

THE FOREIGN POLICY OF RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS REGION (2004-2024)

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ABSTRACT

The Caucasus region has received less attention from Eurasian scholars and policymakers in recent years due to the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine and the turmoil in the West Asian region. However, the Caucasus region, especially the South Caucasus, suffers from severe geopolitical fragility due to internal and external reasons. As the post-Cold War rivalry between Russia and the United States has reached its highest point, their process of engagement and competition in this sensitive part of Eurasia deserves attention. Therefore, while examining the bilateral relations between Moscow and Washington in the Caucasus, the author aims to explain the current situation in the region and the logic of cooperation and competition between the two countries in recent years. The main objective of this research is to answer the question of what policies the United States and Russia have adopted towards the crises in this region and the reasons and logic of these two countries for these policies. The hypothesis put forward in response to this main question is that different perceptions of how to gain strategic, security, and military benefits have led to the competitive policymaking of Russia and the United States in the crises of the Caucasus region. This research also focuses on the cooperative logic of the United States and Russia in relation to the processes of resolving ethnic and political conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, which is in line with preserving the perceptual structure of the international system. While relying on the theory of attribution error and the descriptive-analytical approach to examine these hypotheses, the study method is based on documentary research using library data collection and analysis, websites, articles, and Internet resources.

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Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union created new challenges and opportunities for the countries of the South Caucasus region. The three countries of this region (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) have taken different and sometimes contradictory paths, participating in various alliances, treaties, organisations, and programmes. This ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity has led to a wide range of ethnic and religious conflicts and, in some cases, devastating wars. The northern part of this geographical area is Christian, and the south is inhabited by Muslims. These ethnic and religious differences have led to the long-standing conflict between Yerevan and Baku over Nagorno-Karabakh, which still persisted when this article was written. In the northern parts of this geographical area, we also see the conflict between the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the central government. The consequences of this conflict were the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and the autonomy of the two regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Pilehvard and Zarmehri 2015, 40). Along with the emerging geopolitical and economic opportunities, these developments have prompted several foreign actors to turn their eyes to this part of Eurasia after nearly 70 years of Soviet dominance over the Caucasus.

The United States has had a significant impact on the security of the region in the past three decades as the global hegemon. It has been the main factor in preventing Russia's political and security ambitions in the region. However, it can be argued that the security issues in the region are more the product of foreign developments than the influence of regional actors. In fact, since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the regional dynamics, although not reflecting the complete situation of the region, have often been interpreted in the Russia-United States dichotomy (Sushentsov 2018). Russia and the United States are engaged in a risky confrontation, with Washington accusing Russia of violating international law in Ukraine and Moscow claiming that the West has violated the same laws in the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa. This current confrontation stems from these conflicting reports, which, given the current world order, raise the question of who the "revisionist power" and the primary producer of threats to international stability is. However, Ukraine is now the main focus of this confrontation in the post-Soviet space, and more literature is focused on the Moscow-Washington disputes around the 2022 Russian war in Ukraine. It seems that the issues of the Caucasus play a secondary role in this context. Even the Georgia-Russia war and the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict are studied as preconditions for the Ukraine conflicts in 2022 or in connection with the annexation of Crimea to Russia.

Although the armed conflicts after the collapse of the Soviet Union have many similarities, the interventions of Washington and Moscow in each of these crises and their support for different forces have had contradictory reasons. Moreover, there is no single pattern in the United States and Russia's relations regarding conflict resolution processes or security issues in the post-Cold War era, particularly in the Caucasus. Therefore, while recognising the serious consequences of the Ukraine crisis on Moscow and Washington's approaches across Eurasia, the developments in the Caucasus region should be considered from the perspective of the challenges and opportunities of this region from the disintegration of the Soviet Union to the present. Accordingly, this article seeks to answer the question of what policies the United States and Russia have adopted towards the crises in this region and the reasons and logic of these two countries for these policies. The hypothesis put forward is that different perceptions of how to gain strategic, security, and military benefits have led to the competitive policymaking of Russia and the United States in the crises of the Caucasus region. This research also focuses on the cooperative logic of the United States and Russia in relation to the processes of resolving ethnic and political conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, which is in line with preserving the perceptual structure of the international system.

Literature Review

Elamiryani argues in the article "World Order and Shifting Regional Security Landscapes: The U.S. Policies in The South Caucasus" that international relations in the 21st century have witnessed a transformation in the global order, which has impacted the US priorities in various parts of the world, including the South Caucasus. The author discusses the US interests in the South Caucasus within the framework of the "Asia Pivot" policy and the revised National Security Strategy (2017), as well as the temporary National Security Guidance of President Biden (2021) regarding Europe and the Middle East. The author concludes that the US no longer finds the South Caucasus strategically appealing. This strategy is related to the US policy of re-focusing its strategic attention towards Asia and the Pacific, reducing interest in Caspian Sea energy resources, and withdrawing its military presence from Afghanistan (Elamiryani 2023).

