth continuation of the previous one, but the very opposition leaders who used to campaign against all ties with Russia are now giving lip service to the need to improve and enhance Russia–Armenia ties. Stressing the importance of continuity in foreign policy, the new government emphasizes the unique nature of Armenia's revolution, which was by no means a "Color Revolution" but a "Velvet" one, in the sense that, unlike the Color Revolutions, it had no relevance to foreign policy in general and relations with Russia in particular, but stemmed from the need to reform the domestic policy sphere, eradicating corruption and ensuring good governance.

In some ways, this is true: the revolutionary agenda was chiefly about domestic politics, and so was the trigger of the power handover. Unlike Ukraine, where things were set in motion by a controversy over the signing of an Association Agreement with the EU, the spark that ignited the revolution in Armenia came from President Serzh Sargsyan's attempt to remain in office for a third consecutive term, treading in the footsteps of the leaders of some Central Asian states and Belarus. By no means central to their struggle, the Westerniza-

tion rhetoric used by the revolutionaries was instrumental, allowing them to criticize the perceived pro-Russian bias in Sargsyan's policies.

It is also true that Europe and the West are perceived in Armenia as symbols of development, modernization and progress. However, while most people want these things for Armenia, support for a pro-Western political orientation is less widespread. Among the new elites, there is a growing perception that orientation is not a requirement for progress: one can strive to be European without being pro-European. Prime Minister Pashinyan and his supporters now voice the view that European choices need to be made by Armenians inside Armenia, not in the form of an orientation.

It Comes with the Territory

The reason for the perceived U-turn in Pashinyan's politics—and for the viewpoint that Armenia's foreign policy is written in stone—has to do with geography more than anything else.

The map shows Armenia as a country with four neighbors: Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkey. A less politically correct map shows Armenia to have a fifth neighbor: the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, a de-facto state with its own constitution, parliament, president and army, which is in fact merged with Armenia in every other aspect of life: infrastructural, economic, financial, cultural and linguistic. The mutual border is almost invisible, with goods and people freely moving across, but rather than opening Armenia to the world, this border shuts it off: all the external borders of Nagorno-Karabakh are sealed as a result of the conflict, and so are Armenia's mutual borders with Azerbaijan and its close ally, Turkey.

So, for all ends and purposes except cartography, Armenia has only two neighbors: Iran and Georgia. With just two neighbors with whom to trade, two-thirds of Armenia's trade turnover goes via Georgia, and one third, via Iran. Given the complex format of U.S.–Iran and Russia–Georgia relations (including a lack of bilateral diplomatic ties), and the fact that the U.S. and Russia are both important for Armenia, working for a political equilibrium has been part of Armenia's survival tactics since its independence, regardless of regimes and personalities.

The existence of the unresolved conflict creates needs in terms of defense and security, of which Russia is the only potential provider. This makes Armenia different from Georgia, which no longer needs a strong army since it has lost its claims to South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Some politicians in Armenia—including some of the revolutionaries prior to their accession to power—mentioned

the EU as an alternative source of security. However, the EU as such is not a security provider; it gets its own security from the NATO, of which Turkey, Azerbaijan's ally in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, is a member state. Plus, NATO has embargoed sales of arms to the region.

Having no alternative in the realm of security, Armenia has a red line in its relations with Russia that no leader can cross regardless of their pro-Western orientation. Once in power, Nikol Pashinyan acknowledged this in his public statements. He even admitted that it comes with the territory: he said that his views as head of state were so different from what he had preached as an opposition politician *just because* he is now the head of state.

A Post-Post-Soviet World

This said, one can still argue that Armenia's foreign policy cannot be immune to revolutions. The 2018 Velvet Revolution brought about a change of political generations. The Soviet people in power have been replaced by post-Soviet people who were educated and built their professional and political careers in independent Armenia. Sociologists call them the Independence Generation. The world in which they grew up was nothing like their parents' late USSR. Their mental maps and school books, their lifestyles and strategies, their worldviews and narratives are dramatically different from those of men like Serzh Sargsyan for whom the USSR is part of their biography. Without the Soviet indoctrination, the new generation has created a different culture, including a different political culture.

While some of the older-generation leaders had been anti-Soviet dissidents in their younger years, in their post-Soviet lives they had to make an intellectual effort not to think or act like Soviet people. Their instincts were Soviet; those of the new generation are not. As a result, the new generation searches for development models outside the former USSR. They look to the developed world for values, reforms, freedoms and good governance practices; they would never look to Kazakhstan or Belarus, and even know little about those countries and their political models.

The pivot that some expected Armenia's foreign policy to make after the Velvet Revolution is unlikely, because whoever leads Armenia, security is a red line they cannot cross. However, it is also unlikely that Armenia's foreign policy will remain unchanged, because development is a necessity for Armenia, and its only source is Europe. Looking for development in Minsk is just as futile as looking for guns in Strasbourg. This is where Armenia gets its "complementary" foreign policy. Unwilling to serve as a battlefield between East and West, Armenia avoids the dichotomy, insisting that pro-

Western need not be anti-Russian and pro-Russian need not be anti-Western.

As a result, the West blames Armenia for being pro-Russian and Russia suspects it of being pro-Western. However, for a quarter century, Armenia has been able to maintain its equilibrium in a tense environment; for example, it is the only member state of the Eurasian Economic Union to have signed a CEPA with the EU. In some ways, Armenia's foreign policy line is similar to the one that Finland implemented after WWII and until the fall of the USSR, also unwillingly, under the pressure of geographical constraints, and also regardless of domestic political developments.

