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Thirty Years of Interaction: The US Policy in the South Caucasus after the End of the Cold War*

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Abstract: Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has been actively involved in the geopolitics in the post-Soviet space. The US presence was felt everywhere – the European part of the former Soviet Union, Central Asian republics, and the South Caucasus. The latter subregion finds itself in a strategically important crossroad, connecting Europe with Central Asia and the Middle East and bordering Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The US policy in the region was a part of its broader policy in the former Soviet Union, which corresponded to the US grand strategy after the end of the Cold War.

To better understand the US policy in the region after the end of the Cold War, we need to explore the US grand strategy during that period. Since the end of the Cold War and with onset of the "unipolar moment" marked by uncontested US hegemony, the US has pursued the strategy of "liberal hegemony" with the core goal to promote democracy in different parts of the world, including South Caucasus and the former Soviet Union in general. The US interests in the region also include establishing the network of oil and gas pipelines to supply the European markets with Caspian energy resources, circumventing Russia. The US supported the reforms agenda embraced by the post-Soviet states and simultaneously made significant efforts to create a strong community of civil society organizations, viewing them as a tool for creating a new generation of pro-Western elites.

Another aspect of the US regional strategy was to build up the resilience of the newly independent states to make them, as the Americans called it, less vulnerable to Russian pressure. The "liberal hegemony" strategy resulted in the US unequivocal support to the so-called "Rose Revolution" in Georgia and the country's foreign policy aimed at integration with the European Union, which included the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014. The US allocated significant resources to help launch the Baku – Tbilisi – Ceyhan oil pipeline, and the Baku – Tbilisi – Erzurum gas pipeline, as well as to support the "Southern gas corridor" project.

The 2008 global financial crisis marked the beginning of the end of the "unipolar moment" and the rise of the new, multi-polar world order. This transformation coincided with the rise of

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China and affected the US foreign policy. The US started to shift its focus to the Asia–Pacific region, while the 2014 Ukraine events brought Russia – US relations to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

President Trump declared the return of the great power competition era and launched the America First policy with less or no emphasis on democracy promotion and human rights protection as a core tenet of the American foreign policy. The election of President Joe Biden seemed to bring back democracy and human rights back to the US foreign policy forefront. However, the Biden administration will continue to emphasize great power competition viewing Russia and China as its main rivals. The transformation of the global order and the growing tensions in US-China and US – Russia relations had an impact on the US policy in the South Caucasus as well. The region is not one of the vital US foreign policy priorities, and the relatively passive US stance during the 2020 Karabakh proved this new equilibrium. The US will continue to support democracy-oriented reforms in Armenia and Georgia and assist the civil society sector. Meanwhile, the US will probably avoid actions that may antagonize Russia, such as pushing hard for Georgia's NATO or EU membership.

Keywords: South Caucasus, US, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, grand strategy

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Тридцать лет взаимодействия: политика США на Южном Кавказе после окончания холодной войны

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Резюме: После распада Советского Союза в 1991 году Соединенные Штаты стали принимать активное участие в геополитических процессах на постсоветском пространстве. Присутствие США ощущалось повсюду - в европейской части бывшего СССР, в республиках Средней Азии и на Южном Кавказе. Последний упомянутый субрегион находится на стратегически важном пересечении, соединяющем Европу с Центральной Азией и Ближним Востоком и граничащем с Россией, Турцией и Ираном. Политика США в регионе являлась составной частью более широкой политики Вашингтона на территории бывшего СССР, которая, в свою очередь, соотносилась с общей внешнеполитической стратегией США после окончания холодной войны.

Чтобы лучше понять политику США в регионе после окончания холодной войны, необходимо изучить внешнеполитическую стратегию США в этот период. После окончания холодной войны и с наступлением т.н. периода однополярности, отмеченного неоспоримой гегемонией США, Америка следовала стратегии «либеральной

гегемонии» основной целью которой было продвижение демократии в различных частях мира, включая Южный Кавказ и бывший СССР в целом. Интересы США в регионе также включают в себя создание сети нефте- и газопроводов для снабжения европейских рынков энергоресурсами Каспийского бассейна в обход России. США поддержали программу реформ, начатых в постсоветских государствах, и одновременно приложили значительные усилия для укрепления сообщества организаций гражданского общества, рассматривая их как инструмент для создания нового поколения прозападных элит.

Другим аспектом региональной стратегии США было повышение устойчивости новых независимых государств, чтобы они стали, по их мнению, менее уязвимыми для давления со стороны России. Стратегия «либеральной гегемонии» привела к безоговорочной поддержке США так называемой Революции роз в Грузии, а также внешней политики страны, направленной на интеграцию с Европейским союзом и включавшей подписание Соглашения об ассоциации с ЕС в 2014 году. США выделили значительные ресурсы на запуск нефтепровода «Баку - Тбилиси – Джейхан» и газопровода «Баку - Тбилиси – Эрзурум», а также на поддержку проекта «Южный газовый коридор».