Rumer, in a research project at the Carnegie Endowment titled "Losing Ground: Russia and Its Neighbors in Times of War", argues that Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly changed the Eurasian landscape as countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus seek to diversify their economic, diplomatic, and security relations to protect themselves against Russia's

imperial ambitions. As a result, Russia has lost its influence in its immediate vicinity. However, due to its control over key transportation routes and extensive economic resources, Russia remains a major power in its claimed sphere of influence (Rumer 2023).

Neset and colleagues, in the strategic plan titled “Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War. Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry”, argue that the 45-day war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 significantly changed the geopolitical landscape and redrawn new borders, altering the regional power balance. Additionally, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has further destabilised the regional situation and added new threats to an already unstable security environment. Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan initially tried to establish connections with the West while avoiding Russia’s attention. Overall, the space for foreign players has increased, and awareness of the change in the regional power balance between Russia and Turkey is evident among regional powers and foreign powers (Neset et al. 2023).

In the article “The US, Strategic Environment in the South Caucasus and Armenia: A Sight on the Future”, Elamiryan focuses on identifying the main interests of the US in Eurasia and attempts to define its strategic interests and priorities based on the region. The main question in this writing is centred on US relations with the South Caucasus and, in particular, with Armenia after the Ukraine conflict. This article simulates and tests four scenarios for future US interactions with the South Caucasus. The scenarios for future US interactions with the South Caucasus are based on these scenarios, which suggest that despite the lack of strategic interests in the region, the Ukraine conflict has led the US to increase its presence in the South Caucasus. This study is based on strategic documents, including the US National Security Strategy (2017), the 2021 National Security Guidance, other white papers, reports, and studies of US foreign policy (Elamiryan 2022).

In contrast to most works, this research attempts to explain the strategic policies of Russia and the US in the South Caucasus using the theory of attribution error, showing the reasons behind the Kremlin’s and the White House’s policies in the South Caucasus, which are rooted in different political, military, and economic policies of these two countries.

Theoretical Framework (Documentary Errors)

The four main attribution errors are:

a) Fundamental Attribution Error: The reality is that in our judgements, we usually ignore external factors and do not attach much importance to them

while paying more attention to internal and dispositional causes. This demonstrates an error that Ross calls the fundamental attribution error. Even when there are obvious environmental factors, there is still a tendency to find personality and internal causes in attributional judgements. This bias seems to stem from the fact that when observing the behaviour of others, we focus our attention on actions and place the situation in which the behaviour occurs in the background. Therefore, the concept of fundamental attribution error, coined by social psychologist Lee Ross in 1977, is used to describe people's tendency to underestimate the influence of situational factors on human behaviour and to overestimate dispositional factors (Ross 1977).

b) Self-Serving Bias: According to the self-serving bias, individuals tend to attribute their failures to environmental and situational factors and their successes to internal factors and their own stable traits and characteristics. For example, one can refer to the attributions of politicians after success (based on hard work and effort) and failure (based on external conditions such as unfair competition and uninformed people) in elections. Due to the self-serving bias, many people consider their own negative actions justified and forgivable. Still, the similar negative actions of others are considered irrational and unforgivable, which can pose serious risks to interpersonal relationships (Ross and Nisbett 1991, 14-18).

c) Egocentrism: This is a tendency in which individuals see themselves as the centre of events more than reality, i.e., they believe they have been the main actor in controlling and influencing the occurrence of events and the behaviour of others (Abdoli and Ahmadi 2017, 4-5).

d) Causes of Errors: Several views have been presented on why these errors occur in our attributions, most of which fall into two categories: cognitive and motivational explanations. The cognitive model states that self-serving bias is essentially due to certain tendencies in how information is processed. We attribute positive results to internal causes and negative results to external causes because we expect to succeed and tend to attribute expected results more to internal causes than external causes. In contrast, the motivational explanation believes this bias stems from our need to maintain and enhance self-esteem. Although both motivational and cognitive factors may play a role in this attribution error, research evidence seems to support the motivational interpretation more. These biases, whatever the reason, can cause many disagreements between individuals. Also, due to this bias, many people consider their own negative actions rational and justifiable but consider similar actions by others as irrational and condemn them. Given these adverse effects, self-serving bias is considered one of the attribution errors that poses serious risks to interpersonal and even international relations (Aronson 2007, 81).