In domestic politics, post-revolution Armenia also appears to be reproducing the pre-revolution configuration. In it, one of the smaller parties criticizes the alliance and cooperation with Russia from a strong pro-Western perspective. In the previous parliament, this role was played by Way Out, the alliance led by Pashinyan; in the new one, the niche was taken over by the Bright Armenia Party, a former Way Out coalition member. At the other end of the gamut, the Prosperous Armenia

Party campaigns to strengthen ties to Russia. Together, Bright Armenia and Prosperous Armenia have about a third of the seats, whereas the other two thirds—the constitutional majority—are held by the ruling alliance, My Step, which has already shifted to a centrist position similar to that of its predecessors.

Arguably, this self-replicating system to some extent represents Armenian society. The younger, more educated and well-to-do classes, chiefly residents of central Yerevan, prioritize European-style development. Older, less urbanized and less privileged citizens believe in ties to the former parent state. The majority does not have a clear political orientation and supports an ad hoc foreign policy.

Altogether, one can argue that a subtle, consensus-based policy tailored to the changing interests of various actors does not just increase Armenia's chances of survival, but may also enable it to elaborate policy strategies that are more beneficial to modernization than rigid positioning on one side of the political divide could ever be.

About the Author

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Azerbaijan and Russia: Towards a Renewed Alliance, for a New Era

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Abstract

This article examines the recent shifts in Azerbaijan's balancing of relations between Russia and the West. It argues that the Azerbaijani elite have been undergoing a shift from placing more emphasis on its relations with the West, towards an emerging strategic accord with Moscow. There are both micro- and macro-geopolitical developments driving this process. On a micro-level, the Azeri elite has gradually come to distrust the West's intention to and capability of supporting them in their core security and state development aims. From a macro-perspective, shifts in geopolitical alliances around Azerbaijan are acting to attract Baku towards Moscow, and away from Brussels and Washington.

Since Heydar Aliyev, the father of the incumbent president Ilham Aliyev, became the country's president in 1993, Azerbaijan has been known for its staunch pursuit of a so-called "balanced" policy in its relations with the outside world, particularly Russia and the West. Whereas in the past this policy tended to be "balanced" more in favour of the West as far as Azerbaijan's *strategic* interests were concerned, Baku's political disposition has shifted decidedly towards Russia in recent years.

The changing nature of Azerbaijani–Russian relations became obvious to outside observers during the first European Games, held in Baku in June 2015—the first high-profile sporting event hosted by Azerbaijan. Whereas nearly all European leaders openly ignored the event, citing Azerbaijan's poor record on human rights and freedom of the press, Russian President Vladimir Putin attended the opening ceremony. Russia's behaviour during Azerbaijan's counter-offensive against Armenian forces on 2–5 April 2016 was likewise taken by many as clear evidence of the growing Azerbaijan–Russia alliance and its increasingly strategic nature. Russia refused to provide military assistance to Armenia and declined to condemn Azerbaijan's actions, stoking speculations that those actions must have been agreed upon with Moscow in advance. As anti-Russian sentiments in Armenia grew as a result of these developments, Baku's relationship with Moscow intensified still further. Indeed, these relations grew so strong that an Azerbaijani MP, Ali Huseynli, who chairs the Azerbaijani parliamentary committee on legal affairs and state-building and leads the Azerbaijani–Russian inter-parliamentary cooperation group, suggested in August 2018 that Baku could join the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Discussion about Azerbaijan joining the Russia-led military bloc would have been unimaginable even a year earlier.

Some analysts have tended to disregard the emerging Russia–Azerbaijan alliance, deeming it "merely

a temporary marriage of convenience aimed at maximizing both countries' geopolitical influence," or seeing it as deriving solely from a shared model of (authoritarian) governance. Yet relations between these two unlikely partners rest on a far more solid and deeper foundation than might be apparent from a quick glance, and the growing partnership between Azerbaijan and Russia is likely to soon develop into a strategic alliance.

Indeed, Azerbaijan's foreign policy in the initial years of independence was motivated almost exclusively by the fear of Russian revisionism and the quest to liberate the occupied territories in and around Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenian forces. The so-called "contract of the century" that Azerbaijan signed with an international consortium in September 1994 to develop and produce oil from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli fields in the Caspian Sea, its aggressive pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration, and the westward orientation of the chosen pipeline routes for its oil and gas have all been derivative of the country's quest to retain independence, restore its territorial integrity, and thus avoid repeating the fate of its first experience of modern statehood in 1918–20, when Azerbaijan ultimately lost its independence to Soviet Russia and some of its territories (part of Zangezur) to Armenia. Consequently, like Armenia and Iran, Russia in the 1990s was excluded from all major regional projects initiated by or around Azerbaijan; any moves Baku made *vis-à-vis* Russia at the time were instrumental in nature, intended to either appease a potentially revisionist northern neighbour or—in an attempt to extract greater concessions from its Western partners (both in Europe and the United States) or counteract their criticism of the country's less-than-democratic mode of governance—demonstrate that Baku did have an alternative geopolitical route to pursue.

Over the past decade, several developments on the micro- and macro-levels have worked to gradually alter

this established regional dynamic and alignment pattern, bringing Azerbaijan back into the Russian fold.

