

# **THE U.S. ROLE AND POLICIES IN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS AND PEACE BUILDING: POTENTIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SOUTH CAUCASUS\***

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## THE U.S. ROLE AND POLICIES IN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS AND PEACE BUILDING: POTENTIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SOUTH CAUCASUS<sup>1</sup>

**Summary:** *The paper is discussing the potential US peace-keeping engagement with the South Caucasus after the Third Nagorno-Karabakh war. Based on the case-study of the Third Nagorno-Karabakh war, followed by ethnic cleaning of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and continuous Azerbaijani aggression towards the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia, the paper analyzes the US interests and draws potential scenarios for US peacekeeping engagement in Armenia-Azerbaijani conflict. It draws five potential scenarios, which are: direct military engagement, support to a UN (or other international organization, for instance, OSCE) mission, support to the EU mission in Armenia, NATO engagement, distancing, and argues that the most realistic model is the US direct diplomatic engagement with major support to the EU/EU countries' efforts, including military, in Armenia.*

**Keywords:** *Armenia, United States, Azerbaijan, Peacekeeping, South Caucasus, Peacebuilding.*

### Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century was marked by global transformations in international relations. They include, in part, the recent change in the world order, which influence the global security system and the strategic environment in many areas of the world by virtue of a knock-on effect. Different notions, sometimes mutually exclusive, are used to describe it: a new world order, chaos, polycentric and multipolar world, and a world without poles, to name a few. In this context, one of the key issues in current

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international relations is the future face of the new world order in five, ten and twenty years.

Without getting too deep into an academic debate on formulas, it is still possible to say that the changes in the world order boil down to the consolidation and restoration of Russia's positions, which were lost after the Soviet Union's collapse, strategic uncertainty and the EU's search for a geopolitical future, a shift of the US strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific Region and the growth and expansion of China's interests and influence. The rise of middle powers is another variable of the developing new international order. As a consequence, global turbulence and uncertainties heavily impact regional security architectures in various parts of the world, making some actors to leave and bringing in new ones (Elamiryan, 2019). Turbulence, uncertainty and transformation of the world order, in fact, change the Yalta-Potsdam system of international relations, established after the Second World War, establishing and developing a new world order. These changes cover not only the sphere of relations between the world's leading centers of power, but also the security environment in various regions of the world is being transformed.

The Caucasus is no exception. The third Artsakh war of 2020 clearly demonstrated the changed strategic environment in the South Caucasus. From this point of view, this study is devoted to the study of the transformations that are taking place in international relations, as well as a systemic analysis and identification of their impact on Russia's foreign and security policy in the South Caucasus. In the meantime, the Ukrainian conflict of 2022 became simultaneously a result and accelerator of those transformations, bringing unprecedented turbulence and uncertainty to international relations.

The changing global geopolitical landscape comprehensively impacts major power politics in various parts of the world. This leads to rising confrontation on global, regional, and local levels, driving rise of multiple conflicts in the periphery. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is one of those conflicts, which heated up and erupted into the 44-day war in Autumn of 2020, when the whole world was dealing with the Covid pandemic, on the one hand, and world order transformations, on the other. Though the war was stopped by the Trilateral Statement of the Presidents of Russia and Azerbaijan, and Prime Minister of Armenia, followed by the placement of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno Karabakh, in fact, the war has never stopped since then, ending up in ethnic cleansing of Armenian population of Nagorno Karabakh. In the meantime, starting from at least the end of

the Third World War the US has taken major responsibility for the fate of humanity by, inter alia, engaging in numerous peacekeeping operations and peace building activities.

From this perspective the main objective of this research is to study the US experience and approaches in peacekeeping operations and peace building processes, and reflect that experience towards the South Caucasus, discussing the potential US engagement on the example of Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

The main hypothesis is that given the shifting major power politics in the South Caucasus, when the US demonstrates comprehensive and multifaceted interest towards the South Caucasus, the US might directly or indirectly (through the third parties, such as NATO, UN, and so on) get involved in the peacekeeping operations and peace building processes in the South Caucasus, in particular, in the framework of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

## **Methodology and Scope of the Research**

The research starts with comprehensive research of definitions to reveal the working approach for peacekeeping and peace building. It will be continued by the study of the US engagement in peacekeeping operations and peace building activities, revealing both historical path and contemporary state. This will be followed by the analysis of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict as a case-study for peacekeeping and peace building. Finally, the received results will be discussed through the US interests and priorities to reveal potential US engagement with the conflict management and resolution. The research is primarily based on such methods as: discourse analysis, historical and comparative study, case-study, scenario-building method.

