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## Russia's South Caucasus Policy In The Context Of Geopolitical Interests

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### Annotation

At the onset of the 21st century, a shift in ruling power within Russia prompted a noticeable transition in the theoretical underpinnings of the state's foreign policy—from Westernism to neo-Eurasian ideologies. This article delves into the evolving geopolitical landscape following the Cold War across the former USSR, highlighting the intersecting interests of Russia with both international and regional stakeholders in the South Caucasus. Examining the historical backdrop of geopolitical rivalries in the region alongside pertinent political and economic dimensions, the piece scrutinizes Russia's South Caucasus policy and its theoretical framework, rooted in Defensive and later Offensive realism. Furthermore, it probes into the drivers behind Russia's assertive stance in its South Caucasus policy, analyzing the methods and strategies employed to combat contemporary security threats while unraveling Russia's geopolitical ambitions in the region. The main conclusion of the article is that Russia, which considers the South Caucasus as a vitally important region, tries to maintain its presence in the region in order to secure its geopolitical interests, and creates obstacles for the strengthening of other actors in this region.

**Keywords:** *South Caucasus, Russia, foreign policy, geopolitical interests, geopolitical competition.*

### Introduction

The South Caucasus (SC) has long been a focal point in regional geopolitics, owing to its geostrategic location and historical significance, which have rendered it a prime target for expansion by major powers. Historically, the SC served as a geopolitical battleground between the Safavid State and the Ottoman Empire during the late Middle Ages, and later between the Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, and Iran. In the first half of the 19th century, the Russian Empire secured full control over the region, a dominance that persisted until the end of World War I. However, the tide turned with the

February Revolution in Russia, followed by the Bolshevik coup, fundamentally altering the political landscape and geopolitical dynamics in the SC.

While the peoples of the SC briefly tasted independence, Bolshevik occupation swiftly stripped them of sovereignty, subjecting them to 70 years of totalitarian rule under the Soviet Union. The isolationist policies of the Union republics stifled the flourishing of international relations, relegating the region to authoritarian control under Soviet hegemony. Nevertheless, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, new geopolitical realities dawned upon the post-Soviet territory. The SC states, newly sovereign following the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, emerged as independent actors in the arena of international relations.

Although Russia continued to regard the SC as within its sphere of influence, serving as the primary economic and trading partner for regional countries, its erstwhile political dominance waned. The activities of international and regional actors, each pursuing diverse interests within the SC, posed a perceived threat to Russia's influence in the region. Under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, the Western-oriented, defense-centric realism-based foreign policy gave way to a more assertive realism approach under Vladimir Putin's leadership.

Russia, deeming the SC its "backyard," perceives the burgeoning influence of other actors in the region as antithetical to its geopolitical interests, and thus, unacceptable.

After the collapse of the USSR, the significance and role of this region experienced a notable increase. Iran and Turkey, longstanding adversaries of Russia in the region, cultivated relationships with South Caucasian countries during the post-Soviet period to bolster their influence in the region, achieving success in their endeavors. The geostrategic position of the region, coupled with the inherent advantages of the South Caucasus countries, accentuated their unique capabilities. Consequently, the region's strategic location, serving as both a crucial land corridor traversing Turkey and Greece, and a favorable geopolitical hub facilitating the transit of hydrocarbon reserves and other goods from Asia to Europe via the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, attracted the attention of various international and regional powers.

As a result, the South Caucasus became a geopolitical arena during the last decade of the 20th and early 21st centuries, characterized by the geopolitical struggle between Russia and Western states, alongside regional actors seeking to reassert their influence in the region. Employing various tempos, methods, and means, this struggle unfolded amidst shifting power dynamics.

As the South Caucasian republics gradually sought to loosen Russia's grip and pursued foreign policies conflicting with the geopolitical interests of their northern neighbor, Russia remained steadfast in its determination to maintain dominance in the region. Consequently, Russia continued to pursue a policy grounded in aggressive realism, unwilling to relinquish its position of influence.