The Micro-Level: Disappointments and the Failure of the “All-Eggs-in-a-Western-Basket” Policy

Russia’s war with Georgia in August 2008, which resulted in Russia’s recognition of the independence of Georgia’s breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, served as a watershed event in the South Caucasus. The West’s inability to counter Moscow’s stance undermined the West’s credibility, jeopardising both its commitment to the security and territorial integrity of states in the region and its capacity to live up to that commitment. The 2008/10 global financial and economic crisis—and the latter’s implications for the Western economy—served to further undermine the West’s discursive power in Baku.

Beyond its overt incapacity in the face of Russian power in the region and the homegrown economic crisis, the West also began to be seen as *unwilling* to address the country’s pressing security problems. Part of this reality was that despite the westward orientation of Baku’s foreign policy, including as expressed in the orientation of its energy pipelines, Azerbaijan failed to secure explicit recognition—either by Washington or by Brussels—that Armenia was occupying part of its territory, an outcome evidenced by the voting record on United Nations General Assembly Resolution 10693 (passed on 14 March 2008), which reaffirmed the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and demanded “the immediate withdrawal of all Armenian forces from all occupied territories there.” The United States voted against, as did France, while the rest of the EU states chose to abstain. In short, no Western state voted in favour of the resolution. Likewise, in January 2016, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) voted against a resolution on the “escalation of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh and the other occupied territories of Azerbaijan,” based on a report by British former PACE member Robert Walter, which called for “the withdrawal of Armenian armed forces and other irregular armed forces from Nagorno-Karabakh and the other occupied territories of Azerbaijan [and] the establishment of full sovereignty of Azerbaijan in these territories.” Lack of movement in this direction has significantly undermined Azerbaijan’s interest in the West and prompted it to look elsewhere.

Likewise, the West’s refusal in the 2000s to finance the construction of the Baku-sponsored Kars–Akhalkalaki–Tbilisi–Baku (KATB) railway project in what amounted, in the eyes of the Baku elite, to nothing less than an act of solidarity with—and deferral to—Yerevan, called attention to the reality that the West would not always act in Baku’s best interests, including when

Western support was most needed. Finally, the amount of effort the West—both the United States and the European Union—put into fostering a rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia in 2008–09, at the alleged expense of Azerbaijan’s stated interests and in open defiance of the latter’s position, only served to reinforce the perceptual shift in Baku’s interaction with the West.

Beyond its perceived incapacity and lack of willingness to resolve Azerbaijan’s pressing economic and security problems, the West has gradually come to be perceived as a direct threat in its own right. With Western financial and political support increasingly tied to and conditional upon instituting democratic forms of governance and with Western criticism of Azerbaijan’s performance in this respect ever more pointed, Baku has gradually come to view Western engagement as no less of a threat to its cherished sovereignty than Moscow’s perceived desire, in the first half of the 1990s, to reverse the collapse of the Soviet Union. Just as Moscow’s alleged efforts to instrumentalise its energy resources, as well as the so-called “frozen” conflicts in the broader region, have long been perceived as derivative of, and serving, Russia’s neo-imperial ambitions, the West’s use of democratic discourse in relations with its partners in the east and south has come to be regarded among the Baku elite as a control mechanism designed to facilitate Western neo-imperialist penetration—indeed, as “a dangerous geopolitical weapon” set to help the West “realise [its] principal foreign policy objectives” and “formulate [its] agenda in any given region of the world.” The wave of so-called “coloured revolutions” across the post-Soviet space and the Balkans during the early 2000s, particularly the 2003 Rose revolution in Georgia and the 2004 Orange revolution in Ukraine, and the West’s perceived role in fostering them, only came to add to the perception of the West as a threat. Now seen as a neo-imperial power centre in pursuit of dominance and control, the West has gradually come to be regarded as far more dangerous to regime survival than Russia, particularly in light of the West’s involvement in the recent war dynamics in the Middle East and the toppling of “unwanted” leaders in the region, including in Iraq and Libya.

Consequently, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has gradually intensified his anti-Western discourse. In a March 2015 speech on the occasion of the Novruz holiday, Ilham Aliyev clearly delineated his vision of the present world order. He argued that “the world has entered a new period” in which “global politics [...] is governed not by international law, but by hypocrisy, double standards, discrimination, racism, Islamophobia and xenophobia. These are today’s realities. Therefore, we must be prepared for it and we are prepared,” even as “some foreign circles are waging an overt campaign against Azerbaijan” to the extent of “almost declar[ing] a cold war on [the country].”

In a speech opening the October 2016 ministerial meeting dedicated to the results of socioeconomic development in the first nine months of that year—a speech that some pundits claimed was “a culmination of the comprehensive reformulation of Azerbaijan’s political strategy”—Ilham Aliyev addressed the position of those who advocate for Azerbaijan integrating more deeply into European structures:

Some people say that... we have to integrate into Europe. The question is which Europe are we supposed to integrate into? Today's Europe is in front of our eyes. The top leaders of the European Union acknowledge that Europe is experiencing a deep crisis today. Are we supposed to integrate into a crisis? Are we supposed to integrate into where they say “stop Moslems”? Are we supposed to integrate into the society of those who apply double standards to Moslem refugees? Are we supposed to integrate into the society of those who keep Moslems in cages?

