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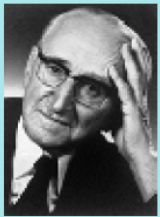
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Ordnungspolitische Diskurse

Discourses in Social Market Economy



Ralph Wrobel

**The Changing Geopolitics in the South
Caucasus during the War in Ukraine:
Chances and Risks for the Region**

Diskurs 2023 - 2

The Changing Geopolitics In the South Caucasus During the War In Ukraine: Chances And Risks For the Region

Ralph Wrobel

Abstract

Since February 2022 – when Russia invaded the Ukraine – the geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus changed dramatically. On the one hand, EU sanctions on Russia made the “Middle Corridor” of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative through the South Caucasus more attractive for China and Europe, on the other hand the “*protective power*” Russia is weakened by the war and the Western sanctions leaving a vacuum of power in the South Caucasus. As a result, Azerbaijan was able to reconquer the region Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 within a few days, only. Therefore, the region is still not more an unassailable Russian “*backyard*” or “*sphere of interest*” but place of a new “*great game*” of the main powers in the world. Beside Russia losing power – a slight rise of China can be observed while the West – U.S. and the EU – is still neglecting the region. Only Türkiye became a new active geopolitical player in the region. This may – beside all tragedy for the people of Nagorno-Karabakh – bring some “*never ending conflicts*” in the region to an end and may open up new opportunities for Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan to develop better economically in the near future.

Keywords: Geopolitics, South Caucasus, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, EU, Belt & Road Initiative

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The Changing Geopolitics In the South Caucasus During the War In Ukraine: Chances And Risks For the Region

Ralph Wrobel

1. Introduction

In September 2023 the geopolitical conflicts in the South Caucasus came back on the TV screens worldwide. Pictures of thousands of Armenian refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh and news about the capitulation of Armenian troops in the region within Azerbaijan made clear, that the South Caucasus is in trouble, again. The helplessness of the Russian peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh was obvious. It seems, that since February 2022 – when Russia invaded the Ukraine – the geopolitical situation changed dramatically in the South Caucasus. On the one hand, EU sanctions on Russia made the “Central Corridor” of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative through the South Caucasus more attractive for China and Europe, on the other hand the “*protective power*” Russia is weakened by the war and the Western sanctions. Therefore, the South Caucasus is still not more an unassailable Russian “*backyard*” or “*sphere of interest*” but place of a new “*great game*” of the main powers in the world.

Therefore, in this paper it will be analysed what are the geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus since February 2022. And what are either the chances for conflict resolution or what are the risks for the region. Therefore, after a brief introduction of the basic ideas of geopolitics and its application in the South Caucasus the political, economic and military dependencies of all three states in the South Caucasus will be described in detail. Here, economic dependency will be measured mainly by trade and FDI data. Then, in the next chapter the shifting interests and strategies of the geopolitical powers as well as the reactions of the local countries will be analysed. In this way, chances and risks for the political reorientation of all three countries in the South Caucasus and for Europe as still not active geopolitical player will be figured out.

2. Application of Geopolitical Theory in the South Caucasus

Altogether, Geopolitics studies the effects of human and physical geography on international politics and especially on international relations. In this, it focuses on political power investigating diplomatic history in relation to geographic space, especially water ways, trade

routes, access to natural resources etc. (Wrobel 2019, 149) The framework of this analysis will be neoclassical geopolitics in concrete, which can be defined as ways of “*thinking about the effects of geography on international relations that explicitly locate themselves within the Mackinder – [...] – Spykman tradition, but which creatively rework it with reference to changed social, economic, political and cultural factors*”. (Megoran 2010, 187) In that sense, the South Caucasus can be understood as a remaining Russian “*backyard*” or “*sphere of interest*” which is threatened by new larger and smaller powers. The principles of a “backyard” or “primacy of power” have been formulated by scientists of the U.S. think tank, the Rand Corporation, already decades ago. According to Ronfeld (1983), a primacy of one power can be described as a situation based on four principles: First, a region must be secure for the power’s “*presence, power, and passage*”; second, “*hostile foreign powers must be prevented from acquiring military bases and facilities there*”; third, “*foreign balance-of-power struggles must be excluded and prevented from destabilising the region*”; and fourth, only a few military resources “*have to be dedicated to protecting interests and assets there*”. In the past, this has fitted the Russian-dominated South Caucasus very well as can be shown in the following chapters.

Fig. 1: The South Caucasus’ Conflict Zones (till 2023)



Sources: Heritage Foundation research based on information from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Leaders Discuss Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict; Kerry Expresses ‘Strong Concern,’” September 5, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-/26567727.html> (accessed January 5, 2015), and SOCAR Romania, “The Global Scale of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic,” <http://www.socar.ro/en/SOCAR-AZERBAIJAN> (accessed January 5, 2015).

heritage.org

As figure 1 shows, since about three decades the geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus is characterised by local conflicts which are (1) the war between the Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan for Nagorno-Karabakh that flared up again and again till September 2023, (2) the stagnating military confrontation of Russia and Georgia in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and (3) the political conflict between Armenia and Türkiye because of the recognition of the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War and the current Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Türkiye's ally Azerbaijan. Additional complexity the local geopolitical situation got by the imposition of sanctions to Iran – the large neighbour country of the South Caucasus in the South – by the US and other Western states. Therefore, all three states in the South Caucasus were seeking for stabilizing powers outside of the region: While Georgia applied for EU membership in March 2022, Armenia remained as an ally of Russia in the region until now. In contrast, Turkish-speaking Azerbaijan established strong relations with Türkiye. Azerbaijan and Georgia are also participating in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while Armenia's infrastructure measures are financed mainly by the Asian Development Bank. (Wrobel 2022, S. 3) In this way, all three states in the south Caucasus try to counterbalance the Russian influence in different ways.