In the case of US-Russia relations, the phenomenon of attribution errors is often realised in the fact that one side (the US or Russia) tends to explain its own behaviour fairly based on external conditions but explains the behaviour and actions of the other side in terms of the aggressive and domineering nature of the respective country. This interpretation is often applicable to Russia and US regional policies, especially in the post-Soviet space. For example, Russia is often criticised for negatively interfering in the democratisation process of Eurasian countries, which in turn is attributed to the fundamental weakness of the Russian regime in the face of democratic developments. In contrast, Russian policymakers believe there are “great conspiracies” behind US foreign policy actions towards Russia (Rojanski 2019), explicitly rejecting the idea that policy may be the product of an individual’s emotions, inter-organisational mismanagement, or simply an opportunistic act. Therefore, the application of attribution errors in this research is to explain the asymmetry in the perceptions of the US and Russia and to clarify the reasons for the wrong conclusions of the two countries that have caused biases and challenges in the Caucasus region.

The Geopolitical Mismatch between the United States and Russia in the Caucasus

To identify the differences and convergences between the United States and Russia, it is first and foremost important to assess the significance of the Caucasus region for both powers. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow defined the South Caucasus from a motivational perspective as its “near abroad” and considered ensuring stability in the Caucasian republics as a prerequisite for peaceful domestic development and maintaining its territorial integrity. Without any exaggeration, Russia can be considered a Caucasian country; seven electoral districts of the Russian Federation (Adygea, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, and Chechnya) are located in the North Caucasus region. Four other districts of Krasnodar, Stavropol, the Rostov region, and Kalmykia are located in the steppe foothills of the Caucasus. In addition, the Black Sea coast in the Krasnodar region and the Caucasian mineral water region in the Stavropol region are also part of the Caucasus region. Therefore, the territory of the Russian North Caucasus is larger than the three independent countries of the South Caucasus combined. Moreover, as a practical matter, the ethnic and political tensions that have arisen in the Russian states are closely related to the existing conflicts in the South Caucasus. The dynamics of the conflict in Georgia and South Ossetia have had a serious impact on the Ingush conflict in North Ossetia, Russia, and the situation in Georgia and Abkhazia has

influenced the demographic policy and identity of Circassia in Russia. The security environment in Chechnya and Dagestan has also been linked to developments in the Pankisi Gorge of Georgia. Russia and Azerbaijan, as neighbouring countries, have also faced the issue of ethnic groups (Lezgins and Avars), so it is in Russia's interest to have a positive relationship with Baku, regardless of its strategic military cooperation with Armenia (Janse 2021). Therefore, the Kremlin cannot achieve stability in the North Caucasus without a stable situation in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

The approach of the United States is completely different from the Russians. As Eugene Rumer and his colleagues correctly stated, "The United States has important interests in the South Caucasus that are not vital, including maintaining regional stability, preventing the outbreak of new ethnic-tribal wars, supporting democratic changes and better governance, and fully integrating Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia into the Western Front" (Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronski 2017, 5). The egocentrism of US policy towards the Caucasus is linked to the reality that a lack of willingness regarding regional issues is not beneficial for the hegemon. This initial lack of intervention means that the United States has not been able to work on a number of broader security and military issues in the face of Russian strategies in the Caucasus. For example, Georgia is seen by US policymakers as a weak link among the former Soviet republics that Moscow can use as a tool to establish dominance over Eurasia. On the other hand, Azerbaijan is considered a secular, reliable partner and energy supplier for European countries. Armenia also has an important position for Westerners, which has somewhat placed it on the general course of US foreign policy in recent years through political tools, including a campaign to recognise the Armenian genocide by the Ottomans. However, the Caucasus issues play an incomparable role in US domestic politics compared to Russia, and the activities of lobby groups are more visible (Galstyan 2016, 8). Therefore, the Caucasus issues are examined as part of the larger geopolitical puzzles of the greater Middle East, the wider Black Sea region, energy policies, and democratisation. As a result, we observe a definite asymmetry in the importance of the Caucasus for the two superpowers, so these two countries have different motivations, and their engagement with regionally designed programmes is different.

The Rivalry between the United States and Russia in the South Caucasus

The reasons for the competition and conflict between the United States and Russia in the Caucasus are numerous. They can be categorised into three main areas: First, the great power rivalry in both countries is still vibrant. As

Mark Kramer correctly noted, “the Cold War metaphor has gained widespread popularity in recent years, especially with the increase in East-West tensions” (Kramer 2018). The hostilities that have occurred in Ukraine and the Russian army’s invasion of Ukrainian territory are analysed as proxy conflicts between Washington and Moscow. Even local debates about Russia’s interference in the US presidential election and the ongoing information confrontation between the media of the two countries have reinforced these narratives (Chekov et al. 2019, 5). In this regard, the Caucasus, with its geopolitical situation that provides a wide advantage to regional rulers, is the arena of competition for powers that have highlighted the traditional features of the “love and hate” relationship between Russia and the US. Since security interests are very important for Russia, the successful initiative of one country is considered a defeat and challenge for the other. Second, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many conflicts in the Caucasus region have been directly or indirectly influenced by the United States. While Washington has allocated millions of dollars in aid to the South Caucasian republics, US government agencies and private companies have participated in every major political, economic, military, or humanitarian project in the region to sideline Moscow (Elamiryan 2022, 8). Third, what makes the situation critical is that the two sides have repeatedly supported rival, sometimes even reciprocal initiatives: the Southern Gas Corridor pipeline project against the Nabucco project, the GUAM Organisation against the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Georgia’s territorial integrity against the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and so on. Furthermore, the geographical location of the Caucasus causes this region to be involved in other regional geopolitical puzzles, primarily Central Asia and West Asia, which creates greater risks for Russia’s foreign policy in the near abroad.

