

The Policy of the United States in the South Caucasus

Gayane Novikova

What does the new foreign policy under Donald Trump mean for the complex security environment?

This article analyses the interaction between the three main actors of the South Caucasus region, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, through the prism of change and continuity in US regional policy.

Any discussion regarding the current state of US foreign policy contains more questions than answers. The more recent trend has been determined by the slogan "America First!", which means on the one hand that the US is moving toward a more isolationistic policy. Steps which aim to serve only American interests can be to

some extent provocative and unpredictable: In many cases they can give an impulse to irreversible changes in the security environment in certain regions. On the other hand, there is both a visible and hidden continuity in respect to the main directions and approaches toward the core issues of the American foreign policy.

environment to the extent that global peace and security is affected.

This article therefore aims to analyse the frameworks of interaction between the United States and the three main stakeholders of the South Caucasus region: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, through the prism of change and continuity in US regional policy.

Photo: US State Department



US Secretary of State John Kerry shakes hands with Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan on 16 May 2016 at the Bristol Hotel in Vienna, Austria, before US, Russian, and French officials sat down with Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders in an effort to calm tensions over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Author

Dr. Gayane Novikova is the founder and current director of the Center for Strategic Analysis, (Spectrum) in Yerevan, Armenia.

Changes and continuity in US foreign policy can be found not only in regard to global issues. The dynamic of developments even in areas of the world peripheral for the US or – at first glance – around "insignificant" or less important issues can provoke the collapse of a very fragile regional security en-

The US National Security Strategy

The Trump administration introduced its National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2017. It states that the "America First foreign policy celebrates America's influence in the world as a positive force that can help set the conditions for peace, prosperity, and the development of successful societies." To analyse the exact results of this influence upon the other states, which are both US partners and rivals, it is necessary to note that the foreign policy of Donald Trump possesses several distinctive aspects in comparison with the foreign policy of his predecessor Barack Obama. Within the context of this article, the most important are the approaches to international peace and security and the role of global actors in preserving stability and promoting democracy. In the NSSs of both presidents, the global threats to US security have been Russian, Chinese, and Iranian ambitions, as well as international terrorism and crime.

The main difference lies in their approaches to the avenues to eliminate these threats. President Obama introduced "strategic patience" in interactions with other actors and emphasised that the "rules-based international order advanced by US leadership [...] promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges." President Trump, who views for-

eign policy per se as his personal domain (which means that it can be – to a certain degree – unpredictable and impulsive), conversely demonstrates "strategic impatience", as he attempts to shape the international order in accordance with his vision of how to protect US sovereignty: "My Administration's National Security Strategy lays out a strategic vision for protecting the American people and preserving our way of life, promoting our prosperity, preserving peace through strength, and advancing American influence in the world. [...] we will serve the American people and uphold their right to a government that prioritises their security, their prosperity, and their interests. This National Security Strategy puts America First." According to the NSS, "The United States will respond to the growing political, economic, and military competitions we face around the world... These competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades – policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false." Therefore, it is correct to evaluate the current version of the NSS as based not on cooperation but on competition. Although the South Caucasus region was not mentioned in the 2017 NSS, some features mark a trend toward a multilayer involvement of the US into processes in this area. In the preamble to the NSS's chapter "The Strategy in the Regional Context," it was stated that the US "must tailor [its] approaches to different regions of the world to protect US national interests. We require integrated regional strategies that appreciate the nature and magnitude of threats, the intensity of competitions, and the promise of available opportunities, all in the context of local political, economic, social, and historical realities."

The long-term strategic interests of the US toward the South Caucasus region can be identified by – among others – two important factors: its location and fragile security environment.

Geopolitical Competition

The South Caucasus region can be considered as a constituent part of larger regions, in particular the Broader Middle

East. From the US perspective, it accomplishes at least three important functions. First, as a buffer zone, the South Caucasus reduces the scale of penetration of a broad spectrum of security threats (including Islamic radicalism, terrorism, drug- and human trafficking, and uncontrolled migration) emanating from the vulnerable Middle East. Second, in part it can be viewed as an obstacle against a more active inclusion of Russia in Middle Eastern processes.

The South Caucasus area is a crossroads of oil and gas pipelines that diversify energy supplies to the several European states thereby reducing their dependence upon Russia. The existing and proposed trade and communication routes are of significant importance, providing transport corridors which connect the Central Asian states and China to Europe. This region is essential for China's "Belt and Road" initiative.

The geopolitical competition with the inclusion of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, can be analysed in a three-level overlapping and mutually influential framework. At its first level are Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, which have very complicated relationships with each other. Numerous regional contradictions have shaped the Georgian-Azerbaijani strategic partnership, the Armenian-Georgian friendly relations and the Armenian-Azerbaijani enmity. These states also either border with, or are in close proximity to, three regional powers: Russia, Iran, and Turkey. These powers constitute the second level of actors directly involved in South Caucasus processes. The strategic interests of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, as well as their models of interaction with each other, allow them to manipulate the South Caucasus states

and significantly to limit the space available to them for political, economic, and military manoeuvring.