This narrative has been made manifest in the policy realm: Azerbaijan turned down the offer of an association agreement with the EU, which was set to replace the partnership and cooperation agreement concluded in 1999. Azerbaijan’s refusal to join the agreement, which Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine all signed in 2017, sent a clear message about its geopolitical and civilisational choice. Described by some as “an eye-opener,” Baku’s rejection was a sign that Azerbaijan no longer identified with European values and instead sought only the material, technical benefits that “thin” cooperation with the organisation and its individual members could offer. Azerbaijan’s move, in May 2017, to block the Azerbaijani Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), along with a few other Internet TV services, including Germany-based *Meydan TV*, further reinforced Baku’s message about its rapidly evolving geopolitical orientation.

While drifting away from Western power structures, Azerbaijan, like Turkey, has been actively moving towards anti-Western, anti-globalist power constellations in the Global South (including in particular the Moslem world, the BRICS, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) in pursuit of legitimisation and survival. The West’s latest stand-off with Erdogan, in this respect, has served as the final trigger of nascent anti-Westernism among the Azerbaijani ruling elite and has intensified the perceived necessity of a potent balance. Just like a pro-Western disposition in the 1990s, anti-Westernism in the 2010s has offered a shared discursive platform to unite Azerbaijan and Turkey at this new stage of bilateral engagement. Indeed, it has salvaged Azerbaijan’s relations with Tur-

key, which had been at the point of crumbling under the weight of Erdogan’s AKP regime—both its pro-Islamic dispositions and, particularly, following Ankara’s move in 2008–09 to seek a historic rapprochement with Azerbaijan’s archenemy, Armenia, at the expense of the former. While the immediate crisis was resolved thanks to Azerbaijan’s masterful deployment of the energy card and pro-Azerbaijan sentiment in Turkey itself, a longer-term and increasingly sustainable harmonisation of relations occurred as Turkey’s relations with Washington suffered serious erosion and setback in the 2010s.

At this stage, Russia, which has seen its own broad crisis of relations with the West rapidly unfold, has risen as the single most important strategic ally for both Azerbaijan and Turkey. In fact, Turkey’s rapidly shifting geopolitical disposition away from Washington and towards Moscow in the second half of the 2010s served to create an alternative potentiality loop in which Azerbaijan’s interests, too, have become ever more securely aligned with those of Russia.

The Macro-Level: A Renewed Cycle of the Global-Level Struggle between the West and Russia/Turkey

The global aspect of the new stage of Azerbaijani–Russian relations, which can be understood as an extension of the intensified struggle between the West, on one hand, and Russia (and Turkey), on the other, has been by far the most important factor pulling Baku firmly into the Russian orbit, and will likely continue to do so for many years to come. And, whereas the micro-level dynamics described above could only provide a thin platform for cooperation, whereby Azerbaijan would turn towards Russia in *tactical* attempts to address the most immediate security challenges facing the state, the macro-level developments have nurtured conditions leading to the rise of nothing short of a strategic alliance between Baku and Moscow.

Indeed, the international system today is characterised by rising competition between the U.S.-led Western alliance, on one hand, and the rapidly evolving allied force that brings together Russia, Iran, and Turkey, on the other. With anti-Westernism as a shared platform, Russia’s relations with Iran and Turkey have grown at an unprecedented rate over the past few years. Overall, Russia’s influence in Eurasia has been growing to such an extent that some experts have warned that, unless the United States “actively re-engage[s] with the world community,” “Russian [might soon overtake] English as the language of commerce.”

In light of these developments, the latest stage of Azerbaijan’s relations with Russia cannot be understood

in isolation from the dynamics of interaction within the Russia–Turkey–Iran triangle, on one hand, and the position of this “tripartite” alliance in the international struggle for global dominance, on the other. Viewed from this perspective, Azerbaijan’s recent strategic gravitation towards Russia should be seen not only as a response to the West’s increasing democratic pressure on Baku, but also—and most critically—as a natural choice in line with the dictum “my friend’s friend is my friend, and my friend’s enemy is my enemy.”

In Azerbaijan’s geopolitical imagination over the past three decades, Turkey has always stood as the one true friend on which it could consistently rely for support and understanding (A brief standoff around Turkey’s attempted rapprochement with Armenia in 2008–09 only served to upgrade relations between Baku and Ankara to a whole new level of strategic alliance). With Turkey seen as an indisputable friend, Russia—which is rapidly evolving into a strategic partner for Turkey—comes to be viewed as a natural friend. Meanwhile, the West—Turkey’s increasingly explicit antagonist—is left outside the realm of Baku’s affordable partners.

Indeed, it might be in light of this geopolitical choice, which it was compelled to make, that Baku has recently attracted an unprecedented degree of Western criticism and pressure, including as expressed in the fact that Azerbaijan became the first target of the British government’s newly-acquired power to use a so-called Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO) to seize the property and assets of foreign officials suspected of corruption and their families, a law that came into effect in early 2018. At the same time, a broader money-laundering operation of around 2.9 billion USD, allegedly handled by the Azerbaijani ruling elite over a two-year period through four shell companies registered in the United Kingdom, was made public under the catchy name of the Azerbaijani Laundromat. That is, Baku’s intensified relations with Russia were not so much a reaction to Western pressure as actually provoked that pressure. Apparently, Azerbaijan’s deepening engagement with Ankara and Moscow is now—rightly—seen by the West as indicative of Baku’s broader strategic choice of membership in a global alliance that the West considers as its main enemy today. Notably, the aforementioned pressure placed on Baku by the UK occurred in parallel with a diplomatic crisis between Russia and the West, and the UK in particular (again), over the poisoning in Britain of a Russian ex-spy: following Westminster’s accusation in March 2018 that Russia was behind the nerve agent attack on former double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, around twenty nations, including the United States, moved to expel a total of more than 150 Russian diplomats.