Even though Moscow declared the near abroad as part of its vital interests, in 1994, the United States created an interagency working group for the newly independent countries. Also, in 1997, the US National Security Strategy announced its goals in the region: “We have prioritised working with countries in the region [Caspian and Caucasus] to establish multiple pipeline companies to ensure access to oil” (Elamiryan 2023, 7). However, Russia has always viewed the Caucasus as an interdependent system where the processes in the South Caucasus affect the North Caucasus and vice versa. Therefore, based on the self-serving bias, Moscow has always considered regional security much more sensitive than other issues and views the US initiative in the Caucasus as a cause of insecurity and a factor for greater influence on the most unstable region of Russia (the North Caucasus). Over the past 30 years, Washington has experienced three important stages in its Caucasus strategy, each with its own specific implications for bilateral

relations and its own “fundamental problem”. The first, in the 1990s, was the “getting acquainted with the region” stage. US policy at the time consisted of two factors: 1) establishing partnerships, including military partnerships, with the newly independent countries of the region, which led to the penetration of US military companies into the region. 2) Securing energy projects in the Caspian and Black Seas, in which US companies had a large share. For example, four major US oil companies, ExxonMobil, Chevron, Dun Energy, and Hess, along with the International Azerbaijan Consortium, accounting for 40% of the shares, were formed to develop oil reserves in the Republic of Azerbaijan, ensuring that no major threat to US national security emerges in the region (Markedonov and Suchkov 2020, 7).

The Context of Intensification of Competition between the US and Russia in the North Caucasus

Economic interests, resource policy, and the promotion of democracy have been portrayed as the dominant image of US security intervention in the region. Therefore, when the United States first began NATO-led military exercises in the Black Sea in the 1990s, Russia perceived this country’s security strategy in the region as threatening. However, Moscow lacked the necessary resources and political will to stand against this strategy and, due to the bloody and costly conflict in Chechnya, was forced to agree to only a reactive policy, although Moscow was concerned about foreign military activity near its borders and considered these activities a direct threat to its national security. It was at this time that a fundamental attribution error took shape that has subsequently worsened bilateral relations to this day: In most developments in the North Caucasus, the US view differed from Russia’s. Certainly, Russian military operations carried out in the region or human rights violations related to these operations have been a focal point for US intervention. However, other issues have also been on the agenda. Since the first Chechen campaigns (1994-1996), the issue of human rights violations by the Russian Federal Security Forces has become a popular topic among many Western analysts, journalists, and human rights activists on both sides of the political spectrum. Using historical analogies, they pointed to Russia’s imperialist methods of suppressing the indigenous people of the North Caucasus. They also argued that Russia, under the pretext of fighting terrorism, was imposing the most severe repression against the region’s indigenous population and that the United States should express its position on this critical situation. The idea that the Russians were fighting “violent jihadists with freedom fighters” was promoted at a high level. This concept was based on the assumption that Russia was actually implementing a brutal “neo-colonial” policy in the North Caucasus, and arguments were made

that the insurgents were fighting against the Kremlin's oppression and injustices. Thus, Moscow's discriminatory actions (fundamental attribution errors) are considered the main factor of chaos in the region (Applebaum 1999, 12-18).

Certainly, the Kremlin has committed and continues to commit many strategic errors in the North Caucasus: widespread poverty, high unemployment rates among youth, population growth, and alarming migration statistics make the people of this region more susceptible to fundamentalist ideas. However, the different language used in US and Russian discourse on these issues goes beyond subtle linguistic differences among researchers and should be explained as a fundamental attribution error. Westerners reflect harsh interpretations and define highly polarised and horrific narratives for the international community. Therefore, to a large extent, there are still two contradictory narratives about the situation in the North Caucasus. This contradictory narrative has created a major obstacle to effective counter-terrorism cooperation between Russia and the United States and spread the seeds of mistrust and mutual suspicion. Conceptually, it is difficult for many US analysts and politicians to think outside the "stereotypical pattern of oppression of the Chechen people" and recognise other actors involved in this process. Some still deny the relationship between the infamous Caucasian states and Al-Qaeda, and US decision-makers believe that the two countries face challenges of different natures (Williams 2007, 156-178). Western politicians believe that while the US and its allies deal with Islamic fundamentalist groups, separatism in the North Caucasus is of an ethnic nature and is merely a "Russian issue". These high-risk ideas push the US towards cooperation with some Islamic groups, which is not at all beneficial for the advancement of bilateral relations in the region. The truth, however, is that the ethnic-nationalist agenda of the 1990s is over and has quickly been replaced by extreme Islamism. Since then, much of the North Caucasus has been one of the frontlines in the war against global Islamist terrorism, as the relationships between terrorist groups in the North Caucasus and the Greater Middle East, whether in terms of ideology, financial flow, or operational activity, have been evident and proven (Yarlykapov 2017, 5). This is the second misconception of the current situation in the region that leads to contradictory public opinion in the US regarding the Caucasus. As a result, Russia and the United States have fundamental differences on this issue, leading to conflicting disagreements that remain unresolved.