The three republics in the South Caucasus have taken different paths since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nowadays, the South Caucasus is very diverse in political as well as economic terms. While Georgia and Armenia are “*defective democracies*” at least, Azerbaijan must be called a “*hard-line autocracy*”. In the Democracy Index 2022 of the Bertelsmann Foundation Armenia holds rank 39 (index value 6.75) out of 137 countries and Georgia rank 54 (6.10), while Azerbaijan is ranked 108 (3.58), only. Additionally, the Bertelsmann Foundation is evaluating the economic transition in all three countries quite differently: While Armenia is ranked 40 (limited: 6.11) and Georgia 52 (limited: 5.89), Azerbaijan is ranked 73 (limited: 5.36), only. To compare these data: Estonia is ranked 2 (9.65) in the democracy index and 3 (9.29) in the economic transition index, while Russia is ranked in the democracy index 84 (4.40) and 39 (6.14) in the economic transition index. (Bertelsmann Foundation n.d.) As can be seen, not only local conflicts and different geopolitical orientations of all three countries, but also the results of 30 years transition created a “*patchwork carpet*” in the South Caucasus.

On the other hand, from a geopolitical point of view the South Caucasus is a unique bridge between Europe and Asia. Here Mackinder's “*heartland*” (Russia) is meeting Spykeman's “*rim land*” (Türkiye and the West) as competitors in the region. (Mackinder 1919; Spykman 1944) In concrete, the South Caucasus plays a crucial role in the transportation of Caspian resources to Western Europe. In particular, the region is of highest importance for the European energy security. Additionally, it can be seen as an increasingly attractive transport route between Europe and Asia. The Caucasus is closed to the Middle East. And some of the countries of

the region share a border with Iran and Türkiye who are local geopolitical players. Additionally, the South Caucasus constitutes a part of a larger Black Sea region where the two competing integration strategies – European Union and Eurasian Economic Union – are clashing. (Markedonov 2018, 24) This makes the South Caucasus an important transportation hub between West and East as well as between South and North.

Therefore, since Russia attacked the Ukraine in 2022 the begin of a new “great game” for supremacy of the powers as well as a reorientation of the countries in the South Caucasus can be stated. The term “*great game*” can be traced back to the 19th century when Russia and the British Empire were in conflict for Afghanistan. Later the term was used to describe the U.S. – Chinese conflict in East Asia, too. (Wrobel 2019) In a broad sense, a “*great game*” can be defined as struggle for geopolitical power in a region of the world. This is just going on in the South Caucasus. Beside Russia main players are the “West” and China, but also local powers like Iran and Türkiye. The “West”, mainly EU and the U.S. supported the political and economic transformation in Armenia and Georgia, i.e. they used soft power mainly. As a result, both countries became democracies, but the Western influence is still limited. For the U.S. the South Caucasus is not of highest importance and the EU is still not a geopolitical player, but divided in different countries with diverging interests in the region. In contrast, Azerbaijan is strongly supported by Türkiye as a common opponent of Armenia and linguistic as well as religious kin. And China tried to bring Georgia and Azerbaijan together to create a corridor for trade from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea as alternative route in the Southern part of Eurasia. Nowadays, since Russia’s retreat from the region, the vacuum of power must be filled, again.

3. Current Political, Military and Economic Dependencies

3.1 Armenia

In political and military terms an Armenian dependency from Russia can be stated clearly. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union Russia has military bases in the country: (1) The Russian 102nd Military Base in Gyumri and (2) the Russian 3624th Airbase in Yerevan. (Meister 2021, 8) (see fig. 2) In the past the country was also well known as Armenia’s protective power, mainly in the conflict with Azerbaijan for Nagorno-Karabakh. Still in the year 2013, the commander of Russia's troops in Armenia announced “*If Azerbaijan decides to restore jurisdiction over Nagorno-Karabakh by force the [Russian] military base may join in the armed conflict in accordance with the Russian Federation’s obligations within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).*” (Eurasianet 2013) The “*Collective*

Security Treaty Organization” (CSTO) can be traced back to the 1990s and is an inter-governmental military alliance consisting of the six post-Soviet states Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. (CSTO 2023) In accordance to that treaty, 2020, Russia established peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh to support Armenia's interest in Azerbaijan. But in September 2023 Russia simply let the Azerbaijani do what they wanted, to reconquer the territory for Azerbaijan.

In 2015, Armenia also was getting closer with Russia economically. It joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). As a result, the country had to refuse to sign an Association Agreement with the EU. (Zabakhidze et al. 2019, 3) However, a “*Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement*” (CEPA) with the EU was negotiated in November 2017. Substantial parts of it have been applied since 2018. (European Council 2023a) According to the Eastern Partnership policy of the EU, Armenia can become a member of the European Union, but did not yet apply for it. Additionally, in 2023, there were also US – Armenian peacekeeping training exercises in Armenia, the so called “*Eagle Partner Exercise*”. (U.S. Embassy in Armenia 2023) It seems that Armenia is still dominated by Russia but seeking for more cooperation with Western countries.

Armenia's dependency from Russia can also be shown by an analysis of trade data. Before the war in Ukraine, in 2021 Armenian exports of about 3.36 bill. USD went mainly to Russia (23.5%), followed by other European countries like Switzerland (10.8%) and Bulgaria (5.9%). In Asia China accounted for 13.2% of Armenia's exports, followed by India (7.39%) and Iraq (5.27%). Within Europe only the Netherlands (5.7%) and Germany (3.62%) were additional relevant export destinations. Main export products were copper ore (25.1%), gold (7.6%) and hard liquor (7.31%), i.e. mainly natural resources. (OEC 2023a) Therefore, Armenia's export destinations can be evaluated as quite diversified while a partial dependency from Russia is obvious. This picture is mirrored also on the side of imports. Here, Russia accounts even for more than one third (34.4%) of Armenia's imports, followed by China (13.1%) and Iran (7.66%). Other relevant origins of Armenian imports are Georgia (4.81%) and Germany (4.25%), only. (OEC 2023a) Although the 2019 newly elected government was looking to diversify the alliances and trading partners by strengthening the relationships with two direct neighbours Georgia as well as Iran and the important trading partner China. (Zabakhidze et al. 2019, 3) But this approach is still not really successful.