Глобальный финансовый кризис 2008 года ознаменовал начало конца периода однополярности и возникновение нового многополярного мирового порядка. Эта трансформация совпала с ростом Китая и оказала влияние на внешнюю политику США. Они начали смещать свое внимание на Азиатско-Тихоокеанский регион, а события 2014 года на Украине довели российско-американские отношения до самого низкого уровня со времени окончания холодной войны.

Президент Д. Трамп объявил о возвращении эры соперничества великих держав и начал проводить политику «Америка превыше всего», уделяя меньше внимания продвижению демократии и защите прав человека и не придавая этому роли основного принципа американской внешней политики. Избрание президента Джо Байдена, казалось, вернуло демократию и права человека на передний план внешней политики США. Однако администрация Байдена будет продолжать делать упор на соперничество великих держав, рассматривая Россию и Китай в качестве своих основных соперников. Трансформация мирового порядка и растущая напряженность в отношениях между США и Китаем с одной стороны и США и Россией с другой оказали влияние и на политику США на Южном Кавказе. Этот регион не является одним из жизненно важных приоритетов внешней политики США, и относительно пассивная позиция США по отношению к Нагорному Карабаху в 2020 году подтвердила такое положение дел. США будут продолжать поддерживать демократические реформы в Армении и Грузии, а также оказывать помощь гражданскому обществу. Между тем, США, вероятно, будут избегать действий, которые могут вызвать антагонизм со стороны России, таких как поддержка настойчивого стремления Грузии к членству в НАТО или ЕС.

Ключевые слова: Южный Кавказ, США, Армения, Азербайджан, Грузия, Россия, внешнеполитическая стратегия.

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE US GRAND STRATEGY AFTER THE END OF THE COLD WAR: FROM CLINTON TO BIDEN

During the Cold War the US pursued the grand strategy of containment. Defined by the legacy of prominent diplomat and scholar George Kennan, this grand strategy was pertaining to the entire American foreign policy. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 triggered the quest for a new grand strategy in the US. Active debates were taking place in both academic and policymaking circles. One of the early publications, which sought to define the debate, was the article called "Unipolar Moment" by Charles Krauthammer published in early 1991 in *Foreign Affairs*. Krauthammer declared that the post-Cold war world would be a unipolar one characterized by the unchallenged power of the United States. "The world is in a unipolar moment," this sentence perhaps was the key in this paper, which gave the name to the international security system for the coming two decades or so. Krauthammer argued that the US should embrace this new world and shape it according to its interests [Krauthammer Ch., 1990/1991].

Just before Krauthammer elaborated on the upcoming unipolar moment, another American scholar, Francis Fukuyama, published a paper called "The end of History?" in the *National Interest*. He argued that what the world may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as we know it: that is, the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government [Fukuyama F. 1989].

In his 1992 article, Joseph Nye Jr. rejected the traditional approaches to the upcoming international security architecture: return to bipolarity, multipolarity, the three economic blocs, unipolar hegemony, multilevel interdependence. He pushed forward with the liberal conception of global society of peoples, as well as states, where the order is resting on values and institutions as well as military power [Nye J. 1992: 83-96].

These early debates of the early 1990s were vital to the formulation of the new US grand strategy, which many experts and scholars called a "primacy" or "liberal hegemony" strategy. Primacy builds on hegemonic stability theory, which centers on a claim that the global order is a public good. As such, nations will try to enjoy it without contribution, which is called free-riding, causing the order to atrophy unless there is a state – the hegemon – that compels other states to protect it. A strategy of primacy entails that the US provides this hegemonic leadership mainly through its military commitments

and deployments. Thus, under the US protection, states can be less preoccupied with their security by forming alliances and increasing military capacity [Thrall A., Friedman B. 2018: 2-3].

As a distinguished American scholar Stephan Walt mentioned, the strategy was liberal, not in the sense of being left-leaning, but because it sought to use American power to defend and spread the traditional liberal principles of individual freedom, democratic governance, and a free-market economy. The strategy was one of hegemony because it identified America as the "indispensable nation": that was uniquely qualified to spread those political principles to other countries and bring the states into a web of alliances and institutions designed and led by the United States [Walt S. 2018: 53-91]. The US launched a strategy to create a liberal world order through the active use of US power. Washington sought to remake other countries in its image and incorporate them into institutions and arrangements of its design.

The spread of those values was not only seen to be good on their own terms; they were seen as positive if not essential for the US' own security. According to this view, the US could be only safe in a world full of states like itself, and as long as it had the power to pursue that outcome, it should do that.