Impediments to Deepening Cooperation

Azerbaijan’s long-unresolved conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent regions stands as the main impediment to the further deepening of the strategic engagement between Moscow and Baku. While Azerbaijan’s relations with Russia have been increasingly conditioned by the global-level dynamics of East–West confrontation, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a primary determinant of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy preferences over the past three decades, has kept the country anchored in a parochial vision of world affairs, including its relations with the West and Russia. Limited to the confines of its own national statehood, this vision has, for example, prompted Baku to consistently criticise Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine, viewing the conflict exclusively through the lens of its own problem with occupation and thus blinded to any wider factors surrounding the Russian intervention.

The country’s embeddedness in global structures of power and potentiality works to bring Azerbaijan and Russia, along with Turkey and Iran, closer together in a rapidly growing and increasingly secure alliance of convenience. However, as long as the Nagorno-Karabakh problem persists, popular Azeri trust of Russia, too, will be difficult to fully secure and the public perception of Russia will continue to be a net negative, while any criticism of the West will be limited to the latter’s inability or unwillingness to offer an adequate response to Russia’s (potential or actual) aggression in the region.

For nearly three decades, Russia’s policy on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been hostage to its global and regional rivalry with the United States and the Euro-Atlantic alliance more broadly. Indeed, following NATO’s eastward expansion at the expense of Russia’s near abroad, particularly as expressed in former Soviet states joining NATO’s Partnership of Peace in 1994 and the Baltic states’ accession to the Alliance in March 2004, Russia’s insecurity *vis-à-vis* its southern neighbours, including its policies towards the break-away territories in Azerbaijan and Georgia, has been less about Russian imperialism and more about a very logical response to, and resistance against, expressions of U.S. imperialism in the region, including the encirclement strategy Washington has practiced against Moscow since the end of the Cold War. In effect, the “Anaconda” strategy that the US used during the Cold War to cut the Soviet Union off from access to the “warm” seas—hence such Western-sponsored Cold War military organisations as SEATO (Organisation of the Treaty of Southeast Asia), Cento (the Central Treaty), and others—was never ended and persists to this day.

Viewed from this perspective, Western engagement with Ukraine and Georgia is an extension of the

West's centuries-long strategy to cut Russia off from the Black Sea. Not only would this deprive Russia of access to a warm sea and the ocean, but it would also block its access to the Mediterranean and hence its maritime route to the Middle East. Consequently, Russia would lose its superpower or regional power status overnight. That is why it is only in Georgia and Ukraine that "colour" revolutions have occurred, and it is only on these two occasions that Putin has used force to prevent change along the Russian borders (that is, to prevent a Western incursion). This also makes it clear why no such measure has been taken to prevent the "democratic" (read: pro-Western) turn in Armenian politics: although long considered a Russian strategic ally in the region, Armenia—with no access to the Black Sea—is not as valuable to Russian interests as the likes of Georgia and Ukraine.

In this sense, keeping regional conflicts frozen might have been the only affordable way for post-Soviet Russia to prevent further U.S. infiltration into the region. With the path towards Western integration no longer a strategic option for Azerbaijan in view of the shifting alignment patterns in the region, and with Pashinyan's Armenia actively leaning towards the West at the expense of its pro-Russian disposition, maintaining the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh should make little to no sense from a Russian standpoint, and, if anything, will only damage its position, in that it will serve as the only serious impediment to the ever-deepening alliance between Azerbaijan and Russia (as part of the broader alliance with Turkey and Iran), undermining its potential to engage with issues of a far more consequential nature and broader—global—reach.

The first clear sign of this dramatic shift in the Russian position came with the signing, in August 2018, of a new convention on the legal status of the Caspian Sea—an issue that, like the regional conflicts, Russia (and Iran) had kept frozen for more than 20 years, in order to retain a level of control over the use of the sea's rich hydrocarbon resources and, *inter alia*, prevent the construction of the trans-Caspian pipeline linking Central Asian gas deposits via Azerbaijan to the European market, in the face of the West's active infiltration into the region's energy market at the expense of Russia's initial dominance in the field. Whereas the Russian effort to prevent such an agreement for two decades of the post-Cold War era was meant to ensure that states in the region did not intensify cooperation with the West at the expense of Russia, the move to sign the agreement, although it effectively only formalised what had long been practiced by the littoral states, was made, as Putin himself expressly stated, to "create conditions for bringing cooperation between [Russia itself

and the regional states] to a qualitatively new level of partnership, for the development of close cooperation on different trajectories." This is a dramatic shift in perspective, indeed. In many ways, the Caspian agreement has been a crucial milestone in the changing dynamic between Russia and Azerbaijan: even if Russia wished to facilitate a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on terms favourable to Azerbaijan, a bilateral alliance between Baku and Moscow could never mature, so long as Azerbaijan's energy export interests tied the country firmly to the Western orbit. Viewed from this perspective, the agreement cleared the way for thinking out a mechanism, whereby the longstanding post-Cold War energy rivalry between Azerbaijan and Russia could transform into a dynamically evolving partnership.