## **Changing World Order, U.S. and the South Caucasus**

The US presence in Eurasia, and particularly, in the South Caucasus goes back at least for a century when after the World War One it appeared as a global political, economic, and geopolitical actor. Since then, the US foreign policy toward Eurasia has faced steady rise providing zigzags of cooperation with countries, which now occupy the region of the South

Caucasus. The cooperation has increased drastically since 1991 when the three South Caucasus countries received independence after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

In this context this subsection reveals the current basic US interests in Eurasia and determines the role, which the South Caucasus can play in that strategic environment. To understand the above, it is worth analyzing the US National Security Strategy of 2017 (Strategy, 2017), which still remains in force and gives the basic understanding on the US interests abroad.

The Strategy does not provide a clear US perception and vision towards the South Caucasus. It only touches upon Georgia in the section titled “Europe”. This allows us to expand that section on the other South Caucasus countries, too.

Describing the US interests toward Europe the Strategy states that “The United States is safer when Europe is prosperous and stable, and can help defend our shared interests and ideals. The United States remains firmly committed to our European allies and partners. The NATO alliance of free and sovereign states is one of our great advantages over our competitors, and the United States remains committed to Article V of the Washington Treaty. European allies and partners increase our strategic reach and provide access to forward basing and overflight rights for global operations. Together we confront shared threats. European nations are contributing thousands of troops to help fight jihadist terrorists in Afghanistan, stabilize Iraq, and fight terrorist organizations across Africa and the greater Middle East. The NATO alliance will become stronger when all members assume greater responsibility for and pay their fair share to protect our mutual interests, sovereignty, and values”.

At the same time the Strategy outlines the following priority actions:

Political: “The United States will deepen collaboration with our European allies and partners to confront forces threatening to undermine our common values, security interests, and shared vision. The United States and Europe will work together to counter Russian subversion and aggression, and the threats posed by North Korea and Iran. We will continue to advance our shared principles and interests in international forums”.

Economic: “The United States will work with the European Union, and bilaterally with the United Kingdom and other states, to ensure fair and reciprocal trade practices and eliminate barriers to growth. We will encourage European foreign direct investment in the United States to create jobs. We will work with our allies and partners to diversify European energy sources to ensure the energy security of European countries. We will work

with our partners to contest China's unfair trade and economic practices and restrict its acquisition of sensitive technologies”.

**Military and Security:** “The United States fulfills our defense responsibilities and expects others to do the same. We expect our European allies to increase defense spending to 2 percent of gross domestic product by 2024, with 20 percent of this spending devoted to increasing military capabilities. On NATO's eastern flank we will continue to strengthen deterrence and defense, and catalyze frontline allies and partners' efforts to better defend themselves. We will work with NATO to improve its integrated air and missile defense capabilities to counter existing and projected ballistic and cruise missile threats, particularly from Iran. We will increase counterterrorism and cybersecurity cooperation” (Strategy, 2017).

Based on the above we can conclude that the Strategy:

- Provides no specific focus on the South Caucasus countries.
- Emphasizes prosperity and stability in Europe
- Outlines a special role of the NATO for the US: as an actor in the region, as well as a place of deepening cooperation.
- Stresses the energy security of Europe,
- Prioritizes strengthening deterrence and defense on NATO's eastern flank,
- Accentuates the necessity to deter Russia (as a political and military threat) and China (as an economic threat) in the region, as well as Iran.

Interestingly Central Asia is separated into a special chapter in the NSS, which could be estimated as a stress of special importance of the region for the US interests in comparison to the South Caucasus. On the other hand, the special focus on Central Asia indirectly increases the importance of the South Caucasus. The latter geographically connects the region with the NATO European allies.