The grand strategy of liberal hegemony was underlying the decision to pursue the NATO enlargement made by the Clinton administration. In July 1994, the administration published its "National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement." It mentioned the necessity for American leadership and defined democracy promotion as one of the three main goals of the strategy. It also explicitly identified Russia and other former Soviet Republics as primary areas of democracy promotion [1].

The "liberal hegemony" strategy was at the heart of the US efforts to expand NATO. In 1994, the US supported the launch of the NATO Partnership for Peace program to enable participants to develop individual relationships with NATO, choosing their priorities for cooperation, as well as the level and pace of progress [2]. The program played a crucial role in fostering NATO relations with the Eastern European Countries and the former Soviet republics and laid a foundation of NATO enlargements in 1999, 2004, and further. Along with NATO and the EU enlargement, the liberal hegemony strategy envisaged the active promotion of the US soft power in the post-Soviet space through establishing and supporting the nascent civil society. USAID, National Endowment of Democracy, and other US organizations poured billions of US dollars to establish, support, and sustain the activities of thousands of non-governmental organizations in the post-Soviet and post-Socialist countries, with a view to promote the ideas of liberal reforms and Euro-Atlantic integration. These organizations played a primary role in promoting pro-US agenda in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and other states.

Besides actively pursuing the soft power strategy, the US did not eschew the use of hard power in pushing forward its strategic interests, as was the case during the

Balkan wars in the early 1990s, the bombing of Serbia in 1999, incursions into Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

The September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US seemed to have shifted the US attention from the democracy promotion to the "war on terror". However, democracy promotion was soon made a centerpiece of the "war on terror." A vivid example of the grand strategy of liberal hegemony was the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003 in flagrant violation of international law. The US aimed to establish a democracy in Iraq and later to use Iraq's example to democratize other countries of the region. President George W. Bush once more evoked this strategy in his second inaugural speech, when he stated that "the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all over the world" [3].

The election of President Barack Obama did not bring significant changes to the American grand strategy. Obama made efforts to normalize relations with Russia by launching a "reset" in early 2009. The three years of the reset brought some successes, such as Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization and the signing of the New START Treaty in 2010. However, democracy promotion continued to be at the center of American foreign policy, as proved by the full US support of the NATO military intervention in Libya in 2011 and its involvement in events in Ukraine in early 2014.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration found itself in a significantly different geopolitical context. The 2008 global financial crisis marked the beginning of the end of the "Unipolar Moment." The growing influence of China, India, Russia, and other players launched the post cold war era and the multipolar world system. This transformation was defined both by power shift from the West to the East, and a diffusion of power as many non-state actors such as transnational companies, non profit foundations, international criminal networks, and military groups have gained more influence.

The American political and academic establishment started to feel the changes. Fareed Zakaria captured this turning moment in his 2008 book "Post-American World" and his paper "The Future of American power" published in the May/June 2008 issue of Foreign Affairs. He argued that the emerging international system was likely to be quite different from those that had preceded it. Since 1991, the world had lived under a US imperium, a unique, unipolar world where the open global economy has expanded and accelerated. However, on every dimension other than military power -- industrial, financial, social, cultural -- the distribution of power was shifting, moving away from US dominance. Thus, the world was moving into a post-American world, one defined and directed from many places and by many people [Zakaria F. 2008].

The shifts in the world power distribution reinvigorated the debate about the necessity to adopt a new grand strategy. In 2014 Barry Posen published his book "Re-

straint: A New Foundation for the US Grand Strategy", in which he called to abandon the grand strategy of "liberal hegemony" and pursue a new one, which will significantly reduce the US involvements in different parts of the world. Posen called to focus on a small number of threats and approach those threats with subtlety and moderation. According to Posen, it was not smart to spend energy transforming the recalcitrant world that Americans could spend renewing the United States [Posen B. 2014: 1-11]. The apparent failure of the American policy of democracy promotion and nation-building in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya contributed to the debate about the necessity of a new grand strategy.

Another factor having influenced the American strategic thinking of the 2010s was the eventual rise of China and the growing understanding among American experts and policymaking community that China will be the primary US competitor in decades to come. The rise of China challenged another assumption of the liberal hegemony strategy, according to which the rise of living standards and the emergence of the middle class will inevitably bring about changes in the political system and will facilitate the political reforms. China made impressive successes in rooting out extreme poverty, but it does not bring the era of liberal reforms despite America's hopes. The "pivot to Asia" strategy, first articulated by the then secretary of state Hillary Clinton in her 2011 Foreign Policy article, was the harbinger of the changing US attitudes in foreign policy [Clinton H. 2011].