Insertion of the US into this scheme as a third-level supra-regional actor brings even more intricacy and complexity into relations on the ground. The US sanctions against Russia, its withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ("Iran Deal") in May 2018, the growing tension in the US-Turkey bilateral relationship, suspension of the INF Treaty (The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) in February 2019 by both the US and Russia all indicate a dangerous trend toward transformation of the geopolitical competition into a geopolitical confrontation.



Graphic: Mapsproject

The increasing US involvement in South Caucasus affairs aims: a) to limit Russia's presence in the region; b) to restrict Iran and to control the interactions of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and (to a lesser extent) Georgia, with Iran, and c) to promote mutual interests in the Middle East with Turkey as a strategic partner and ally. In the meantime, an intensifying tension between the regional powers and the US will cause a further deterioration of security in the South Caucasus.

Regional Conflicts

Another set of factors which determines the strategic interest of the US toward the South Caucasus states is related to the three unresolved conflicts of this area. Developments in and around each of these conflicts can pose a serious security threat: Under certain conditions, a small war can transform into a regional one that involves the participation of several regional actors.

In the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts, the United States is actually excluded as a player. After the outbreak of the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, the EU (France and its President Nicolas Sarkozy, in particular) took the initiative to negotiate a six-point peace plan to end the war and to find a political solution. However, the signed Medvedev–Sarkozy agreement was factually annulled after recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence by Russia in September 2008. Consequently, these two conflicts have been transformed from internal ethno-political conflicts into international ones. Antagonistic Russian-Georgian relations still prevent an implementation of any model of reconciliation between Georgia and the two breakaway semi-recognised statelets, at least in the foreseeable future. The US currently lacks a comprehensive policy in these "Georgian conflicts": It has withdrawn from any discussions and limited itself to statements that support Georgia's territorial integrity. There is no sign that the US has any desire to be directly involved in the resolution of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts.

It must be noted that the discussions around the Georgian conflicts have intensified since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. In July 2016, the US and Geor-

Georgia's reliance and its resilience and its self-defence capabilities." Later, in the US NSS (2017) the only reference to the South Caucasus was related to Georgia: "With its invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, Russia demonstrated its willingness to violate the sovereignty of states in the region."

Another statement, indirectly concerned with the "Georgian conflicts", appeared in September 2018. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, A. Wess Mitchell, addressing the 2018 Tbilisi International Conference, stressed that "together with the weapons and training that we provide, [our bilateral relations] demonstrate very clearly that the US will commit the resources and the attention to supporting Georgia and to making sure that Georgia is able to defend its territory. First and foremost, the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Georgia have been and remain at the heart of the United States strategic objectives in the Caucasus."

The Nagorniy Karabakh Conflict

A different approach can be observed in the US involvement as a mediator in the Nagorniy Karabakh (NK) conflict. Currently the OSCE Minsk Group (MG) platform (established as a framework for the mediation for settlement of the NK conflict) remains probably the only

to negotiate a solution based upon a mutual compromise (namely, the so-called Madrid Principles, as updated in 2009). The outbreak of the conflict in April 2016 clearly demonstrated the growing danger to regional peace and security.

The parties to the conflict directly and indirectly have been blaming the mediators for their inability to suggest something critically new regarding principles for a resolution. Meanwhile, in the course of the last ten years, the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group have attempted to give a new impulse to the negotiations. In particular, the former US Co-Chair, Ambassador Richard Hoagland, recognised: "There are several unresolved, protracted conflicts on the territory of the former Soviet Union, and each one is somewhat different. ...you have to look at exactly what are the elements involved in that conflict... In fact, I'd go so far as to say maybe this [the NK conflict] is just an example of good diplomacy and what I would call Realpolitik." Furthermore, his statement that "there can be no settlement without respect for Azerbaijan's sovereignty and the recognition that sovereignty over these [surrounding Nagorniy Karabakh] territories must be restored" provoked intensive discussions between the parties to the conflict on whether he intentionally avoided mentioning Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and this is a sign of a new policy by the US and /or the Minsk Group, or he simply modified this term slightly.