### **Theoretical Principles of Russian South Caucasus Policy**

The collapse of the USSR precipitated a period of political and economic decline in Russia and other post-Soviet nations. Once a dominant force across a vast geopolitical expanse during the Cold War, the dissolution of the USSR dealt a severe blow to its successor, the Russian Federation. This

manifested in a notable decrease in Russia's political influence on the international stage, economic downturn, inflation, technological stagnation in the military-industrial complex, and widespread social hardships. Consequently, Russia found itself regressing by several centuries in terms of geopolitical significance. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger aptly remarked, "The Russian Federation has regressed 300 years in terms of the shrinking of Western borders and the limitation of the country's possibilities in Europe. With the dissolution of the USSR, Russia returned to its borders during the time of Peter I"(1:96). There was a poignant truth in his observation, as the once formidable USSR, a global superpower during the Cold War, transformed into a regional state with frail political, economic, and social foundations in the turbulent 1990s.

Historically, Russia has wielded considerable influence in shaping the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia as a major power. Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of Russia's foreign policy in the modern era is paramount to deciphering its behavior and discerning its actions on the international stage. A comprehensive examination of realism in international relations theory, particularly its aggressive and defensive paradigms, offers insight into the motives, objectives, and strategies guiding Russia's foreign policy decisions. Realism, as the prevailing theory in international relations, posits that states predominantly act based on power dynamics and security imperatives. In the South Caucasus region and beyond, Russia's foreign policy often adheres to realist principles, as it prioritizes safeguarding national interests and preserving influence within the global and regional order. Across the post-Soviet sphere, including the South Caucasus, Russia's assertive stance, energy diplomacy, and military interventions underscore its commitment to maintaining a balance of power and securing its sphere of influence.

During the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, Russia's foreign policy leaned towards the West under the guidance of Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, pursuing a strategy rooted in defensive realism. However, a significant shift occurred towards the end of the 1990s, particularly with Vladimir Putin assuming power, as Western-centric ideals were supplanted by those advocated by neo-Eurasianists. Consequently, the theoretical underpinnings of Russia's foreign policy gradually shifted towards offensive realism. Russia has repeatedly pursued a foreign policy based on offensive realism towards countries in the South Caucasus during the post-Soviet period, exemplified by the war in August 2008, among other instances. This evolution is evident in the content of strategic documents adopted by Russia in recent years, such as the Foreign Policy Strategy of the Russian Federation and the Military Doctrine (2,3).

On March 31, 2023, Russia adopted a new Foreign Policy Concept (FPC), marking a notable departure from previous iterations. For the first time, the concept incorporated the notion of "national interests" and introduced transformations in the hierarchy of relations with countries and the delineation of geographical regions. Notably, concepts such as the "Islamic World" and the "Eurasian continent" were absent in previous foreign policy concepts until 2023, replaced by the designation of the "Near Abroad," which includes territories formerly part of the USSR, including the South Caucasus. Section V of the new concept emphasizes Russia's commitment to preventing external interference in the internal affairs of its allies and partners, countering "color revolutions," and maintaining stability

in these states. Additionally, it underscores Russia's efforts to deter the deployment of military infrastructure by non-friendly states in the Near Abroad and to deepen integration with Russia, while also providing comprehensive assistance to Georgia's occupied territories (Abkhazia and South Ossetia)(4).

The new FPC portrays Russia as a "unique state-civilization, a great Eurasian and Europe-Pacific Ocean state" possessing significant resources. It emphasizes Russia's status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the successor of the USSR, highlighting its pivotal role in the international relations system. The document underscores Russia's commitment to countering neo-Eurasianist ideas and neocolonial tendencies and positions Russia as a decisive global actor.