In 2022, the total stock of FDI in Armenia was estimated at USD 5.6 billion, around 40.4% of the country's GDP. The four major investors in the country were Russia, Greece, Cyprus and Germany. But also significant investments are made by the members of the Armenian diaspora. The main FDI sectors were energy, telecommunications, metallurgy, hotel services

and air transportation. (Standard Bank 2023a) Assuming, that FDI from Cyprus will have Russian origin, too, Armenia is also depending from Russia according to FDI. Altogether, Armenia's political, military and economic dependency from Russia is still visible but first steps are done by the Armenian government to reduce it.

3.2 Georgia

Georgia is mainly seeking a Euro-Atlantic integration to have closer ties with NATO and other western partners. Therefore, Georgia plays an important role in regional connectivity and coordination because of its advanced relationships with Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Armenia. (Zabakhidze et al. 2019, 3) Also, its location makes it an important transit country for energy resources. Additionally, it is a strategic gateway for trade between Europe and Asia. (Boltuc 2023, 6) On the other hand, for Georgia Russia is a hostile neighbour. Since the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 about 20% of the Georgian territory – Abkhazia and South Ossetia – are occupied by Russian troops. Therefore, the current Georgian government – led by the party “*Georgian Dream*” – is very reserved to Russia, e.g. in imposing EU sanctions, while huge parts of the population are clearly supporting the Ukraine. The Russian threat leads to a “pragmatic” policy towards Russia, as Irakli Kobakhidze, the Chair of the ruling Georgian Dream party, announced in May 2023. (agenda 2023) On the other hand, Georgia is mainly cooperating militarily with Western states. One strong pillar is the “*U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission*”, which is working “*in support of Georgia's total defense approach, Euro-Atlantic integration, and territorial integrity*”. As one result of the cooperation with the U.S., Georgia hosted the largest-ever “*Noble Partner*” exercise with US troops in 2018. (U.S. Department of State 2018)

In political terms, in the past the European Union was the main partner of Georgia. Already since 2016, an association agreement between the EU and Georgia is in force. Main goal was to “*deepening Georgia's political association and economic integration with the EU*”. Then, directly after the Russian attack on the Ukraine – in March 2022 – Georgia applied for EU membership. Only a few month later, in June 2022, the European Council stated its readiness to grant Georgia EU candidate status. (European Council 2023b) But in June 2022 the EU accorded candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, only, but not to Georgia. This increased the perception of vulnerability in the country, again. (Biscop 2023, 8) Additionally, it must be taken in consideration that the currently ruling party's anti-Western rhetoric drives the country away from the EU what makes its request to receive the EU candidate status very difficult. (Kogan 2023, 3)

As result of this political situation Georgia is much less depending on the Russian economy than Armenia. Georgian exports in 2021 of 5.02 bill. USD were much more diversified than the Armenian. Main export destinations were Asian countries like China (12.6%) followed by Azerbaijan (10.5%), Türkiye (7.48%) and Armenia (5.07%). In Europe also Russia was the main export destination (12.2%), but the Ukraine accounted also for 12.2%, too, and Bulgaria for 6.11%. Main export products were copper ore (17.0%) and ferroalloys (9.44%), followed by cars (9.02%). (OECD 2023b) Even, Russia and China together accounted for more than one fourth of the exports, while local trade partners are on the same level. According to imports the main origins were Türkiye (17.4%), China (9.43%) and Russia (9.29%). Additionally, the US is not unimportant as import origin (6.66%). (OECD 2023b) Altogether, China, Türkiye and Russia are the dominating trade partners but no trade partner exceeds the limit of 20% in imports and exports for Georgia. Impressive is the rise of trade turnover between Georgia and China, only, which has increased since 2002 enormously and reached USD 1 billion in 2018 – compared to about USD 10 million in 2002. (Zabakhidze et al. 2019, 5) That shows the rising importance of China in the whole region.

In 2021, the total stock of FDI in Georgia was estimated at USD 19.3 billion, around 103.7% of the country's GDP. The neighbour Azerbaijan is the largest investor in Georgia due to the ongoing construction of the South Caucasus Pipeline. Therefore, the country holds 18.8% of the total FDI stock in Georgia, followed by the UK (13.9%), the Netherlands (8%), Türkiye (6.8%), and Cyprus (5.6%). Additionally, the country is increasingly opening up to Asian investment. (Standard Bank 2023b) Therefore, according to FDI Georgia is highly depending on the oil and gas business between Azerbaijan and Western Europe. In contrast, Russia plays no role as investor. But, Georgia is balancing the power of Europe and China as well as of local partners.

3.3 Azerbaijan

The bilateral partnership of Russia and Azerbaijan has clear boundaries because Azerbaijan aims to be independent in the regional energy projects being a partner of the West. Additionally, the government of Azerbaijan clearly and consistently supports Georgia's and Ukraine's territorial integrity. As a result, the Caspian state is not rushing to become part of the Eurasian integration processes led by Russia. (Markedonov 2018, 36) But also in Azerbaijan Russian troops are still active. After the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, peacekeeping operations were initiated by Russia in this region to monitor the ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia sent a peacekeeping contingent of 1,960 servicemen to the Lachin Corridor and to the till 2023 remaining "*Republic Artsakh*". (Ministry of Defence of the

Russian Federation 2020) But also Türkiye was involved in the Karabakh conflict. It participated in the joint Russian-Turkish centre for monitoring the ceasefire regime and all military operations in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone (RTJMC). (Radio Free Europe 2020) Instead of the EU, Türkiye is an influential partner of the regime in Baku. Both countries are the only Turkish speaking nations in the West of the Caspian Sea and have therefore strong cultural links. In 2021 both countries signed the “*Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations Between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Türkiye*”, which can be seen as bilateral roadmap entailing further political and economic cooperation, but focussed also on defence and mutual military aid. Therefore, the Shusha Declaration outlined also joint efforts to reorganize and modernize the Azerbaijani Army. Since several years, there are also plans for a Turkish military base in Azerbaijan, a debate which is provoking Russia. (Shahbazov 2021) That military cooperation can be seen as one main reason for the military success of Azerbaijan’s troops in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023.