Notably, to keep the West (including NATO) out of the region, the convention still includes a clause that prevents non-Caspian countries from deploying military forces on the Caspian Sea and, although the document allows for the construction of underwater pipelines along the Caspian floor ("according to consent by the parties through whose sector the cable or pipeline should be built"), it makes this possibility conditional on environmental provisions ("ecological requirements and standards"). Russia and Iran have used the latter loophole to oppose the trans-Caspian pipeline in the past and could still use it to oppose such a pipeline in the future, but this would be of no concern to Azerbaijan, which has likewise never been interested in the trans-Caspian pipeline owing to supply competition considerations.

The latest wave of negotiations around Nagorno-Karabakh, including the meetings between the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia on 5 December 2018, when Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister, Elmar Mammadyarov, suggested that the parties had "achieved a mutual understanding for the first time in many years," and between the two country's presidents—Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan—on 22 January 2019 at the World Economic Forum in Davos, gives hope that Russia, just as in the case of the Caspian's legal status, might have given the green light to a resolution of this longstanding conflict, thus clearing a major hurdle in the way of ever-deeper alignment with Baku.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Both Azerbaijan and Russia were very compliant with Western "rules of the game" during the first decade of the post-Soviet era. Both consequently found their interests neglected and, in the case of Russia, their trust abused, leading to disappointment and the decision to dramatically alter their discourse and, ultimately, their policies.

With Russia, the watershed moment came with Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich security conference,

where he spoke openly against a unipolar world as impossible under modern conditions and morally unacceptable. The speech was a natural outgrowth of the many years in which Russia felt that its good will had been consistently abused by the West, which openly neglected Russian interests—a period that included NATO's eastern enlargement; the NATO bombing of Serbia, Russia's key ally in Eastern Europe, in 1999 and the subsequent recognition of Kosovo's independence; and the U.S.-led military invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Putin's New Year Address to the Nation on 31 December 2018 reiterated Russia's image as a lone warrior in a hostile universe:

We face many pressing tasks in the economy, research, technology, healthcare, education and culture... We will succeed, but only if we are able to work together. We never had any help in these endeavours, and never will. For this reason, we must form a team that is united, strong and acts as a single whole.

Ilham Aliyev's aforementioned March 2016 speech, which described "some foreign circles... waging an overt campaign against Azerbaijan [to the extent of] almost declar[ing] a cold war on [the country]," echoed the Russian narrative of a hostile West.

In many ways, Azerbaijan is repeating the fate of the majority of postcolonial Moslem states, whose rule and financial prowess have been secured by Western powers, in exchange for loyalty and obedience. In the Azerbaijani case, Western support also translated into tacit security guarantees against any potential encroachment on the part of Russia or Iran, although the credibility of such guarantees was undermined following the 2008 Russia–Georgia war. The outcome of this engagement with the West has been the homogenisation of governance and elite behaviour across much of the Moslem world, a dynamic that has repeated itself in Azerbaijan: elites grow into and self-identify as key conduits of Western imperialism and influence in their countries and key

agents of Western modernity and associated consumerism (which they also live first-hand in terms of their cultural, social, and acquisition habits), relying on high-end nationalism and spectacle developmentalism as the key ideological basis to legitimate and discursively sustain their authoritarian regimes.

Dependent exclusively on Western legitimation for their political survival and effectively cut off from their own populations, these leaders—who have consistently deprived themselves, and been consciously deprived by the West, of popular legitimation—had nothing to cling to when, having acquired (geo-)political visions of their own, they sought to pursue a policy line independent of Western interests. In the face of a raging West that sought to replace them with a more amenable alternative, they could turn only to elites in other states that were facing a similar situation. With the prospect of repeating the fate of the leaders of Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt looming large, the Azerbaijani regime has gradually come to see the West as a far greater danger than Russia, against which Western support had been sought in the initial stage of independence. Indeed, it is in Russia and Turkey that the Baku elite has found a force capable of withstanding pressure from the West.

Driven by its petty need for survival, then, the Baku regime has drawn itself into the very centre of the global confrontation between the West, on one hand, and a Russia-led alliance, on the other. As international dynamics quickly pull the states of the world into bipolar alliances, with Russia, Turkey, and Iran on one side and the West and Israel on the other, Azerbaijan will soon face the toughest choice of its entire post-independence history. And, while the recent dynamics between Azerbaijan and the West will likely make this choice easier for Baku (at least as far as the West is concerned), the very fact that Azerbaijan will actually have to make a choice will certainly be a new experience, one that comes with a price to pay—and a host of opportunities to reap.

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Russian Hegemony Begets Georgian Discontents: Tbilisi's Search for Strategic Ballast

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Abstract

This article explores Georgia–Russia relations through the lens of power asymmetry and Georgia's efforts to engage in external balancing to mitigate relative weakness and maximize autonomy. While Georgian efforts to engage the Euro-Atlantic West is perhaps the most notable example of Georgian outreach to potential patrons, it is part of a more expansive campaign that includes other powers of differing regime types and perceived strategic aspirations. Although Georgian efforts to externally balance Russia have failed to win security guarantees or attenuate Russian power, it may have contributed to conditions that allow Georgia to enjoy unexpectedly high levels of autonomy.