It is worth mentioning that the Strategy also emphasizes the return to the theory of Political Realism. Particularly, it states that “this strategy is guided by principled realism” (Strategy, 2017). Interestingly enough the strategy corresponds with the ideas of well-known apologist of political realism John Mearsheimer, who in his recent book states that “...there is good reason to think that with the rise of China and the resurrection of Russian power having put great power politics back on the table, Trump eventually will have no choice but to move toward a grand strategy based on realism, even if doing so meets with considerable resistance at home” (Mearsheimer, 2019).

More light to the understanding of the US interests in the South Caucasus brings the recent visit of the US 27th National Security Advisor John Bolton to the South Caucasus in October 2018. In exclusive interview with Voice of America/Turan Bolton emphasized that the South Caucasus is a critically important region for the United States. Bolton outlined the following main directions of interest:

- Clear desire to make tighter presser on Iran.
- High interest to see the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on acceptable for both Armenia and Azerbaijan terms (Bolton, Baku, 2018).

From Baku Bolton traveled to Yerevan, where in the interview to Radio Azatutyun he again prioritized the necessity of resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At the same time the following idea deserves special attention: “I think that the perspectives for more stable democracy are outstanding here. And I think that the issue of full sovereignty is essential for Armenia not to depend on extreme foreign influence. I think that for people it is better to have here more opportunities on international level than to be restricted by historical clashes” (Bolton, Yerevan, 2018).

Obviously, these issues are tied together and the basic idea, *inter alia*, is to decrease the foreign impact in Armenia and the region, in general. Based on the Strategy, most probably under the “foreign impact” Bolton means Russia, as especially in case of Armenia, it is Russia who enjoys very strong dominant positions.

Moreover, Bolton went further and suggested the Armenian government to buy weaponry from the US instead of Russia. This could be interpreted rather as another step to decrease the Russia’s influence, than to gain economic advantage for the US companies provided low military spending of Yerevan. In Yerevan Bolton also touched upon the necessity of harder line and pressure on Iran. However, interestingly he separated the issues above from the economic ones, encouraging the Armenian government to attract investments from the Armenian Diaspora in the US, instead of relying on financial support from the US government (Bolton, Yerevan, 2018)).

Thus, we see that strategic environment in the South Caucasus is formed around the containment of Russia and Iran – an idea, which is clearly resembled in the Strategy. At the same time the Strategy makes it clear that the issue is not only about Russia and Iran, but also China. Particularly, it states that “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity...” (Strategy, 2017).

In January 2021 Joe Biden became the 46th President of the United States of America, replacing Donald Trump in the White House. In March 2021 the White House has published an Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (Guidance). In the introduction section President Biden writes that he is “issuing this interim guidance to convey my vision for how America will engage with the world” (US Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, 2021).

The Guidance directs departments and agencies until the new National Security Strategy is published. Hence, it can be referred to a preliminary official document, which set the US foreign policy priorities. However, the Guidance does not have any reflection on the South Caucasus. It does not even refer to Georgia separately as the US National Security Strategy of 2017 did. At the same time, the Guidance speaks about the development and strengthening of relations with the US allies and partners, particularly, in the framework of NATO. The Guidance speaks also about the necessity to contain China, Russia, and Iran. A very similar approach was present in the Strategy. At the same time, the Guidance in opposite to the Strategy sets the US decisive support towards democracy and democratic development in the world (US Interim, 2021).

Very similar approach is presented in the article written by Biden for the Foreign Affairs in March-April 2020 and entitled “Why America must lead again”, before he formally announced to run for the US Presidency. The article contained neither any specific reflection on the South Caucasus, as a region, nor any single country of the region (Bolton, 2018).

Finally, it is important to mention that on April 24, 2021 Joe Biden used the term “Genocide” in speech devoted to the massive killings of Armenians in Turkey early 20th century. On the one hand, this might be seen as a US claim to return to the South Caucasus (Bolton, 2018). On the other hand, given the ongoing deterioration of the US – Turkey relations, Biden’s speech on Armenian Genocide might be a signal to Turkey.