As result of the strong cooperation with Türkiye, also the economic importance of this country for Azerbaijan is comprehensible. In 2021 Azerbaijanian exports accounted for 22.8 bill. USD, more than twice of the Armenian and Georgian exports together. Main export destination in 2021 was Italy (actually the EU) with 41.5%, followed by Türkiye with 12.4%. In contrast, Russia accounted for 4.08% only, and China for just 0.64%. The reason for this export structure is the Azerbaijanian focus on oil and gas exports by pipeline. Crude petroleum exports accounted for 59.1% of the whole exports, gas for 25.1%. (OEC 2023c) Oil and gas are mainly exported by Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline (oil) and the South Caucasus Pipeline (natural gas) from the Shah Deniz gas field in the Azerbaijan sector of the Caspian Sea to Türkiye. Since 2018, this pipeline is connected with the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline which allows Azerbaijan to transport its natural gas directly to Southern Italy where it is distributed to several other European countries. (Kerimkhanov 2018) In this way the exports of Azerbaijan are quite undiversified. The country is depending on its Western customers – or the Western customers on Azerbaijan! For instance, in 2022 the EU and Azerbaijan signed a memorandum of understanding on a strategic partnership in the field of energy policy to reduce the European dependency on Russian gas. (Adar 2022, 3) In contrast, the import origins are quite diversified: Main import origins are Türkiye (19.2%), Russia (18.2%) and China (10.4%). (OEC 2023c)

The total stock of Azerbaijani FDI was at USD 31.6 billion in 2021, what is about 57.9% of the country’s GDP. Russia is the main source of FDI in Azerbaijan, because the country is part of the customs union between Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Belarus. But also Western investors are becoming more important. In the first nine months of 2022, FDI inflows to Azerbaijan totalled USD 4.57 billion, led by the UK (27.7%), Türkiye (16.4%), Cyprus (13.5%),

Russia (8.3%) and Iran (5.6%). (Standard Bank 2023c) Therefore, a rising dependency from Western investors can be estimated. But, Azerbaijan is still balancing foreign influence, but the cooperation with Türkiye and Russia is quite dominant. For Azerbaijan's President İlham Aliyev, the cooperation with Russia as well as Türkiye is a "*guarantor of stability*" in the new geopolitical configuration of the South Caucasus. (Huseynov 2021, 33) But as an oil and gas exporting nation Azerbaijan is also depending on the pipeline routes into the west.

4. Shifting Interests of the Geopolitical Powers

4.1 Russia: Weakened by Restoring the Empire?

The first Russian military troops arrived in the South Caucasus in 1722, when the armies of Peter the Great crossed the Caucasus and conquered the Caspian coastline including the town of Baku. At that time, the city was called "*the key to the Caspian*" by Peter the Great himself. (Kopeček 2010, 99) From that time on, Russia was able to establish its power in the region and to control the local peoples, first as part of the Russian empire, then as Soviet Republics within the USSR. But also, when Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan became independent states again after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Russia has successfully managed to strengthen its influence over the South Caucasus, a region which was called Moscow's "*zone of privileged interests*". (Huseynov 2021, 30) In the whole region Russia was an indispensable actor for decades. Before invading Ukraine Russia had been the only mediator between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. But Russia could also be seen as a "*patron and protector for separatist regions within the internationally recognised borders of Georgia and Azerbaijan*". In this way, Russia was able to cynically maintain frozen conflicts to preserve its regional hegemony. (Ambrosetti 2022, 5) This strategy can be called "*divida et impera*", divide and rule!

Fig. 2: Russian Armed Forces in the South Caucasus (till 2023)



Source: own illustration, basing on a map by shutterstock.com.

The Russian military presence in the South Caucasus is still obvious. Since 1991 Russia maintains two military bases in Armenia. In 2008, the country occupied Georgia's regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia and established its own military presence there. Since the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, Russia has also military control over parts of Azerbaijan by sending so-called peacekeeping forces to Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor connecting Armenia with this territory. (see figure 2)

In this way, Russia was able to keep other foreign powers out of huge parts of the South Caucasus. Already during the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, Russia punished Armenia and the Armenian leadership for its “Velvet Revolution” in 2018 as well as the increasing cooperation with the West. This scenario is already well known from the cases of Georgia or the Ukraine. However, it must be assumed that Russia's main goal was to ensure a physical presence in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia to be able to control the potential alternative to the Northern Corridor of the Chinese BRI connection to Europe, the Central Belt – or “Middle Corridor” – via the South Caucasus, as well as controlling a Western gateway to Central Asia. (Toroyan 2023) But due to the Russian peacekeeping force in Nagorno-Karabakh it was obvious that there were signs of growing concern by both Azerbaijan and Armenia, although from different perspectives. (Ibrahimov 2022, 67)

When the Russian government decided in February 2022 to attack the Ukraine they took a turn towards its Western “backyard” that still existed in his imagination. Because the war could not be ended immediately – as it may have been planned by Wladimir Putin – other neighbouring regions which were still under Russian influence – or control – were neglected. Obviously, Russia is less able to defend its interests in the South Caucasus what was resulting in continued fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as in Iranian military exercises on the border of Azerbaijan or Azerbaijani-Turkish exercises. (Kogan 2023, 1) Today, because of the Azerbaijani victory in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 the Russian military presence within Azerbaijan has become obsolete. Neither Russia nor the CSTO responded to the Azerbaijani attack to Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Russia left Armenia alone in one of the hardest times of the state’s existence within the last three decades. If Armenia will still accept the Russian military bases in the country must be doubted. In this way, the Russian influence in the South Caucasus region already is and will be further reduced. Or summarizing: the war that “*intended to restore Russian strength has instead left the country weaker*”. Additionally, perhaps it brought the “*end of the Post-Soviet order*” – at least in the South Caucasus. (Laruelle 2022) Russia has left a vacuum of power. And as a result, other super powers respective regional powers got chances to enlarge their spheres of interest in the region.