In summer 2016, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt published "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy" paper. They called the US to forgo ambitious efforts to remake other societies and concentrate on what really matters: Preserving the US dominance in the Western hemisphere and countering potential hegemony in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf, preserving the regional balance of power. They argued that this new grand strategy was the only tangible way to secure the US role as the world's 'sole superpower' [Mearsheimer J., Walt S. 2016: 70-83].

Despite the shift of focus of the US foreign policy towards the Asia Pacific, the Obama administration did not end the liberal hegemony strategy. Democracy promotion continued to be the central pillar of the US foreign policy, which was evident by the 2014 events in Ukraine. The US put significant efforts to support the anti-Yanukovich movement in Ukraine, explaining it by the desire to promote democracy and protect the rule of law and human rights. Another example was the Obama administration's decision to support anti-Assad forces in the Syrian conflict and Obama's explicit calls for Assad to step down [4].

The victory of Trump in the 2016 presidential elections sent shock waves across the US political spectrum. Trump's disdain for globalization and his "America first" policy seemed to usher in the end of the liberal hegemony strategy. President Trump downgraded democracy promotion as a US foreign policy priority, simultaneously making efforts to keep the US position as the world's sole superpower. Given the chaotic nature of Trump's presidency, it is difficult to identify a clear grand strategy un-

der the Trump administration. The recurring theme for his presidency was the return of the great power competition, which was identified as the main feature of XXI century geopolitics [5].

Trump has significantly ramped up the US anti-China policy launching a trade war against Beijing. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic he has sought to trigger anti-China sentiments worldwide by calling the novel coronavirus a "Wuhan virus" and disseminating the "lab leak" theory. Despite his initial statements about intentions to normalize relations with Russia, the US – Russia relations deteriorated further as they effectively became hostage of the US domestic policy fight between Republicans and Democrats.

In his recently published book "American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump," American scholar Hal Brands offers two models of the more nationalistic US grand strategy during the Trump presidency or after. The first model is "Fortress America", a hardline, neo-isolationist strategy that would deliberately undermine the existing global order in search of a unilateral advantage. The second approach argues that the more nationalistic grand strategy will focus on redistributing burdens, securing more advantageous deals and arrangements with the US allies and partners [Brands H. 2018: 101-127]. President Trump's repeated calls to the NATO allies to improve burden-sharing by increasing their defense spending and his efforts to renegotiate the free trade deal with Canada and Mexico can be perceived as examples of this type of grand strategy.

The recent book by Benjamin Miller and Ziv Rubinovitz, "Grand strategy from Truman to Trump," provides excellent insight into the choices made by the different US administrations. Authors identified four general types of grand strategies: offensive realism – quest for superiority/hegemony, including by a unilateral resort to force, defensive realism- focusing on security maximization through balancing, deterrence, and multilateral arms control, offensive liberalism – promotion of democracy through the use of force, defensive liberalism – emphasis on soft power and international institutions and spread of democracy by peaceful means [Miller B., Rubinovitz Z. 2020: 9-37]. According to this approach, we may define the Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama's grand strategy as a mix of offensive and defensive liberalism, while that of Donald Trump as offensive realism seeking to reinstitute the US hegemony through utterly coercive measures, including trade wars and economic sanctions.

The victory of Joe Biden in the November 2020 presidential elections reinvigorated the debate on the future US grand strategy. During the election campaign as well as after the inauguration, Biden emphasized the necessity to bring back democracy and human rights protection into the forefront of US foreign policy. Biden declared that the critical event that would determine the world's future is the struggle between democracies and authoritarian powers.

In March 2021 Biden administration published its “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance” [6]. The document declared that democracies across the globe were increasingly under siege and argued that the US should join hands with like-minded allies and partners to revitalize democracy all over the world. The word democracy prevailed the entire document, thus creating an impression that Biden decided to return to the liberal hegemony strategy. President Biden’s decision to convene Leaders’ Virtual Summit for Democracy in December 2021, with three principal topics: defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights, was in line with this narrative [7].

The Biden administration continues to pay special attention to the great power competition. In its April 2021 Annual threat assessment, the Office of the Director of the National Intelligence identified Russia and China as critical threats to US national security. Marking China as a sole potential peer competitor for the US, the document fixed Russia as a primary source of concerns in fields such as cyber capabilities and modern weaponry, including hypersonic missiles. The US defense establishment warned that Russia – China military cooperation might play a role of force multiplier for China, thus significantly increasing the long-term danger posed by China [8].

Meanwhile, several prominent US scholars and foreign policy practitioners argued for accepting the inevitability of the emergence of a multipolar world and called for a relevant US foreign policy. The President of Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan proposed the establishment of the "New Concert of powers" given the fact that the two centuries of Western world domination under Pax Britannica and then under Pax Americana, are coming to an end. They called for a new global concert of major powers, as a consultative, not a decision-making body comprising six members, China, the European Union, India, Japan, Russia and the United States [Haass R., Kupchan Ch. 2021].