There are some signs of the US readiness to play a more active role and to speed the NK conflict resolution. A visit by US National Security Advisor John Bolton to the region in October 2018, and his press conferences in Baku and Yerevan, indicated that the US is in favour of a compromise that will bring both Azerbaijan (as a US strategic partner) and Armenia (the relations with which he described as "a top priority") closer to the West, and thereby to reduce Russia's influence in the region. He said, "From Armenia's point of view, the surest way to reduce excessive outside influence in Armenia is to reach a resolution on Nagorno-Karabakh." Advisor Bolton also discussed arms purchases, stressing that purchasing of weapons from Russia "has clearly not contributed to a resolution of the dispute, because of the enormous leverage it gives Russia over both parties...We [Americans] believe in competition as a spur to improvement, and our military equipment is better than the Russians' in all cases. This is something we should consider." This offer to sell weapons to the parties to the NK conflict should be viewed not only through the

Photo: OSCE



On 26 May 2016, the OSCE PA Special Representative on the South Caucasus Kristian Vigenin visited the boundary line separating South Ossetia from Georgia near the village Khurvaleti.

gia signed a new agreement that shifted military assistance to Georgia from the training of its troops for international deployment to an increase of its self-defence capabilities. As John Kerry, the former US Secretary of State, mentioned, this agreement "defines our security partnership and the steps we will take together to further

area of US–Russia cooperation, in spite of existing differences. As a co-chair of the MG, the US, together with Russia and France, is trying to facilitate a consensus between the parties to the conflict, namely Armenia, the Republic of Artsakh (also known as the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic), and Azerbaijan, and

prism of the US–Russia relationships and the desire of the US to contain Iran, but also be evaluated as a step toward further escalation of an arms race in the already heavily militarised area. Given the situation where the NK conflict is still very far from resolution, any violation of balance of powers can be extremely dangerous. Several direct and indirect factors influence the US position regarding resolution of the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict. Among them should be mentioned the following:

- Azerbaijan has been viewed by US authorities as a secular Muslim state that can (together with Turkey) be helpful in the fight against global Islamist terrorism;
- Azerbaijan allows use of its air and sea ports as essential transit points for US and NATO troops, supporting their missions in Afghanistan;
- Azerbaijan is a key actor in regard to energy supplies to several European states;
- In 2018 alone, the US invested US\$13Bn in Azerbaijan's economy, including more than US\$1Bn in the country's non-oil sector;
- The efforts of the Armenian lobby, which is focused on Armenian Genocide recognition and on maintaining US direct economic support to Armenia and the Republic of Artsakh, and on recognition of Artsakh's independence by various states in the USA, are limited by the united efforts of Turkish and a growing number of Azerbaijani lobbyists.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the US strategic interests toward the South Caucasus as a region is

growing owing to the location of this area: it stands at a crossroads where the interests of three core actors – Russia, Turkey, and Iran – coincide, overlap, or confront each other. Depending upon geopolitical developments, the US can find itself facing an increasing joint resistance of these states toward its policies in the Broader Middle East and in the South Caucasus in particular.

Moreover, the critical goal of the US as concerns the interaction with the three regional states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – involves their more active engagement and larger participation in providing and securing US strategic political-military and economic interests in the area of dominant Russian, Turkish, and Iranian presence and influence. In regard to the growing security deficit in different parts of the world, and especially in the South Caucasus, the following statement in the US NSS should be considered seriously: "We will compete with all tools of national power to ensure that regions of the world are not dominated by one power."

A promotion of democratic values as the US global mission is currently not on the US agenda. In contrast to President Obama's National Security Strategy, which stated that "defending democracy and human rights is related to every enduring national interest", the Trump administration in its first NSS made it clear that it is "not going to impose our values on others." This position echoed quite clearly the US attitude toward the South Caucasus states: the security agenda is prioritised over democratic values and human rights. At the press conference in Yerevan, the US National Security Advisor John Bolton was asked about Washington's reaction to the Armenian

Velvet Revolution. His answer did not refer to the peaceful change of power, an improvement of the human rights situation, or progress in the fight against corruption. Instead, he stressed that, after the parliamentary elections in a December 2018, "the most opportune moment [will have come] to take strong action in number of different respects... There is no better time to try and take decisive action [in the resolution of the NK conflict]." In Baku, Bolton's answer to a question about an "unrelenting crackdown on civil society and independent media in Azerbaijan", was a quote from President Trump's speech at the UN GA; to him, the US has "a desire not to lecture other countries".

Although the threats and challenges emanating from the wider Middle East are common to all the above-mentioned states, the possibility of a broad cooperation to prevent or minimise them is quite low; a shared strategic vision has been replaced by Realpolitik.

Finally, the South Caucasus states are already involved in a vicious circle of intensifying and expanding geopolitical competition. Against a background of a growing confrontation between the US and Russia, an increasing hostility between the US and Iran, and an ambivalent US–Turkey relationship, three South Caucasus states have a special task: To find for themselves an acceptable modus operandi with all these external actors and to avoid by all means a further increase in regional security deficit. Reaching this goal will be difficult under the present circumstances: Existing regional bilateral and multilateral problems have become instrumentalised amidst the geopolitical games of others. ■

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