4.2 EU & USA: Neglecting the South Caucasus?

Russia, the U.S. and Europe have diverging views about the conflicts in the South Caucasus. Especially, Abkhazia and South Ossetia within Georgia are seen as newly independent republics by Russia, while the U.S. and EU insist on the maintaining of “*Georgia’s territorial integrity*”. As a result, as well U.S. as EU use the term “*occupied territories*” for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. From a Western point of view the Russian attempts to alter borders in the South Caucasus is an attempt to restore Russian imperial domination in Eurasia. (Markedonov 2018, 37) For the U.S. main geopolitical goal in the South Caucasus is to prevent Russia from prolonging and expanding its influence in the region. (Oskanian 2022, 12) That can be seen in the broader sense as part of the U.S. containment strategy to Russia. Therefore, it is understandable that the U.S. led NATO backed Georgia in the 2008 war against Russia and in 2011, NATO officially recognised Georgia as a potential member. In that way, the NATO challenged Russia's traditional sphere of influence in the South Caucasus. (Antonopoulos et al. 2017, 366) But the South Caucasus is not of highest importance for the U.S.

Unfortunately, the EU – as the U.S. largest partner in Eurasia – is not (yet) a relevant geopolitical player. As a “club” of more and less independent states it is hard for the EU to find common geopolitical positions and to carry them through. As a result, the EU uses soft power,

mainly. Instead of being a geopolitical “player” the EU is only a “payer” in the South Caucasus. Engagement on security-related issues such as military cooperation, conflict resolution and systemic rivalries with illiberal actors are absent from the EU's agenda, also in the South Caucasus. (Lebanidze et al. 2022, 21) For instance, the EU failed to make substantial progress in regional geopolitics in the South Caucasus for decades. In contrast, the huge and permanent lack of action by the EU as a mediator or security player in the region has made it easier for other actors to change the rules of the game. But that weakened democratic progress and economic reforms in the South Caucasus. (Meister 2021, 1) This failure was already visible during the Nagorno-Karabakh War from September to November 2020 when Russia gained a military presence in Azerbaijan, the only country in the region without any Russian military presence before. This Russian military presence was another major obstacle for the intensification of relations between the South Caucasus and the Euro-Atlantic community. Instead of countering its rival Russia, the EU seemed to accept Russia's “*zone of privileged interests*” in the South Caucasus. But that was disillusioning pro-Western groups in the region. (Huseynov 2021, 28 - 32) Neither the U.S. nor the EU was able to push forward a Western-coordinated peace process as well as further political and economic cooperation with the countries in the South Caucasus.

Therefore, only in economic terms the EU plays a prominent role in the South Caucasus. The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline can be described as “*one of the greatest joint achievements of the West in the South Caucasus*” and neighbouring countries like Türkiye. It greatly contributed to the independence and development of the former USSR countries in the South Caucasus. (Ibrahimov 2022, 67) Also nowadays, there are further opportunities for the EU to deepen cooperation with the countries in the South Caucasus and to strengthen ties of this region to the Western democracies. The sizeable aid package for the socio-economic development of these countries in summer 2021 was a testimony for the potential of the EU to become a relevant player in the new great game for the South Caucasus. (Huseynov 2021, 28) And in 2022, the EU announced an investment of over Euro 2 billion in an electricity cable from Azerbaijan through Georgia and under the Black Sea. That was one of the first prominent projects under the Global Gateway, what is the EU's global infrastructure investment programme. (Biscop 2023, 8) These European activities led also to reactions in the South Caucasus. Georgia, beside of highway and railway projects, also tries to boost trade with the EU by constructing a deep-sea port in Anaklia. This port is expected to handle vessels with capacities of up to 10,000 TEUs. (Zabakhidze et al. 2019, 4)

Also, the idea of an International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) from India via Iran and the Caspian Sea to Russia and Europe was a project supported by the EU. It was mainly India which has started to look for new opportunities to connect with the European markets.

Armenia is still rebuilding its roads – the so-called North-South highway – that connects the country's border with Iran to its border with Georgia. When Armenia lost control of part of the route between the southern towns of Kapan and Goris after the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, it had to build an alternative road. That was supported with the help of a Euro 2.6 billion aid package from the EU that Armenia received in 2021. Goals of the EU were to promote democracy in Armenia and to support the country's recovery from the Nagorno-Karabakh War. (Toroyan 2023) However, the war in Ukraine had a major impact on this route, too. At least in the short term, it is obsolete.

The current EU's interest is simply to maintain reliable energy supplies from Azerbaijan and Central Asia instead of its long-standing energy reliance on Russia. (Oskanian 2022, 12) As the Azerbaijani conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 has shown, the security situation is remaining fragile in the South Caucasus. Additionally, in September 2023 it became obvious how important Azerbaijan's oil and gas exports to the EU are. For instance, the German daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* remarked on the European reactions to Azerbaijan's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh: *"Reactions from foreign heads of state, including from the EU and Germany, were reserved: a few condemnations of the violence, an appeal for a peaceful solution, that was it - as one does when one does not want to endanger economic interests."* Further this newspaper emphasized the importance of Azerbaijani gas supply since 2020 for the European diversification of energy sources after discontinuation of gas deliveries from Russia. Azerbaijan still supplies only a fraction of Europe's gas. But since Russia's attack to the Ukraine, every cubic metre for Europe counts. (Wulfers 2023) But the South Caucasus must be more for the EU than an energy supplier. Therefore, the statement of Ibrahimov (2022, 67) must be supported: *"[We, the West] need to demonstrate that we are interested, care about the region, and are prepared to invest resources into it. Our efforts need to be comprehensive: informational, diplomatic, economic, trade, as well as military cooperation."* As a result, the EU has to learn to be a more active geopolitical player in the South Caucasus or other powers will be more influential here in the future. Or in other words, the EU must turn from a "payer" to a "player".