Revisionism or Maintaining the Status Quo in the South Caucasus

The situation on the other side of the Caucasus mountain range was not better due to the instability of the South Caucasus republics in the 1990s. Four out of eight armed conflicts in the post-Soviet space in the late 1980s

and early 1990s took place in the South Caucasus. Additionally, several destabilising factors emerged in the region, such as Moscow's recognition of autonomous regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia) as independent countries. However, contrary to popular US narratives suggesting that the Kremlin uses the potential for regional conflict to manipulate the perceptions of local elites in Russia's orbit, the Kremlin has never shown a desire to engage in conflict with South Caucasus countries. Analysing nearly three decades of Russian foreign policy in the region, two fundamental positions that drive Russia's actions can be identified:

1. A "revisionist position" defined by recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the escalation of the conflicts from 2004 to 2008 and the subsequent war with Georgia in August 2008.

2. Russia's relatively neutral reaction to the recent conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020. Moscow perceives the balance of power has shifted in favour of Azerbaijan over the past two decades, and Armenia has been unreasonable and uncompromising instead of adhering to a more or less acceptable agreement. Russia's silence regarding Armenia is also related to the fact that Russian diplomats, both in the past decade and currently, feel that Yerevan has wasted time when it could have peacefully resolved its territorial dispute. Experts believe that while Russia has sought to display more power on the global stage during Putin's era, the conflict in the near abroad, in the former Soviet Union territory, is a challenge to Russian authority, and this agreement should be considered an achievement. Russia has demonstrated its competence in achieving diplomatic victory by mediating and ending the six-week war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh (Zare and Zargar 2021, 32).

Since 2016, Russia's foreign policy strategy towards the independent republics of Georgia includes "assisting in the establishment of the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia as modern democratic countries, strengthening their international positions, and ensuring reliable security and improving the economic situation of these two republics" (Komakhia 2023, 2). This position demonstrates Moscow's interest in creating two independent countries supported by the international community, especially the United States. In Russia's foreign policy strategy, Moscow has expressed interest in normalising relations with Georgia in areas where the Georgian government is willing to establish peace, considering the current political conditions in the South Caucasus. In practice, this means maintaining the status quo created after recognising the independence of the two former Georgian republics in the region. Therefore, from Moscow's perspective, the South Caucasus consists of five countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia) rather than three. Moscow has established its

relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia based on bilateral agreements: “Strategic Partnership and Alliance” (with Abkhazia on November 24, 2014) and “Alliance and Integration” (with South Ossetia on March 18, 2015). Even if these agreements somewhat solidify Moscow’s political and military presence in both republics (currently, the South Ossetian Army is integrated into the Russian Armed Forces), they can hardly be considered new turning points in the region. These agreements will remain in place as long as Moscow guarantees the security, economic and social improvement, and progress of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Markedonov 2018). These two agreements have their own distinct characteristics. The differences can be explained by the fundamental divergence in these two issues:

While Abkhazia strives to maintain its independence (with Russia’s political and security guarantees), South Ossetia sees independence not as an ultimate goal but as a transitional stage towards unification with North Ossetia within Russia. Regarding Abkhazia, the elites of this republic try to make it clear that Russian citizens do not have the right to obtain Abkhazian citizenship or access to land resources and real estate. On the other hand, South Ossetia is interested in maximum integration with Russia, including annexation similar to Crimea. As a result, it appears that a segment of the important strategic Baku-Supsa line has come under Tskhinvali’s control. Currently, the South Ossetian border post is located 450 meters from the highway connecting Azerbaijan, Armenia, and eastern Georgia to the Black Sea ports and Turkey. (Neset et al. 2023, 24).