Imperial ambitions and the pursuit of great power status are significant driving forces behind Russia's foreign policy. Characterized by a pragmatic balance among various global and regional actors, Russia's foreign policy in the early 21st century aimed to reduce dependence on any single power by enhancing alliances and partnerships—a multivector approach that enables Russia to maximize its interests in the evolving global arena. Realism, geopolitics, identity, and a multivector approach collectively shape Russia's behavior and decision-making processes. Despite Russia's interest in fostering a multipolar world order, the institutionalization of such an order is expected to be a protracted process.

An examination of these theoretical frameworks offers insights into the motives, objectives, and strategies guiding Russia's international relations. By establishing these theoretical foundations, policymakers can better anticipate Russia's behavior and formulate effective strategies for engagement.

### **Russian Geopolitical Interests and Security in the South Caucasus**

The formation of Russia's foreign policy is decisively shaped by geopolitical factors, with its vast territory, abundant resources, and strategic position bridging Europe and Asia influencing its imperatives. Russia's strategic focus on safeguarding its borders, controlling key resources like energy reserves, and projecting influence in critical regions such as the Arctic and the Black Sea—underscored in its 2014 Military Doctrine—illustrates the centrality of geography in its foreign policy calculus(2). The notion of the "near abroad," emphasizing Russia's interest in maintaining sway over neighboring states, further underscores the significance of geographical proximity in its strategic outlook.

Russia's geopolitical aspirations find grounding in Sir Halford John Mackinder's "Heartland" theory, which posits that control over Eastern Europe translates to dominance over the Heartland, Eurasia, and ultimately, global hegemony. Viewing the South Caucasus as integral to the Heartland, Russia seeks to reassert its imperial dominance by bolstering regional hegemony and safeguarding its southern borders against potential threats from Turkey and Iran. Its policies in the South Caucasus reflect imperial ambitions, employing strategies of division and control, including support for separatist factions to maintain a dominant presence in the region. This approach is exemplified in conflicts like

the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute, where Russia's military, technical, and economic assistance to Armenia complicates conflict resolution efforts.

The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are intrinsically tied to Georgia's prospective NATO membership. By backing the Abkhaz and Ossetian ethnic groups economically and militarily, Russia sought to consolidate its grip over Georgia. The 2008 August War showcased Russia's assertive role in the region, with objectives spanning the curtailment of Georgian sovereignty in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, weakening Georgia's military, thwarting its NATO and EU aspirations, and sending a message to other post-Soviet states considering Western integration, as evidenced by similar actions against Ukraine in February 2022.

Economic considerations are paramount in Russia's geopolitical calculus in the South Caucasus, particularly concerning the region's economic ties with the West, notably in energy projects. Reluctant to cede its dominant position in the energy market, Russia wields its energy policy as a tool to retain influence over European states. Initiatives like the "Contract of the Century," signed in September 1994 to transport Caspian oil to Europe, and subsequent acquisitions, such as Russia's Lukoil acquiring a 10% stake in the project, exemplify efforts to safeguard its position in Europe's energy landscape. In contemporary times, Russia remains intent on bolstering its influence across all spheres, particularly in energy projects, to maintain its grip over the South Caucasus.

Russia's geopolitical interests pose significant challenges to establishing stability in the South Caucasus, where its military-political presence is pronounced. Despite Georgia lacking military-political ties with Russia, the latter maintains a strong military-political presence in Georgia's occupied territories. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan, despite extensive relations with NATO countries, including the USA and Turkey, remains a consistent purchaser of Russian arms and upholds its relations with Russia, as evidenced by the February 23, 2022 agreement. Additionally, following the Second Karabakh War, Russia deployed a peacekeeping contingent in the mountainous part of Karabakh (Azerbaijan) and the Lachin corridor, per the trilateral statement of November 10, 2020. However, the renewable five-year mandate of this contingent is met with negative perceptions within Azerbaijani society.