Speaking about the US grand strategy under President Biden, Michael O’Hanlon put forward the idea of a new grand strategy, which he calls resolute restraint. The core tenet of the proposed strategy is the determination to firmly uphold American commitments to its allies and its core interests like freedom of the seas. However, O’Hanlon argues that restraint is just as important with regard to generally avoiding further expansion of alliances and seeking tough-minded but realistic compromises on nuclear negotiations with North Korea and Iran. He believes that a new US grand strategy should focus much more on shoring up the core of the rules-based global order than pursuing a more ambitious liberal order [O’Hanlon M. 2021: 21-56].

As of now, we may argue that the Biden administration is still in the quest to elaborate a new US grand strategy [Deudney D., Ikenberry J. 2021]. However, in general American establishment understands that continuation of liberal hegemony will require dual containment simultaneously countering Russia and China. Dual containment strategy was implemented by the Clinton administration in the 1990s against Iran and Iraq, but it cannot be replicated now [Myers H. 1997].

Parts of the American establishment call for actions to drive a wedge between Russia and China, similar to what the US, with skillful diplomacy of Henri Kissinger, did in the early 1970s to divide China and the Soviet Union [9; Kupchan Ch. 2021]. The decision to hold an early summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in June 2021 and repeated statements of the US leadership about their intention to have predictable relations with Russia may indicate that the US is wary of dangers to fighting both China and Russia simultaneously [10].

Thus, despite all rhetoric about bringing back democracy and human rights at the heart of the US foreign policy, the Biden administration may pursue a more cautious policy towards Russia, seeking to prevent the further deepening of Russia - China relations [Mitchell A. 2021]. According to the new administration's actions, we may argue that the Biden administration will seek to fuse the options of resolute restraint with defensive liberalism in its pursuit of the new grand strategy. The US will seek to promote democracy through soft power, mainly focusing on supporting the civil society, creating pro-Western forces, especially among the young generation, and using EU normative power in the former Soviet space to reinvigorate the reform processes. Meanwhile, most probably, NATO enlargement will be focused on Western Balkans, and there will be no push to include former Soviet Republics such as Georgia or Ukraine into the alliance.

US POLICY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN THE POST-COLD WAR PERIOD: EARLY STEPS

The collapse of the Soviet Union opened South Caucasus for the US. The region has been part of the USSR since December 1922, after having been incorporated into the Russian empire in the early 19th century. The US had brief relations with the South Caucasus in 1918-1920, when independent Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia emerged due to the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917. The then US President Woodrow Wilson even offered the US Senate to take Armenia's mandate in 1920, but this idea was rejected by the growing isolationist forces of the US [11]. Thus, we may argue that in late 1991 the US had little experience in the region full of ethnic and interstate conflicts. Meanwhile, it should be noted that the US did not develop any special policy towards the South Caucasus. The region was part of the US general perception towards post-Soviet space, where the main goals of the US were democracy promotion and support of reforms and modernization of state institutions. South Caucasus was part of the 1992 Freedom Support Act coverage area. However, as a result of the active efforts of the Armenian - American community, the 907 section of the Freedom Support Act banned any direct aid to the Azerbaijani government as far as the latter would not stop the blockade and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh [12]. This section was under yearly waiver since 2001 to allow the US to assist Azerbaijan to fight against terror, and the

waiver was extended once more by the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken on April 23, 2021 [13].

The early years of the independent South Caucasus were marked by several ethno-political conflicts in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh), Abkhazia, South Ossetia, as well as the civil war and military coups in Georgia and Azerbaijan. The US was not directly involved in these conflicts, mainly acting through the CSCE and later OSCE. One of the early strategic goals of the US in the region was the establishment of the new routes to bring Azerbaijani oil and gas to Europe, circumventing Russia. The US made significant efforts to make a reality the signing of the 1994 Contract of the Century – a production sharing agreement (PSA) between the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) and eleven foreign oil companies [14]. That PSA represented the first significant investment by Western multinational companies in any country of the former Soviet Union.

The US played a significant role in the implementation of the “Contract of the Century” and establishment of a new network of oil and gas pipelines (Baku – Tbilisi – Jeyhan and Baku – Tbilisi – Erzurum) stretching from Azerbaijan via Georgia to Turkey and bringing Azerbaijani oil and gas to the world markets circumventing both Iran and Russia. The US viewed this pipeline network of as a necessity to balance against Iranian and Russian efforts to undermine Azerbaijan's independence. According to the former US ambassador to Azerbaijan Richard Kauzlarich (1994-1997), the US political engagement was critical to supporting the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC) consortium and blocking continuous Iranian and Russian efforts to use the uncertain status of the Caspian Sea to upset this Western-led energy effort [15].