Power Asymmetry and Autonomy

Russia–Georgia relations are commonly portrayed as a function of ideological, identitarian, and even civilizational tensions between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic West. This binary is encouraged by both Western and Russian commentary, but also in Georgia itself, where analysts, politicians, and policy entrepreneurs have sought to associate Georgia's complex and often difficult relations with Russia to more global factors. Yet, in reduced terms, the mutual acrimony that often permeates Russia–Georgia relations is a narrative of Russian strength and relative Georgian weakness. By extension, Georgia's affiliation to a broader narrative of Russian–Western confrontation is both an implicit and often explicit bid to rectify unfavorable local conditions. More generally, Georgian bids to broaden external engagement beyond the West, including with would-be Western competitors, are borne from related preoccupations with achieving external balancing against preponderant Russian power.

The extended conflict between Georgia and Russia is fundamentally an issue of power asymmetry, in which Russia has claim to regional hegemony (and global influence), while Georgia—a smaller, poorer power—contests it. While actions on the part of Russia, Georgia, and other parties (recognized or not) can exacerbate or mitigate the intensity of this dynamic, they have not been able to overturn these basic variables. This is not to say that all parties possess equal claims to international norm adherence, or that locating the Georgia–Russia conflict in a broader system of Western–Russian confrontation is necessarily inappropriate (whether by nature or manufacture, at least some aspects of the Georgia–Russia conflict has been clearly absorbed into the wider narrative of Western–Russian confrontation), but that a bilat-

eral power asymmetry is the basis upon which expanded iterations of this conflict are projected and extrapolated.

Georgian weakness relative to Russia—both strategic and economic—is so marked that Georgian leadership never seriously considered anything other than external balancing as a means of tempering Russian power. While some small states have successfully used well-calibrated internal balancing (invariably in canny combination with other policies) to constrain a hegemon, Georgian efforts in this arena have been relatively nonexistent.¹

Since it gained independence in 1991, Georgian leaderships have largely pursued a foreign policy that overwhelmingly privileged courting external powers as a means of maximizing autonomy relative to the extended status quo of Russian regional dominance. While Georgian overtures towards the U.S., NATO, and the EU are the most well-known, and certainly continue to be the most celebrated in Tbilisi (and Western capitals), Georgia has also pursued extensive external balancing efforts with other would-be external powers—chiefly, Turkey and China—to varying outcomes and degrees of what might be considered success.

Won't You Be My Neighbor

Largely preoccupied with economic distress and internal conflict, Georgia in the immediate post-independence period possessed barely the rudiments of state capacity to pursue complex foreign policymaking, much less prosecute a coherent strategy of external balancing. It is not a mistake that Georgia's first public, major overture in service of an external balancing campaign came in its joining NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1994, which coincided with the recent accession of

1 The exception is one that proves the rule. Georgian military buildups in the 2006–08 period were largely oriented to expeditionary offensive operations, provoked rather than constrained Russian power, and still had virtually no impact on the overall balance of power.

former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze as Georgian leader. Not unrelatedly, Georgian overtures to NATO came shortly after the cessation of the 1992–93 Abkhaz War, which many Georgians considered to be in many respects a conflict against Russia—given the latter’s perceived role in employing ceasefires to benefit Abkhaz forces and organizing and equipping North Caucasus volunteer formations that decisively turned the tide of the conflict.

From a low baseline, Georgia–NATO relations expanded rapidly through the end of the decade. In 1997, Georgia joined the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, with formal relations established between Georgia and NATO only a year later. By 2002, Shevardnadze publicly announced Georgia’s intention to join NATO and the EU. The 2004 Rose Revolution saw Shevardnadze’s government toppled, but Georgian Euro-Atlantic aspirations were, if anything, further cemented into the country’s foreign policymaking agenda. While a cottage industry of international commentary regarding the 2008 Georgia–Russia war centers on the assignment of blame or Western obligations in that conflict, an analytical consensus has emerged that Georgia’s capitulation to Russia would have been far more comprehensive and damaging in the absence of Western and international lobbying for the ceasefire which, while its efficacy is still a matter of spirited dispute, at least achieved an end to active combined arms combat operations.

The 2012 elections and the resulting democratic change in government saw a shift in the tenor of Georgia–Russia relations from open hostility to limited pragmatic engagement, but Euro-Atlantic integration remained the defining feature of Georgian foreign policy. Although some segments of the Georgian population demonstrated increasing apathy towards Euro-Atlantic integration or growing openness to accommodation to Russia, a Euro-Atlantic consensus in Georgia largely held, and Georgia’s relationship with Euro-Atlantic structures grew appreciably. In 2014, NATO unveiled and began implementing a tailored package of programs and integration measures for Georgia, which functionally brought Georgia as close to NATO as possible short of outright membership. In 2014, Georgia and the EU signed an Association Agreement, which came into force in 2016, along with Georgian accession to a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. In 2017, Georgians won coveted visa liberalization with the EU’s Schengen Area.

As a result of these major initiatives, as well as a steady clip of smaller, regular engagements from NATO, the EU, and individual Euro-Atlantic states (and particularly the U.S.), Georgia is widely and understandably regarded as a fellow traveler with the West, if not neces-

sarily an unqualified member. Georgia’s embrace of the West has led to a gradual analytical acceptance of the Georgia–Russia conflict as a local subsidiary of Western–Russian tensions; while this has certainly become at least partially true, it also remains an incomplete and simplistic approximation of Georgia–Russia relations. Meanwhile, Georgian prospects of actual full membership in either NATO or the E.U. continues to be marginal at best, and Russia’s strategic position in the wider Black Sea space is one of growing dominance, while NATO and the EU are seen as gradually in retreat.