Armenia stands as a strategic ally of Russia, heavily reliant on it across various domains such as economy, military-technical support, and security. Consequently, Russia's presence in the region is underpinned by an institutionalized network of security relations. Despite Armenia's intensive relations with NATO and Turkey, its strategic security partnership with Russia is normatively rooted and likely to deepen further. The Russia-Armenia relations exemplify a form of partial sovereignty extension, facilitated by agreements ensuring Russia's oversight of the Armenian border. Additionally, Armenia's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) signifies its military alliance with Russia. Notably, in the occupied Georgian territories, Russian military-political integration is observable, further illustrating Russia's entrenched presence in the region.

Russia maintains a network of military bases in the South Caucasus, enabling it to address security threats and challenges along its southern borders. Following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia, as its successor, continued operating military bases in the region through agreements with local countries. Azerbaijan was among the first post-Soviet states to expel Russian troops from its territory.

The radar station in Gabala, Azerbaijan, designed for missile defense and staffed by up to 2,000 personnel, ceased operations on December 10, 2012, due to a failure to reach a lease agreement (6). Russian troops were withdrawn from Georgian territory (excluding South Ossetia and Abkhazia) in November 2007.

Russia's largest military base in the South Caucasus is situated in Gyumri, Armenia, equipped with S-300 missile systems and MiG-29 fighter jets. It houses a 5,000-personnel garrison under a 49-year agreement valid until 2044. Another Russian military base, accommodating up to 4,000 personnel, is located in Abkhazia, while the military base in Tskhinvali, South Ossetia, also hosts 4,000 personnel(5). Furthermore, a Russian peacekeeping contingent has been deployed in the mountainous part of Karabakh, within Azerbaijan's Karabakh economic region, based on the third clause of the November 10, 2020, trilateral statement, with a mandate until November 2025.

Some Russian military bases in the South Caucasus are leased for free, with the host countries primarily responsible for their material-technical provision. In certain cases, the expenses for maintaining the Russian military presence are partly covered by the host country, as exemplified by Armenia paying 50% of the expenses for Russia's 102nd military base in Gyumri, or fully leased(5).

In the South Caucasus countries, Soviet or Russian-made weapons remain predominant, with Georgia being the sole exception having entirely phased out Russian arms, opting instead for Western models in its military-technical arsenal. Although Azerbaijan continues to procure modern heavy weapon systems from Russia, such as T-90S tanks, BMP-3 vehicles, Smerch MLRS, and TOS-1A Solntsepek, recent diversification policies have led to a decline in Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan. Challengers to Russia's dominance in this domain include Israel, Turkey, and Pakistan, whose successful incursions have undermined Russia's position. Conversely, Armenia has consistently received a greater volume of Russian arms supplies compared to Azerbaijan, often acquiring outdated weapons under domestic prices and favorable terms. Notably, recent significant military-technical cooperation agreements with China and France indicate a gradual erosion of Russia's influence in Armenia.

Following the collapse of the USSR, while official Moscow once played a pivotal role in training military personnel for South Caucasus countries, there has been a fundamental shift in approach and preferences, particularly in Azerbaijan and Georgia, driven by national security imperatives and other factors. These countries now favor Western models over Russian methods for military personnel training.

## **Conclusion**

Russia remains the most influential actor in the conflicts of the South Caucasus, having directly participated in the conflicts in Georgia. Currently, Russia assumes the role of a "guarantor" in maintaining the post-war status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh, while the West endeavors to strengthen its presence in the region. This position affords Russia leverage over both sides of the conflict, yet maintaining a delicate balance of power, particularly amidst active efforts by other states, notably Turkey, to disrupt it, presents a formidable challenge. The escalation of geopolitical competition for

the South Caucasus hinges directly on dynamic processes within the region and the broader global landscape.

Following Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, the involvement of foreign players in the South Caucasus has surged. Turkey, the US, and European nations are all vying to expand their spheres of influence in the region, seeking to fill the void left by Russia. Simultaneously, the looming specter of a large-scale conflict between the West and Russia compels regional countries to explore alternative avenues for diversifying their military-political relations, given the inherent risks associated with deepening ties with Western nations.