Besides supporting Azerbaijan in developing its energy resources, the US provided large-scale humanitarian aid to Armenia in 1992-1994. The country was in a humanitarian crisis with the population receiving only 2 hours of electricity per day with no gas supply to central heating systems. After 1994, when hostilities ceased in all three conflict zones, the US continued its support to Armenia and Georgia in their political and economic reforms. This was done through USAID as well as other American organizations. Another aspect of the US involvement in the region was the support of the newly established civil society organizations as the primary vehicle for disseminating American soft power.

Another aspect of the US involvement in the South Caucasus was its role as a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group along with Russia and France tasked with finding a peaceful resolution over the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. The Minsk Group elaborated several proposals to achieve a solution; the last offer was the so-called Madrid Principles. The basic elements were agreed upon in 2007 and publicized by the co-chair countries' heads of states in 2009 [16]. These offers were never realized, but helped to manage the conflict and prevent the resumption of large-scale hostilities in the 2000s and 2010s [Markedonov S., Suchkov M. 2020].

THE US POLICY IN THE REGION IN THE 2000s

The next phase in the US – South Caucasus relations started after the Rose Revolution in Georgia in November 2003. The Georgian government expressed its desire for the Euro-Atlantic integration in the late 1990s under the leadership of then-President Shevardnadze. However, the process was accelerated after the Rose Revolution and the election of President Saakashvili. He launched sweeping reforms focusing on fighting against low and mid-level corruption. Saakashvili cultivated personal solid relations with several officials of the Bush administration. This period coincided with the second term of the Bush presidency when democracy promotion was raised to the heights of the US foreign policy priorities [Rumer E., Sokolsky R., Stronski P. 2017]. President Bush visited Georgia in May 2005 (the only visit by the sitting US President to the South Caucasus yet) [17], and supported Georgia in its efforts to close the two remaining Russian military bases in Vaziani and Akhalkalaki.

During this period, the US actively supported establishing the Turkey – Georgia – Azerbaijan triangle and the construction and launch of the Baku – Tbilisi – Ceyhan oil and Baku – Tbilisi Erzurum gas pipelines. Meanwhile, the growing Western involvement in the post-Soviet world and the parade of "color revolutions" (Rose Revolution in Georgia, Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan) triggered a Russia – US relations crisis. Russia viewed these changes as a clear manifestation of the US intention to encircle Russia with pro-Western countries and diminish Russian role in the post-Soviet space. Coupled with the enlargement of NATO and the EU, these developments triggered a backlash in Russia. The harbinger of Russia – US and Russia – West disagreements in general was President Putin's famous Munich Security Conference speech in February 2007 [18].

The February 2008 declaration of Kosovo independence and the April 2008 NATO Bucharest summit decision to guarantee NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia in some indefinite future were perceived in Russia as a crossing of the red lines by the West. The August 2008 Russia – Georgia war followed soon after, adding more strain to the US- Russia relations.

Meanwhile, the main priorities of the US in the South Caucasus have not changed in this period. The US continued to support South Caucasus republics to modernize their state institutions, viewing it as a tangible tool to increase those republics' resilience and decrease their dependence on Russia. The key partner of the US in the region was Georgia, but Washington continued its cooperation with both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

As we mentioned, since 2001, the US administration has issued waivers for the Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, as Azerbaijan provided its land and air for supply routes to the US forces in Afghanistan. Armenia was a CSTO member and hosted a Russian military base in Gyumri, but this did not prevent the US – Armenia cooperation in bilateral and multilateral levels. The US played a signifi-

cant role in pushing forward Armenia – NATO cooperation which resulted in first Armenia – NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan in December 2005. The US, through the NATO Defense Education Enhancement program, was actively involved also in defense education reforms launched in Armenia, while few Armenian officers started to receive military education in the US military education institutions through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program [Kotanjian H. 2012].

THE US - RUSSIA RELATIONS AND THE US POLICY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN 2010s.

The launch of the "Reset" policy by the Obama administration in early 2009 decreased tensions in the US – Russia relations. Several positive interactions transpired between 2009-2011, which included Russia and the US signing a new treaty on reducing strategic weapons and Russia voting in favor of the 2010 UN Security Council resolution imposing sanctions on Iran. Additionally, in 2011, Russia abstained on the UN Security Council Libya resolution, and the US supported the Russian bid to become a member of the World Trade Organization.