Playing Multiple Vectors

While the Euro-Atlantic West is the most prominent and consistent object of Georgian outreach, other powers have variously offered hope of providing an alternative, hedging vector to Russian regional dominance. Of these, the most notable is China, which has seen its influence in Georgia, and in Eurasia and Eastern Europe as a whole develop rapidly in the 2010s—albeit largely in the economic sphere. In the span of only a few years, China evolved from a relatively marginal economic player to among Georgia’s most important trade partners, capped by a free trade agreement signed in 2017, which came into force in 2018. By advertising its geographic access to multiple intercontinental markets and trade regimes, Georgia sought to elevate its position in Chinese geostrategic thinking as a hub state as part of Beijing’s vaunted One Belt-One Road initiative.

In many ways, China responded positively to Georgian overtures, with state-backed firms investing heavily in Georgian infrastructure projects, China’s rapid growth into a top-tier destination for Georgian luxury exports like wine, and spigots opened for steady streams of Chinese tourists to Georgia. In many respects, Georgia’s success in attracting Chinese interest led to reasonable speculation that China’s economic ventures had a political and even strategic element to be encouraged. While there was little expectation or open enthusiasm for China to insert itself as a military guarantor of Georgian security, it was widely thought that China’s growing economic investments and strategic interests in Georgia could be a restraint to Russian political or military adventurism in the region. While China continues to offer warm relations with Georgia, it hardly appears to have openly deterred Russian pretensions to regional leadership.

In a more gradual, but perhaps more consequential way, Georgian relations with Turkey might also be considered part of an effort to achieve external balancing. While Georgian leadership has not looked to Turkey as a direct security guarantor, per se, Georgia has consistently supported and encouraged Turkish aspirations to

regional and even global leadership. Like China, Georgia–Turkey relations are largely economic in their basis, though they have since expanded dramatically beyond the economic realm. With shared pipelines and energy interests, good cross-border relations have always been important, but Turkey–Georgia ties at times resemble an alliance in all but name.

Turkey has long been among Georgia’s top trade partners, having inked a free trade agreement in 2007, but the two countries also enjoy a mutual free-movement regime (passport free) and share an extensive array of economic, energy, and transport infrastructure between them. A consistent source of foreign direct investment, the two countries also trade large flows of tourists and, increasingly, facilitate seamless supply chains in a variety of agricultural and manufacturing industries.

Uniquely, Turkey and Georgia enjoy robust military–military relations to a degree that is comparable only to that of NATO itself, and Georgia has long been a beneficiary of Turkish technical, material, and doctrinal security assistance. More recently, Georgia and Turkey have formed joint units for energy infrastructure protection, with regular speculation that more intensive joint military integration may be in the offing. While Turkey is not an explicit security guarantor to Georgia, it has been among the most vocal states in favor of Georgian accession to NATO and against Russian incursions on Georgian territory—even amid more recent periods of Turkish–Russian rapprochement.

Conclusion

Georgian foreign policymaking is often and understandably framed by its prioritization of Euro-Atlantic integration. However, Georgian engagements with China and Turkey evince a more fundamental concern with external balancing. While Georgian governmental messaging and popular sentiments may lend a certain ideological or identity-driven element to Euro-Atlantic integration, the broader narrative of external balancing suggests that Georgian strategic interests are ultimately agnostic to the perceived ideological fitness of the would-be external balancer. By some reckoning, sustained Georgian engagement with Iran in the 2010–12 period—notably coinciding with a particular nadir in Western–Iranian

relations—was a further, if narrower, example of Georgian external balancing efforts in action. In this case, Georgia sought to position itself to cooperate with and benefit from then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s campaign to play a more active regional role. At the same time, the brevity of the Iran engagement versus the sustained durability of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic orientation suggests that certain affinities may lend themselves to staying power.

Yet, sustained engagement or not, Georgia’s level of “success” from mounting a concerted campaign of external balancing depends on how it is measured. On one hand, Georgia has largely succeeded in developing advanced and even disproportionately privileged relationships with a variety of powerful states and state groupings; on the other hand, Georgian weakness relative to Russia is no less noticeably pronounced. If anything, Russia could be described as enjoying the most evidently dominant position over its periphery since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Russian strategic dominance (and Georgia’s relative weakness) has failed to yield to either bandwagoning or appeasement policies by successive Georgian governments. Georgia appears to exercise a unique level of autonomy given its relative weakness and a lack of mitigating factors, such as full membership in the Euro-Atlantic space. Counterintuitively, Georgian autonomy appears to have increased with time, and Georgia’s subsistence outside of the Russian regional system has become even more notable as Russian dominance increases. Even if Georgian external balancing efforts have failed to appreciably reverse its relative weakness compared to Russia, it may have helped create conditions that allow Georgia unexpected levels of autonomy amid such an unbalanced strategic environment.

This suggests that, at least so far, Georgian efforts to cultivate strategic ballast through external balancing have not been quixotic, fruitless quests. While no one effort has successfully shifted regional power dynamics, they have imposed certain constraints on Russia and yielded autonomy for Georgia. That said, it remains unclear as to whether disproportionate autonomy can be sustained amid a persistence of stark power imbalance—and for how long.

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