4.3 China: More Support for the Middle Corridor in Eurasia?

Initially, the BRI proposed three routes starting from China: (1) The Northern Corridor, going through Central Asia and Russia to Europe, (2) The Middle Corridor, running through Central Asia and Western Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, and (3) The Southern (maritime) Road, which runs through Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean and then via the Suez Canal to Greece. Before Russia attacked the Ukraine in 2022, the BRI focused mainly on the

Northern Corridor. It crossed a fewer number of countries and created mutual relations between the two great powers Russia and China. (Toroyan 2023) But also in the South Caucasus, the BRI has been suggested by Chinese officials. They supposed that BRI related projects may create a political and economic environment to diversify activities, to attract more FDI, to improve cross-country coordination, and even eventually harmonize China's and the South Caucasus' trade policies under one – a Chinese – umbrella. Because trilateral cooperation in the South Caucasus is not so easy, all three countries are lacking economic development. But common goal of all three countries is to attract more foreign direct investment (FDI) and cargo. In this way trade relations shall be enhanced and trading partners diversified. Therefore, it is not surprising that all three countries in the South Caucasus have expressed interest in participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative. (Zabakhidze et al. 2019, 3)

The countries in the South Caucasus are on the way to become a part of the BRI corridors connecting East Asia and Western Europe, leading to larger trade and cargo flows through the region. Especially the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway and the “Trans-Caspian International Transport Route” (TITR) which are more relevant to Georgia and Azerbaijan, must be mentioned. In contrast, because of its tense relationship with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, Armenia still has open borders with Georgia and Iran, only. That offered limited options to Armenia under the BRI. Therefore, over the past two decades, only an insignificant amount of Chinese FDI went to Armenia. But China emphasized the importance of its partnership with Armenia by several publicity projects. They initiated the building of a new embassy in Yerevan – the second largest in the post-Soviet space – and spent approximately USD 12 million for the construction of a new school where China offers Chinese language classes to Armenian students. (Zabakhidze et al. 2019, 4 – 6)

The rising economic importance of China for the South Caucasus is also mirrored in trade data of 2021. In Georgia, China has overtaken Russia as export destination (12.6% to 12.2% in 2021) as well as origin of imports (9.43% to 9.29%). For Armenia China is the second largest trading partner (with 13.2% resp. 13.1%) after Russia (with 23.5% resp. 34.4%). And in Azerbaijan China holds rank 3 as import origin with 10.4% after Türkiye and Russia. (OEC 2023a, b, c) Indeed, China is on the way to replace Russia as the main economic partner in at least two out of the three countries in the South Caucasus. But, until today, the conflicts in the South Caucasus, such as the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Western sanctions against Iran for its human rights violations, as well as many other tensions in the region have prevented the BRI's central route from reaching its full potential in the South Caucasus. (Toroyan 2023) The South Caucasus was a difficult place for China's BRI ambitions, until now.

In contrast to its rising economic importance in the South Caucasus China was avoiding open conflicts with the other powers in the Region – Russia and the West. For instance, during the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 China was an invisible actor, only. Azerbaijani planes made over 100 flights to China and back with alleged humanitarian aid to Baku. At that time the most other countries were trying to maintain their neutrality. Therefore, it can be assumed that China was interested in an Azerbaijani victory because it would open the corridor between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan, the Zangezur corridor. (Toroyan 2023) That would open up new transport opportunities between China and Europe via the South Caucasus. Today, after the final victory of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh this vision may become reality soon. Additionally, Russia's role as security guarantor in the South Caucasus till September 2023 left China in a comfortable position. The People's Republic welcomed Russian interventions like in Nagorno-Karabakh. As consequence, China didn't have to get its own hands dirty, and could continue to roll out the Belt and Road Initiative. (Biscop 2023, 8)

Fig. 3: The Middle Corridor of BRI



Source: Eldem (2022).

But after the confrontation between Russia and the West in 2022, also the Chinese geopolitical strategy in the South Caucasus changed. Due to EU sanctions imposed on Russia and Russian counter-sanctions banning EU trucks from entering the country, the Northern Corridor of BRI is closed. (Toroyan 2023) Therefore, only the Central Belt and the Maritime Road are remaining trade routes for China. But the sea route for exported goods to Europe as well as for the main import of natural resources – mainly crude oil – from the Middle East to China are passing through the Strait of Malacca, which is under control of the U.S. with its Singaporean

Changi Naval Base. (Wrobel 2022, 11) Therefore, now China is actively seeking alternative trade and energy routes. This offers chances for the countries closed to the Middle Corridor – also to the South Caucasus. (see figure 3)

But the results of BRI related projects will be limited for the South Caucasus. Nearly all of the cargo transported from the Asia-Pacific to Europe will be brought there via sea routes further on. Only an insignificant amount of cargo is transported via railway through Central Asia to Europe. Therefore, here is a small chance for the South Caucasus, only: The expansion of alternative routes from China to Europe is in line with China's overall strategy, to develop the country's landlocked western provinces. (Zabakhidze et al. 2019, 4 – 5) Participation in BRI projects may help to develop the infrastructure in the South Caucasus – while not too much cargo should be expected to come from Asia via the region to Europe. Additionally, there are also threats due to the Chinese BRI project, mainly the “*debt trap*”. Some observers have suggested “*that Beijing is deliberately pursuing ‘debt trap diplomacy,’ imposing harsh terms on its government counterparties and writing contracts that allow it to seize strategic assets when debtor countries run into financial problems*”. (Wrobel 2022, 5 – 6) When considering investing in BRI-related projects like Baku International Sea Trade Port Complex or the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway which is mostly financed by Azerbaijan, the government of Azerbaijan is trying to avoid such a “*debt trap*” by relying on its own funding. (Zabakhidze et al. 2019, 5) This is an important decision to maintain political as well as economic independence from China. But Azerbaijan is a special case in the South Caucasus because of its rich oil and gas reserves. As a result, the threat of a “*debt trap*” will be much larger for poor countries like Armenia and Georgia, while gains from additional transport from China to Europe is small. Additionally, it is questionable if China nowadays is able to enlarge its political influence also in the South Caucasus. As some observers believe, in the last years China's importance in world politics is stagnating. (e.g. Stahnke 2023) But if the West and China are not taking advantage of Russia's retreat in the South Caucasus, who will get the gains?