Despite Russia’s support for these two republics, Moscow’s influence on the elites of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is primarily examined from the perspective of military or financial support, and many internal processes in both republics have a logic independent of the Kremlin’s strategic policies, based on fundamental attribution errors. For example, in 2014, the leader of Abkhazia was changed due to widespread protests. However, opposition protests did not stop after the election of another leader, Raul Khajimba. In January 2020, Khajimba left his post due to protesters’ activities, despite Russian support. In 2017, Anatoly Bibilov became the president of South Ossetia, while Vladimir Putin openly showed his support for his main rival (the current president), Leonid Tibilov. Additionally, a series of electoral campaigns in Georgia during 2013-2016 significantly changed the Georgian domestic political landscape. After the removal of Mikheil Saakashvili, along with the United National Movement party, tangible changes occurred in Georgia-Russia relations, although these changes remained tactical and selective. Moreover, the entire normalisation process depends on internal dynamics in Georgia, and the escalation of the political crisis between Russians and Georgians in 2019 clearly demonstrated this (Pourahmadi and

Feizollahi 2023, 42). The new leader of Georgia, representing the Georgian Dream Party, maintained loyalty to the strategic approaches of the previous government: “orientation towards NATO and the EU”. At the same time, the Georgian Dream Party, unlike Saakashvili, made serious changes in its tactical approaches. The strategic goal of NATO and EU membership is now observed not with open confrontation with Russia but with a pragmatic approach in relations with Moscow. In 2023, this country did not have diplomatic relations with Russia. Besides, there was a lack of air communication lines between the two countries and clear condemnation of Russia’s attack on Ukraine, defending and supporting Ukraine’s territorial integrity, and declaring a positive vote in UN resolutions in favour of Ukraine. These were examples of the Georgian government’s actions in moving against Moscow’s policy (Ambrositti 2022). On the other hand, in early February 2017, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin and Georgian Prime Minister’s Special Representative for Russia, Zurab Abashidze, expressed interest in returning to the six-year treaty to open trade corridors between the Russian Federation and Georgia (Ellyatt 2019). This treaty has not been successful in practice as it affected the interests of Tbilisi and Moscow but also of Yerevan and Baku and individuals who are somewhat known. However, the fact of proposing some constructive initiatives despite existing differences was a very positive signal. Today, the only topic of potential cooperation between Moscow and Tbilisi is the fight against terrorism, especially considering the radicalisation of the population in Georgia’s Akhmeta district (Pankisi Gorge) bordering Russia and the joining of natives of this region in various jihadist movements in the Middle East and primarily in the Ukraine crisis.

Regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, changes in Russia’s relations with Armenia—its most loyal partner and only official ally in the South Caucasus, as well as a country where it has two military bases—are the best indicator of geopolitical change in the region. The 2020 war was a serious test for the relationship between the two countries, in which Russia failed. Its lack of interest in supporting Armenia throughout the crisis was evident. Putin, attending the annual gathering of foreign academics and journalists in October 2020 at the height of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, was asked whether Russia would stand by Armenia against Azerbaijan and Turkey. He replied: “Russia has always had special relations with Armenia, but we have always had special relations with Azerbaijan as well... Armenia and Azerbaijan are both equal partners for us” (President of Russia 2020). A few days later, as the conflict continued, Putin rejected a formal request for urgent consultations on providing assistance to Armenia when Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan asked Moscow for help. Instead, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that if the conflict directly occurred on the Armenian territory, it

would provide all necessary assistance (Toksabay 2020, 3). The deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces after the signing of a ceasefire agreement mediated by Russia by Armenia and Azerbaijan in November 2020 has been an important move by Russia that strengthens its role as a key player between Baku and Yerevan. However, Russia's motivational and peace-seeking approach has been deeply disappointing for Armenia, as during repeated conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russian peacekeepers did nothing to prevent the capture of key sites in Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijani forces (Hosseinzadeh and Nasiri Lotum 2023, 64). Major conflicts that began in September 2022 resulted in the deaths of more than 200 Armenian soldiers and 80 Azerbaijani soldiers, and the conflicts spread to the Armenian territory. Peacekeepers again took no action to prevent it or to prevent the capture of additional territories by Azerbaijan. The feeling of betrayal during and after the Second Karabakh War has led Armenia to reconsider its close relationship and reliance on Russia, to the extent that Pashinyan said in June 2023, "We are not Russia's ally in the war against Ukraine" (France 24 2023). The negative attitude towards Russia worsened in 2023. In a March survey, 50 per cent of respondents described relations with Russia as good and 49 per cent as bad. Russia fell to fourth place in the ranking of Armenia's most important political partners after France, Iran, and the United States. It also fell to third place as Armenia's most important security partner after Iran and France. Fifty per cent of respondents placed Russia as a source of political threat, ranking third after Azerbaijan and Turkey (Rumer 2023, 32). Therefore, there can be no doubt that the outcome of the 2020 war and Moscow's failure to save Armenia have been the main reasons for the change in attitude towards Russia.