When it comes to the new US national Security Strategy of 2022, it states that “as we support Ukraine, we will also work to enhance the stability and resilience of other democracies. We will support the European aspirations of Georgia and Moldova and their commitment to important institutional reforms”, as well as mentions that the US will back diplomatic efforts to resolve conflict in the South Caucasus (US National Security Strategy 2022), though it is not very clear which conflict is meant (US National Security Strategy, 2022).

Thus, we see that on strategic level the US does not have special strategic interests in the South Caucasus. It is interested in long-term strategic stability in the region, which is located in the NATO and EU neighborhood. At the same time, the US is interested to provide energy sovereignty for the EU, where the Caspian gas can play a vital role. Finally, the US is interested to contain Russia (as a political and military threat), China (as economic threat), and Iran (military, political) in the region.

On the other hand, there is significantly growing collaboration between Armenia and the US. The number of high level mutual visits is a clear indicator (Bilateral Relations). In the meantime, at the start of the Capstone meeting of the Armenia-US Strategic Dialogue, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia gave opening remarks, where he mentioned that: “the bilateral agenda continues to expand and include dimensions critical for the resilience and sustainable development of Armenia. In this context, I want to recall the high-level Armenia-US-EU meeting held on the 5th of April, 2024 in Brussels and the arrangements indicated in the joint press statement... Coming to the agenda of today’s meeting, we have a wide array of concrete steps and plans to discuss ranging from economic and energy diversification to defense and justice reforms. We have been efficient in utilizing three working groups under the auspices of Armenia-US Strategic Dialogue and holding relevant meetings in 2023. Considering the growing nature and dynamics of bilateral relations, we are hopeful to upgrade our Strategic Dialogue to a Strategic Partnership Commission that could further enhance the structured approach to our multifaceted cooperation” (Opening remarks).

### **Third Nagorno-Karabakh War and Geopolitics of the South Caucasus**

On September 27, 2020 Azerbaijan with support of Turkey started a new war against the non-recognized Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict was frozen after the First Karabakh war of 1992-1994 with Three-party Ceasefire Agreement of May 1994. The OSCE Minsk Group with the co-chairmanship of Russia, US, and France was leading the peace talks. Though the ceasefire regime was constantly being violated during these years and very often Azerbaijan was claiming to shift the peace talks to the UN umbrella, however, there was a general recognition of the Minsk Group with the co-chairmanship format and the fact that Russia, US, and France

have the exclusive right to deal with the conflict resolution. With Nagorno-Karabakh conflict being the number one foreign policy issue for Armenia, the talks format has been under no question by the Armenia's authorities since the format was established in mid-90<sup>th</sup>. The situation has not changed also after the Velvet Revolution in Armenia of 2018.

However, the Third Artsakh war has changed the security landscape not only for Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijan, but the regional security architecture in general, or, to be more precise, it demonstrated the already transformed reality and made it explicit. For the first time after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Turkey openly supported Azerbaijan and demanded full participation in the peace talks with Russia (without the US and France) (In Threat To Israel).

Being one of the most important security issues not only in the South Caucasus, but also in post-Soviet space, in general, if succeeded, the new format will mean complete change of the security architecture in the wider region. Russia and Armenia then opposed the Turkey's participation – each of them for own reason. Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs made this clear in June 2021, stating that if Turkey enters the peace-building process in Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran, as a regional power, should have the same privileges, as Turkey (Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks). On the other hand, Turkey is continuing strengthening its positions in Azerbaijan, most probably, with the aspiration of further expansion both in the South Caucasus and further to the Central Asia.

Thus, the dualism of the period is that Russia recognizes the region as a sphere of major or even exclusive interests, seeing it as a part of the post-Soviet space, while Turkey is returning to the South Caucasus through its alliance with Azerbaijan. However, what has already happened is the gradual shift of the South Caucasus from being an exclusive part of the post-Soviet space towards the Middle Eastern agenda.