4.4 Türkiye and Iran: New Local Geopolitical Players?

Because of the small interest of the U.S. in the South Caucasus, the EU's lack of interest in security-related engagement in the region, and China's stagnating role in world politics Türkiye seems to be the new regional power which is able to counterbalance Russia in the South Caucasus. (Meister 2021, 6) For instance, since 2020, Russia had to reconcile its activities with Türkiye's growing influence in the region, mainly with its special relations with Azerbaijan. The Nagorno-Karabakh War boosted Türkiye's influence in the South Caucasus, again. Thanks to Türkiye's strategic alliance with Azerbaijan the country was able to win the war in

2020. (Huseynov 2021, 31) And it must be assumed that the strong Turkish – Azerbaijani cooperation is also a main reason for the final victory of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.

The Turkish – Azerbaijani relations are not only political, but also economic. In 2019, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway line celebrated a first cargo from Türkiye to Georgia. This infrastructure is set to establish a transit by railway on the logistical exclusion of Armenia by the two cooperating countries Azerbaijan and Türkiye via Georgia. The railway can be seen as a geopolitical move of Türkiye also because of the refusal of international financing institutions to support the infrastructure project. Instead the railway was financed by the Azeri and Turkish governments. (Gambino 2019, 12) And in 2022, the governments of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye signed a declaration to improve transport routes in the Southern Caucasus as well as in Central Asia as an alternative to the Northern Corridor of the Chinese BRI via Russia. (Adar 2022, 2) As a result, Türkiye's close cultural ties with Azerbaijan and Central Asia provide Türkiye with greater leverage in the whole region. Additionally, the Central Corridor decreases the other Turkic states' dependence on both Russia and Iran. (Eldem 2022)

As mentioned, Russia's war in Ukraine and its subsequently forced passiveness in the South Caucasus has created a security vacuum in the region, creating a new geopolitical reality. As a result, the balance of power has shifted in favour of Azerbaijan and the regional geopolitical player Türkiye. (Dolidze 2022, 18) As much as Russia lost the control over the South Caucasus, the Turkish-backed Azeri forces were able to make incursions into Armenia's territory. (Adar 2022, 2) In September 2023, the middle power Türkiye was even able to triumph over the century's old Russian hegemony in the South Caucasus by backing the Azerbaijani victory in Nagorno-Karabakh. While Russia is concentrating on its war in Ukraine, Ankara has formed a new strategic partnership with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, for instance. (Eldem 2022)

But the Turkish ambitions in the South Caucasus are going beyond Azerbaijan. Türkiye is also working on better relations to Armenia. After 2020, Armenia and Türkiye have initiated a normalization process between the two countries. This process could lead to an unblocking of all communication channels in the region – and eventually serve as part of the Chinese BRI. (Toroyan 2023) Here, it must be emphasised, that Türkiye was the first country to recognise Armenia after its declaration of independence during the USSR collapse. First, the border had been very briefly opened until 1993. But during the Karabakh War Türkiye decided to close the borders again, in solidarity with its Azerbaijani ally. (Balci 2022, 22) Now, after the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, opening its border with Türkiye can give Armenia access to

alternative routes for its exports and lower its transportation costs to reach world markets. For Türkiye is important to improve regional links giving opportunities to strengthen the country's positions in the South Caucasus by playing a more active role in regional initiatives to restore trade and transportation routes in the region. (Chikhladze 2022, 8) Hence, Türkiye can be seen as the most important new geopolitical player in the South Caucasus.

In contrast to Türkiye, the geopolitical position of Iran in the South Caucasus is quite small. But focussing the Iranian role in a new emerging geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus, the withdrawal of the U.S. from the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" deepened the Islamic Republic's economic cooperation and increased its diplomatic and political influence in the region. (Ibrahimov 2022, 67 – 68) For many years, Iran consistently promoted a vision of a regional security system of conflict settlement in the South Caucasus, called the "3 + 3" format. The two triads are composed of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, as well as Iran, Russia, and Türkiye. Additionally, Iran is hostile to any Western presence in the region and is not ready to cooperate with the U.S. or the EU in resolving conflicts in the South Caucasus. (Markedonov 2018, 39) Also, Iran's concerns over Azerbaijan's leading ally, Türkiye, especially the spread of pan-Turkism ideology closed to Iran's border as well as Türkiye's increasing influence in the South Caucasus, improved the relations between Iran and Armenia – as well as Georgia. Additionally, Iran fears a growing cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel focussing on report about Israel's use of Azerbaijani territory for various anti-Iranian operations. (Petrosyan 2023, 21)

As a result, Iran's economic relations with Armenia and Georgia were deepening. Nowadays, Georgia serves as an important transit point for Iranian goods heading to Europe. A lot of Iranian companies have been turning to Georgia to bypass the sanctions of the U.S. and reach European markets. Therefore, Tehran and Tbilisi are negotiating within the framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), for instance. (Boltuc 2023, 6 – 8) Also for Armenia Iran is an important economic and energy partner. In concrete, Armenia sees Iran as only possibility to mitigate its unilateral economic and energy dependence on Russia by getting gas from Iran. But on the other hand, for Iran Russia's military presence in the region is important to counterbalance the rival Türkiye and its dominance in Azerbaijan while also, the Israeli-Azerbaijani military cooperation is a threat for Iran. (Meister 2021, 7) Therefore, the Azerbaijani success in the war for Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 is also touching the Iranian interests. In the past the Armenian-Iranian border has been Iran's main link to other markets.

Fig. 4: Zangezur Corridor in the South Caucasus



Source: Eldem (2022).