However, Russia's significant influence in the security sphere of the South Caucasus renders it nearly impervious to substantial shifts in the balance of power, even in the medium term. The foreign policy constraints faced by other major powers also curtail their capacity to actively challenge Russia in the region. Nevertheless, the presence of such actors and the opportunity for regional powers to diversify their security relations through them prevent Russia from consolidating its influence in the South Caucasus, thus perpetuating instability in a region prone to heightened tensions.

Essentially, Russia's assertive stance in its South Caucasus policy can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, Russia views the South Caucasus as integral to its "great empire" and endeavors to maintain its preeminent role in resolving conflicts in the region. Additionally, Russia aims to impede the participation of South Caucasus states in Western infrastructure projects, perceiving such endeavors as threats to the security of its southern borders. Consequently, Russia does not hesitate to resort to aggressive tactics to safeguard its defense potential, thereby exacerbating instability in the region and undermining the security of South Caucasus nations.

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# ЮЖНОКАВКАЗСКАЯ ПОЛИТИКА РОССИИ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ЕЕ ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИХ ИНТЕРЕСОВ

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## Аннотация

В статье исследованы новая геополитическая среда, сформировавшаяся на территории бывшего СССР после холодной войны, сталкивающиеся интересы России с международными и региональными акторами на Южном Кавказе, история геополитического соперничества в регионе, политические и экономические аспекты, южнокавказская политика России и теоретические основы этой политики. На основе общенаучных методов была исследована политика России на Южном Кавказе основанная сначала на оборонительном (defensive), а потом наступательном (offensive) реализме. Также были проанализированы причины демонстрации агрессивного поведения России в отношении региона Южного Кавказа, современные способы и средства, использованные в борьбе против угроз безопасности и геополитические интересы России в регионе.

В результате распада Советского Союза, на постсоветском пространстве под воздействием новых геополитических реалий, сформировалась иная политическая среда, а государства Южного Кавказа превратились в независимые акторы международных отношений. Хотя Россия, всегда рассматривающая Южный Кавказ как сферу своего влияния, остается основным экономическим и торговым партнером стран региона, не смогла сохранить здесь свое политическое влияние. Деятельность международных и региональных акторов, имеющих широкий спектр интересов на Южном Кавказе, в направлении расширения своего влияния в регионе, Россия оценила как угрозу.

В период правления первого президента России Бориса Ельцина курс внешней политики западников, основанный на оборонительном реализме, в годы правления Владимира Путина сменился наступательным реализмом. Рассматривая ЮК как свой «задний двор», Россия считает деятельность других игроков в регионе неприемлемой и противоречащей ее геополитическим интересам. Продолжающаяся борьба России, западных государств, а также региональных акторов, пытающихся восстановить свое влияние в регионе (другим темпом, разными методами и средствами) в последнее десятилетие XX века и в начале XXI века превратили Южный Кавказ в поле геополитического соперничества. Со временем республики Южного Кавказа, выйдя из-под контроля России начали проводить противоречащую геополитическим интересам северного соседа внешнюю политику. Россия же, не желающая терять свое доминирование в регионе, демонстрирует политику, основанную на наступательном реализме.

В итоге, агрессивное поведение России в политике ЮК связано с рядом факторов: во-первых, Россия считает ЮК частью своей «великой империи»; Россия старается сохранить свою



лидирующую, решающую позицию в разрешении конфликтов в регионе; Российская Федерация пытается создать препятствия в участии стран ЮК в инфраструктурных проектах Запада; Россия рассматривает каждую попытку международных и региональных акторов, связанных с ЮК, как угрозу безопасности своих южных границ и не гнушается агрессивным поведением, чтобы убедиться в обеспечении своего обороноспособного потенциала. Это, в свою очередь, ведет к нестабильности в регионе и полной потере странами ЮК уверенности в своей безопасности.

**Ключевые слова:** Южный Кавказ, Россия, внешняя политика, геополитические интересы, геополитическое соперничество.