The pattern has dramatically changed since late 2011 when then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin decided to run for a third Presidential term in the Spring 2012 elections and put forward an idea to create the Eurasian Economic Union [19]. The US establishment perceived this move as a clear sign of growing authoritarianism in Russia. The Eurasian Economic Union project was viewed as an effort to re-Sovietize the region under another name and to restore the Russian zone of influence within the post-Soviet space [20]. Russian decision to grant asylum to Edward Snowden in 2013 only exacerbated the situation. Even though the US and Russia managed to overcome the crisis concerning the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government, mutual distrust was only growing.

A new phase of the crisis in bilateral relations began in early 2014 with the Euro-maidan revolution in Ukraine. The ouster of the Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, the Referendum in Crimea and the decision to incorporate the peninsula into Russian territory, Russian support of the insurgency in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine, and the US and EU sanctions imposed on Russia left bilateral relations at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

The US narrative surrounding these events is based on the vision that Russia has clearly breached the fundamental norms of international law by its actions in Ukraine [21]. According to the US, Russia attempts to redraw borders by force and change the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe. Russian actions are viewed as a violation of its commitments with the aim to create a zone of instability in Central and Eastern Europe. Since the Ukraine crisis, both the US and NATO made steps to strengthen their military posture in this part of the world through programs like the European Reassurance Initiative, which later was transformed

into a European Deterrence Initiative [22]. Additionally, during the Wales and Warsaw summits, NATO decided to strengthen the Alliance military capabilities on the Eastern Flank.

In this new context of the Russia – US rivalry, the US policy in the post-Soviet space was mainly focused on Ukraine, and South Caucasus was somehow sidelined. The US continued to work closely with Georgia. The two sides signed a Charter on Strategic Partnership in January 2009, which defined the contours of bilateral cooperation [23]. The victory of the Georgian Dream coalition in the October 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia and the departure of President Saakashvili in autumn of 2013 did not have a significant impact on bilateral relations. The new government of Georgia took steps to restore economic relations with Russia, but Euro-Atlantic integration remained at the heart of Georgia's foreign policy.

The election of President Trump in 2016 did not make significant changes in the US policy in the region. Despite the lack of emphasis on democracy promotion and human rights by Donald Trump, the US continued its policy to assist the region in reform promotion. The US launched significant efforts to overcome an internal political crisis in Georgia in late 2019 - early 2020 and contributed to the signing of the March 8, 2020 agreement between the opposition and the ruling Georgian Dream party securing the rules for the October 2020 parliamentary elections [24].

The US continued to support Azerbaijan in the development and launch of the Southern gas corridor aimed to bring Azerbaijani gas to Europe via Transanatolian (TANAP) and Trans-Adriatic (TAP) pipelines. Meanwhile, the drawdown of the US troops in Afghanistan diminished Azerbaijani role as a supply route for the US. The growing authoritarian tendencies in Azerbaijani leadership also negatively effected bilateral relations.

In the 2010s, the US continued its support to Armenia through various programs funded by USAID, National Endowment for Democracy, and other American organizations. Their main aim was support for reforms in different sectors, such as fight against corruption, establishing an independent judiciary system, good governance and protecting human rights.

THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE US POLICY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AFTER THE 2020 KARABAKH WAR

The current phase of the Karabakh conflict started in February 1988, when the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast authorities appealed to the Soviet Union leadership to incorporate NKAO into Soviet Armenia. Soviet Azerbaijan rejected this possibility, and the situation started to deteriorate. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the full-fledged war broke out between Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh, and Azerbaijan, which ended in May 1994. The negotiations over the Karabakh conflict have been conducted under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group, which was established back in 1992. In recent two decades, the process was steered by the three

co-chair countries – Russia, the US, and France. The co-chairs put out several options to resolve the conflict, but negotiations have been in a deadlock since June 2011 failed Kazan summit [25] and the four-day war in April 2016 only cemented the impasse. Since 2007, negotiations have been conducted within the so-called “basic principles”. It was an effort to find balance between the principles of territorial integrity and the equal rights and self-determination of peoples. They envisaged the return of some territories around the former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region which were part of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic to Azerbaijan while providing interim status to Karabakh and a land corridor linking Karabakh to Armenia during the first phase of settlement. During the next phase, the determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh should take place through a legally binding expression of will. The conventional wisdom was telling that Karabakh Armenians will vote either for independence or for unification with Armenia, thus realizing their right of self-determination, while Azerbaijan would receive back significant parts of territories which it lost during the 1992 – 1994 war. However, Azerbaijan rejected this plan stating that Nagorno Karabakh would not be granted independence today or tomorrow or in 10 or 50 years.

Meanwhile, the April 2016 four-day war launched by Azerbaijan was an alarming bell for Armenia and the Nagorno Karabakh Republic that international guarantees for security did not work. It meant that most probably, after taking vast portions of the territory of Nagorno Karabakh Republic, Azerbaijan will reject the idea of a referendum and use these new territories to launch another war against Karabakh in the future [26].