Despite the fact that Moscow-Washington relations have reached their lowest point after the 2022 Ukraine crisis, US diplomats positively evaluate Russia's leadership role both in the process of escalating military conflict and in supporting the negotiation process. Therefore, the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement process may be the only relatively successful framework for US-Russia interaction in the post-Soviet space. Washington, like Moscow, maintains a balance between different stakeholder groups because, on the one hand, issues related to energy security and Caspian geopolitics bring US policymakers closer to Baku. On the other hand, the liberal views prevailing in Washington are closer to the positions of the Armenian lobby. In this regard, Washington supports the principle of territorial integrity of all newly independent Caucasus countries, and the deployment of more than 80 US troops on Armenian soil could be a guarantee against possible Azerbaijani attacks on Nagorno-Karabakh or Armenia itself. However, Washington's action in this region, which has vital interests for Moscow, will not be without risk.

Moscow views the strengthening of Washington's partnership in the Caucasus as a self-serving bias of the Biden administration, using the Ukraine crisis to challenge Russia's influence in the region. The latest US proposal to unblock the Lachin corridor is to open an alternative route for Nagorno-Karabakh through the Azerbaijani city of Aghdam. According to Tigran Grigoryan, a political analyst and head of the Regional Centre for Democracy and Security (a Yerevan-based think tank), even if the Lachin corridor and Aghdam route are opened, Baku's capacity to close them again remains. The Biden administration should use its leverage over Azerbaijan to ensure the end of the Lachin corridor blockade while simultaneously working towards a solution for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that both recognises Azerbaijan's sovereignty and provides enforceable guarantees to defend the rights and future security of the Armenian population, which likely requires coordination with Russia (Dersimonian 2023). Although such a scenario may be difficult to imagine, Washington and Moscow have cooperated on Nagorno-Karabakh in the past despite strained relations in other regions. Now, due to tensions in this region, such coordination becomes justifiable.

The Impact of the Ukraine Crisis on the South Caucasus

While most analysts may view the Ukraine crisis in 2022 as related to the near abroad or Eastern Europe, this unresolved crisis has certainly sparked a broader confrontation in Russia-US relations. Some shocks from the Ukraine crisis have also reached the South Caucasus, one of the regions prone to changing the course of conflict between Russia and the West. This is because, firstly, there is considerable doubt among South Caucasus elites about the ability of European institutions and US diplomacy to resolve conflicts in the post-Soviet space. The responsible elites in Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Baku realised that in the event of a serious war in the region, no international institution or organisation, or any major European power, is ready to defend the interests of these countries in case of a military war with Russia. Secondly, the South Caucasus countries found themselves in an irreversible position: the perceptual shock from the Ukraine crisis showed that decision-making and recklessness regarding European and Eurasian integration come at a high cost, and the time for the right choice for Baku, Tbilisi, and Yerevan may be running out.

For Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, Russia's invasion of Ukraine entails (new) security risks for a region that has been burdened by such a security environment since the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. For Armenia, Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh can influence the Armenian government and public opinion in line with Russian interests. However, increasing

dissatisfaction within Armenia may also jeopardise the independence of the elected government. For Azerbaijan, Russia's egocentric thinking may be in line with Azerbaijan's (along with Turkey's) geostrategic role in relation to energy policies with Western countries. Russia may pressure or influence Azerbaijan's decision-making by increasing or decreasing its room for manoeuvres in the post-Second Nagorno-Karabakh War environment. Georgia may experience a worsening situation in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and of Russia's efforts to create power through this conflict. Russian propaganda may also increase in Georgia, exacerbating social and political polarisation (Civil Georgia 2023). All countries in the region must mitigate the consequences of Russian pressure and protect their national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence. If Ukraine's territory changes due to the war, this will potentially have severe consequences for the South Caucasus countries. In addition to the severe security risks the region may face, the South Caucasus has already experienced significant economic pressure due to the war and mainly extensive sanctions against Russia. Factors such as the downward trend of the Russian ruble and the decline in trade and economic activity are having an impact. Moreover, all three countries have large diaspora communities in Russia who regularly send money to their relatives. Evidence suggests a decrease in these remittances even before the sanctions took effect (Elamiryan 2023, 21). Russia may also try to use its networks and dependency structures in these three countries to circumvent sanctions and place countries in opposition to the United States, the European Union, and other parts of the international community.

There is also a possibility that the shock of Russia's actions in Ukraine and the change in international order may alter the behavioural patterns of intervening powers. In the worst-case scenario, the spillover effects of Russia's war on Ukraine may lead to more disagreements between South Caucasus countries as they try to remain on Russia's side to prevent its aggression and gain maximum autonomy. In the best-case scenario, the spillover effects of the war could lead to unity against a common threat. To illustrate the worst-case scenario, on February 22, 2022, just two days before Russia invaded Ukraine and one day after Russia recognised Donetsk and Luhansk as independent countries, Azerbaijan signed an agreement with Russia. This agreement was a joint cooperation pact aiming to bring Azerbaijan's relations with Russia to the level of Armenia-Russia relations and secure Azerbaijan's gains after the Second Karabakh War. However, the 43-article agreement also states points that may restrict Azerbaijan's room for manoeuvres in international relations (points 4 and 7) and its aspiration as an energy supplier with Turkey and the Caspian Sea route to Europe (point 25). This meeting was described more as a humiliation of the President of Azerbaijan in how it