Therefore, the Iranian leaders opposed any change to this border. After the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, the government of Azerbaijan demanded the creation of a so-called “*Zangezur corridor*”, a corridor that would connect Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan. (see figure 4) But such a corridor would essentially separate Iran and Armenia. (Toroyan 2023) Today, after the victory of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh this discussion will come on the agenda, again. For the participating countries – from China via Central Asia to Azerbaijan and Türkiye – the Zangezur corridor is a “*golden opportunity*” to make the route through the South Caucasus even shorter and more secure. (Gawliczek / Iskandarov 2023, 37) But for Armenia and Iran it could be a new geopolitical problem – perhaps a blockade. This will probably reduce the Iranian influence in the South Caucasus in the near future. Only, after abolishment of Western sanctions on Iran there is a realistic chance for the country to be incorporated into the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP), for instance. (Ibrahimov 2022, 68) That would be also a chance for Armenia to be the connection between TANAPs continuation in Georgia, the South Caucasus Pipeline, and the natural gas pipeline net in Iran. Additionally, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) from India via Iran and the Caspian Sea to Russia and Europe can become a new chance for Armenia and Georgia when all conflicts in the region – from the Ukraine to Iran – are solved. To summarize, while Türkiye was able to fill the vacuum of leaving Russian power in the South Caucasus at least partly in the last years, Iran is challenged with the new geopolitical situation.

5. Consequences

The geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus since the Russian war in Ukraine are fundamental. Russia's weakness in the region brought a lot of chances but includes also several risks. For Armenia the tragic end of the war for Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 brought at least about 120,000 refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh who must be integrated into the Armenian society. But that may include also a historical chance to end the hostile relation to Azerbaijan as well as to Türkiye. Until now, the country is isolated between both hostile neighbours, having access to the rest of the world only via Georgia and its harbours at the Black Sea – and a small and critical connection to Iran, a country suffering from international sanctions. From now on, a new chapter in the Armenian history could be opened connecting Armenia with its Western and Eastern neighbours and opening up the country for more trade by cheaper trade routes as well as for more international FDI. In the worst case, the Zangezur corridor will cut Armenia from Iran, only if Armenia is actively participating in the project it will get gains from that. Nowadays, it can be argued that against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and the victory of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia can no longer delay the construction of this critical new transport route between Europe and Asia. (Gawliczek / Iskandarov 2023, 37)

Because of the territorial conflict with Russia Georgia still has no realistic chance to become a NATO member in the next decade. Also, EU candidate status is still not finally negotiated. As a result, it must be feared that the current government is turning further towards Russia. (Kogan 2023, 3) But there is a chance in the current Russian weakness. If Georgia will be able to end the conflict in Abkhazia and South-Ossetia with Russia, gates to NATO and EU will open up again. Then, the Russian threat to the highway connection between Black Sea and Caspian Sea could be reduced. Currently, a South Ossetian border post is located just 450 meters from this highway away. (Markedonov 2018, 33) But in which way, such a conflict solution can be found is still an open question. The clear winner of the changed geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus is Azerbaijan. While the Russian peacekeeping troops on Azerbaijani territory between 2020 and nowadays could have been a key factor to bring Azerbaijan back into the Russian sphere of influence, e.g. to force the country into the Eurasian Economic Union, since the Azerbaijani-Turkish victory in Nagorno-Karabakh the Russian influence in Azerbaijan became much smaller.

Altogether, the countries in the South Caucasus have to keep an eye on those geopolitical players who are able to counterbalance Russia as former hegemonial power. While the U.S. are withdrawing from the region and the EU remains unwilling to engage more on security issues in the region illiberal powers like China, Türkiye and Iran may play a rising role. But all

regional geopolitical powers, Russia, Türkiye and Iran, have the common interest to build transit routes through the South Caucasus to link China with Europe and India with the Global North. This opens up several new opportunities for the countries in this region. And it brings new challenges to the main geopolitical players in the South Caucasus, Russia, the EU and China.

First, Russia lost a lot of its influence in the region. Its inability to intervene in the Nagorno-Karabakh war in September 2023 made clear that the South Caucasus is still not more in the focus of the Russian government. Russia has to draw back its peacekeeping troops from Azerbaijan urgently. A disappointed Armenia will try to shake off the Russian paternalism as soon as possible, too. Georgia is a hostile nation for Russia, waiting only for the right moment to attain control over its occupied territories, Abkhazia and South-Ossetia, again. In case of changing governments in Georgia an end of the “pragmatic” policy towards Russia is possible. The war in the Ukraine was obviously – at least for a period – the end of Russian hegemony in the South Caucasus.

Second, the EU has to counterbalance the other major powers – mainly Russia on the retreat and China on the rise, but also Iran and Türkiye – in the South Caucasus. That should be done through close partnership offers with the EU. There are still relevant pro-European aspirations among the local people and the EU holds a substantial share of the region’s foreign trade. Additionally, the EU members have a critical significance as investors in the region. (Huseynov 2021, 33) And Azerbaijan’s oil and gas fields – directly connected by pipeline to Italy – are of high importance for European energy security. Now, in 2023, the EU should play a more active role in the post-conflict peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan to substitute the failed Russian peacekeeping mission. The West as well as Türkiye tries to ensure the flow of resources of the South Caucasus and Central Asia to Europe bypassing Russia and Iran. In this way, the influence of Russia and Iran can be reduced, further on. (Gawliczek / Iskandarov 2023, 39) But the EU should not focus on Azerbaijan, only. To participate in a pacification process in the South Caucasus would secure the energy supply via the region to Europe, on the one hand. And on the other hand, it would create a democratic and free channel of nations between Russia in the North and Iran in the South for East-West trade.

Third, the West has also to take into consideration that its strategic interests are more dangerously challenged by China in the South Caucasus. China’s influence is rising not through military capabilities but soft power, such as steadily rising Chinese Investments in the region. But this will have dramatical impacts on the European energy and national security interests in the long run. It must be seen that over the past few years, China’s economic presence has grown in all three South Caucasus states. The result is an increase of Beijing’s

geopolitical influence in the region. (Ibrahimov 2022, 70) But China's economic presence offers also opportunities for the South Caucasus. A sustainable peace in the region could open all transportation corridors in the region – the BRI between East and West as well as the North-South Corridor. In this way, the South Caucasus could free itself from Russian control and would have a chance to become an interdependent transport hub at the crossroad between China and Europe as well as between India and the North.

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