Thus, in recent years the Basic principles were perceived mainly as not an effective tool for conflict settlement but as a tangible way to preserve the status quo and prevent a large-scale war. However, this was working only in the framework of the international and regional balance of power. However, the 2008 world financial crisis marked the beginning of post-Cold War order demise, with few hints when the new world order may emerge and what it may look like. Relative decline of the US, the end of the "unipolar moment," and the rise of the other powers have brought strategic ambiguity and significant instability in international relations. Dubbed by many scholars as global disorder, these tectonic changes have also influenced regional balances of power. In the absence of global hegemony, the rivalry for regional influence began in many regions of the world, with a growing emphasis on economic, political, and military coercion by several states [27].

The 2020 Karabakh war has significantly impacted the regional dynamics in the South Caucasus. Experts and pundits have not yet come to a unified approach regarding the reasons and implications of the war. However, many agree that its primary beneficiaries were Russia and Turkey. Russia has reached perhaps its main goal in Karabakh – to put Russian boots on the ground, while it has also significantly increased its military presence in Armenia. Turkey has cemented its presence in Azerbaijan as now a large part of Azerbaijani society believes that without Turkey's overt

support and involvement, Baku could not win the war. Turkey also participates in the joint monitoring center operating in the Aghdam region of Azerbaijan, though Turkey hoped to have more military involvement in the post-war Karabakh.

Another recurring topic in expert discussions after the 2020 Karabakh war is the decrease of Western influence in the region. The US and France, two other OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs, did not take part in the elaboration of the November 10, 2020, trilateral Armenia – Azerbaijan – Russia statement, which put an end to the war. Both countries made efforts during the war to reach the humanitarian ceasefire, but with no real success. The 2020 Karabakh war coincided with the Presidential election campaign in the US, and many experts believe that this was the main reason why Washington was so passive during the hostilities.

The victory of Joe Biden in the November 2020 elections seemed to bring the usual patterns of the US foreign policy back to the pitch. The notion "America is back" is perceived as willingness to increase American involvement in different parts of the world. The emphasis on democracy and human rights by the key figures of the new administration may create a perception that Biden will reinvigorate the liberal hegemony grand strategy implemented with varying degrees by the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations during 1993-2016. However, it will be challenging for the US to behave like it did in the 1990s, when Washington was free to do whatever it wanted. The emerging multipolar system requires new approaches in dealings with adversaries such as Russia and China, and the grand strategy of liberal hegemony may not be the right answer to the new challenges faced by the US.

As of now, the Biden administration has not put out a new strategy for the South Caucasus. The US would not like to see Russian influence increase there; meanwhile, it is not in a position to force its desirable solutions in the region. Most probably, the US will imply cautious approach, seeking to decrease Russian presence in the region through persistent efforts to push forward with continued liberal reforms in Armenia and Georgia using the US assistance and the US leading role in the international financial institutions as leverage to influence the governments' policies. Another channel for the US influence is the support of Western-oriented civil society organizations, which play the role of the cadre bank to fill the government offices with pro-US persons. The US views the EU involvement in the region through the Eastern Partnership initiative as an essential supplement for its efforts to push forward this agenda and welcomes the recent EU announcement on the new aid package for the regional powers [28].

Meanwhile, the US will avoid moves that may be perceived as threats to its vital interests by Moscow – such as pushing for the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia or calling for the removal of the Russian troops from Karabakh or Armenia.

The US continues to believe that the economic cooperation between regional states will not only contribute to the de-escalation of the situation, but in the long term will

result in the decrease of Russian influence in Armenia as Yerevan will feel less threatened by Azerbaijan and Turkey and thus will have fewer incentives to be militarily tied with Moscow. In this context, the US will support restoration of communication routes in the South Caucasus and establishment of economic ties between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Armenia and Turkey. Interestingly, in this respect, the US and Russia interests coincide. Russia also pushes forward to restore communications and economic cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan to stabilize the post-2020 status quo and foment Russia's gains [29].

Another hot topic debated by experts is the US views on the Minsk Group and Turkey's role in the South Caucasus. The Minsk Group co-chairs have published several statements since the end of the 2020 war calling for the resumption of the negotiation process under the auspices of the Minsk Group [30]. However, there is a general understanding that Minsk group statements mean little. The group may adopt statements calling for a re-start of negotiations every month, and the Armenian government may reiterate its support to these calls, but this process is insufficient to force Azerbaijan to return to the negotiation table. As for the role of Turkey, the Biden administration may not like President Erdogan, but this does not mean that the US will act against the increase of Turkey's role in the region.* Regardless of who sits in the Ankara Presidential Palace, more Turkish influence in the South Caucasus means less Russian presence.

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