occurred, the meeting procedures, and the date of the meeting, similar to the Treaty of Turkmenchay, which was implemented on February 22, 1828 (Neset et al. 2023, 43-46). However, some developments indicate a better scenario: One of these events is the bilateral peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, facilitated by the European Union without Russian involvement (although Moscow is not expected to withdraw). Following a meeting between senior representatives of Armenia and Azerbaijan coordinated by the EU in Brussels on March 30, 2022, another meeting was held on April 6, after which the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, said: The leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan met and agreed to move towards a peace agreement. Furthermore, the fact that the three South Caucasus countries have many common challenges with Russia could potentially be a unifying force among them (Ambrosetti 2022). However, currently, such a process lacks a suitable foundation, but it is likely to be a good starting point given that the region has had little experience of cooperation.

Conclusion

Based on the data obtained in this research, we should now examine the question and hypothesis within the framework of the concept of attribution errors. According to the idea of attribution error, in the world of politics, we will not seek to understand how an actor behaves. Our only purpose is to understand the reason for performing a political action or behaviour. Therefore, we seek to obtain the causes of each state's behaviour, but the point here is that we understand the causes when we look for attributions of individual behaviour. As shown in the behaviour of Russia and the United States in this article, the actions of these two countries in the South Caucasus in various events, starting from Ossetia and Abkhazia and reaching the Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine incidents, have been influenced by misunderstandings of each other and a lack of understanding of each other's positions. However, it was shown that each country considered its own behaviours to have valid and correct reasons while viewing the other's actions as erroneous and malicious. In fact, the sense of mutual insecurity they receive from each other and the analysis that each has of the other's behaviour from the outside causes an attribution error between the two countries. Therefore, based on the existing hypothesis, different perceptions of how to gain strategic, security, and military benefits have led to competitive policymaking by Russia and the United States in the crises of the Caucasus region. These perceptions in the issues of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia showed that the two powers, in recognising each other's behaviour, did not try to pay attention to the underlying reasons for

such behaviour. Instead of moving towards cooperation, each considers the other responsible for the existing conditions, and a competitive state has prevailed. Consequently, the logic of cooperation in this region, especially after the Ukraine crisis, has reached a state of perceptual deadlock, at least until the time of writing this research.

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SPOLJNA POLITIKA RUSIJE I SJEDINJENIH AMERIČKIH DRŽAVA U REGIONU JUŽNOG KAVKAZA (2004-2024)

Apstrakt: Region Kavkaza je u poslednjih nekoliko godina dobio manje pažnje od strane evroazijskih stručnjaka i donosioca politika zbog tekućeg oružanog sukoba u Ukrajini i previranja u regionu Zapadne Azije. Međutim, region Kavkaza, posebno Južni Kavkaz, pati od ozbiljne geopolitičke krhkosti usled unutrašnjih i spoljnih faktora. Kako je rivalstvo između Rusije i Sjedinjenih Američkih Država nakon Hladnog rata dostiglo svoj vrhunac, njihov proces angažovanja i konkurencije u ovom osetljivom delu Evroazije zaslužuje pažnju. Stoga, u analizi bilateralnih odnosa između Moskve i Vašingtona u Kavkazu, autor ima za cilj da objasni trenutnu situaciju u regionu, kao i logiku saradnje i konkurencije između ove dve zemlje u poslednjih nekoliko godina. Glavni cilj ovog istraživanja je da odgovori na pitanje koje su politike Sjedinjene Države i Rusija usvojile prema krizama u ovom regionu, kao i razloge i logiku ovih politika. Hipoteza izneta kao odgovor na ovo glavno pitanje je da su različite percepcije o načinu sticanja strateških, bezbednosnih i vojnih prednosti dovele do konkurentskih politika Rusije i Sjedinjenih Država u krizama u regionu Kavkaza. Ovo istraživanje se takođe fokusira na logiku saradnje Sjedinjenih Država i Rusije u vezi sa procesima rešavanja etničkih i političkih sukoba u Abhaziji, Južnoj Osetiji i Nagorno-Karabahu, što je u skladu sa očuvanjem perceptivne strukture međunarodnog sistema. Oslanjajući se na teoriju atribucione greške i deskriptivno-analitički pristup u ispitivanju ovih hipoteza, istraživačka metoda zasniva se na dokumentarnom istraživanju koristeći prikupljanje i analizu podataka iz biblioteka, veb sajtova, članaka i internet izvora.

Ključne reči: Kavkaz; Sjedinjene Države; Rusija; atribuciona greška; konkurencija; saradnja.