Thus, looking back to the end of 2020, one could claim that the Third Nagorno-Karabakh war has significantly changed the power balance in the South Caucasus and beyond, particularly, strengthening Russia's and Turkiye's positions, weakening the positions of the West (or fully removing from the peace process by that time), but also creating a very fragile power balance on the ground, which, as the later history showed, collapsed very shortly with slight refocusing of Russia's attention towards Ukraine. The new status quo significantly contributed to the transformation and implementation of an updated Azerbaijani strategy towards Nagorno-Karabakh and the Republic of Armenia, inter alia, in the form of hybrid warfare. The new reality has

triggered a new wave of hybrid war against Nagorno-Karabakh and the Republic of Armenia, ended with ethnic cleansing of the non-recognized state and ongoing conflict with the Republic of Armenia.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The end of Third Nagorno-Karabakh war has triggered the offensive and open territorial claims of Azerbaijan towards the Republic of Armenia. It continued and followed not only by diplomatic and information efforts of Azerbaijan, but also hybrid operations and direct military interventions.

This led to multiple and radical consequences, including Armenia freezing its Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization membership and deployment of the European Union Mission in Armenia on the border with Azerbaijan. Both steps are unprecedented, as Armenia joined then-Collective Security Treaty (became an Organization in 2002) in 1992 and has never left it or suspended the membership (Collective Security Treaty Organization). Moreover, until the 2020 Third Nagorno-Karabakh war it was among the most active members. Additionally, despite the fact that the European Union Mission in Armenia “is tasked with observing and reporting on the situation on the ground, contributing to human security in conflict-affected areas and supporting the confidence building between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where possible,” (About European Union Mission in Armenia) it is the first ever this type of EU presence in Armenia, which implements peace-keeping efforts, though in indirect way. 23 EU Member States and the Third Contributing State Canada have joined the mission.

In this regard, provided the recent intensification of Armenia and US relations, a question could be raised about US more active peace-keeping engagement within Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process to provide more stable strategic environment and contain potential new Azerbaijani aggression towards the Republic of Armenia.

Given the above, the followed potential scenarios of the US engagement might be specified:

- Direct military engagement
- Support to a UN (or other international organization, for instance, OSCE) mission
- Support to the EU mission in Armenia
- NATO engagement
- Distancing

Given the current political reality in the US, its strategic interests and priorities, the direct peace-keeping engagement in Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict currently seems unrealistic. On the other hand, the 'distancing scenario' also seems not very realistic, given the recent developments in Armenia – US relations especially over the last three years. The second scenario might have been workable if there is that kind of agenda is on the table. The same might be true with regard to potential NATO engagement.

Thus, given the current political, geopolitical, and security landscape in the world and South Caucasus, the most realistic scenario might be the US direct diplomatic engagement with major support to the EU mission in Armenia.

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## **УЛОГА И ПОЛИТИКА САД У МЕЂУНАРОДНИМ ОПЕРАЦИЈАМА ОДРЖАВАЊА И ИЗГРАДЊЕ МИРА: ПОТЕНЦИЈАЛНИ АНГАЖМАН СА ЈУЖНИМ КАВКАЗОМ**

др Рубен ЕЛАМИРИАН, ванредни професор

### ***Сажетак***

Рад говори о потенцијалном мировном ангажману САД на Јужном Кавказу након Трећег рата у Нагорно-Карабаху. На основу студије случаја Трећег рата у Нагорно-Карабаху, праћеног етничким чишћењем Јермена Нагорно-Карабаха и континуираном агресијом Азербејџана на суверену територију Републике Јерменије, у раду се анализирају интереси САД и извлаче потенцијални сценарији за Мировни ангажман САД у јерменско-азербејџанском сукобу. Разматра се пет потенцијалних сценарија, а то су: директно војно ангажовање, подршка мисији УН (или друге међународне организације, на пример, ОЕБС), подршка мисији ЕУ у Јерменији, ангажовање НАТО-а, дистанцирање и тврди да је најреалнији модел је директно дипломатско ангажовање САД уз велику подршку напорима земаља ЕУ/ЕУ, укључујући војне, у Јерменији.

**Кључне речи:** *Јерменија, Сједињене Америчке Државе, Азербејџан, одржавање мира, Јужни Кавказ, изградња мира.*