

Russia-GUAM-US Triangle of Competition over Eurasia and Geopolitical Pluralism

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This article discusses the triangle of competition between Russia and the USA over three members of the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, GUAM: Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine. The first of three sections analyze how Russian leaders and politicians have, since 1991, prioritized the reintegration of the former Soviet space over nation-building in the Russian Federation. Russian officials and politicians have always viewed the former USSR, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Eurasia as "Russia's exclusive sphere of influence". Russia has supported separatism and manufactured frozen conflicts, recognized the "independence" of separatist regions, and annexed neighbouring territories in countries that have stepped in a direction contrary to Russia's regional interests in Eurasia. The second section focuses on Ukraine and GUAM members Azerbaijan and Georgia, which have prioritized building nation states over joining integration projects in the post-Soviet space and have implemented independent or pro-Western security policies. The third section analyses US security policy towards Eurasia and the South Caucasus under assertive (Bill Clinton, George W. Bush) and indifferent (Baack Obama, Donald Trump) presidents. This section discusses policies that US President Joseph Biden could pursue to revive the US as a security actor in partnership with Turkey towards Eurasia and the South Caucasus in pursuit of what US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski described as "geopolitical pluralism" in Eurasia.

Keywords: Russian nationalism, Eurasia, spheres of influence, US security policy, GUAM, Turkey



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Introduction

This article analyses three security actors in Eurasia and the South Caucasus. The first such actor is Russia and its assertive nationalism in viewing Eurasia, including the South Caucasus, as part of its exclusive sphere of influence. An assertive Russian security policy has remained a stable factor in Russian geopolitical thinking irrespective of whether Borys Yeltsyn or Vladimir Putin was Russian president. Russian political thinking and geopolitical strategy has always prioritized building integration in the post-Soviet space over nation-building in Russia.

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The second security actor is Ukraine, which, together with Azerbaijan and Georgia, has pursued a stable security policy towards Eurasia and the South Caucasus over the three decades of its independence since 1991 but has prioritized nation-building and the defence of its sovereignty. All three countries – Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – declined to participate in Russian-led integration projects in Eurasia because they viewed them as threats to their national sovereignty. Russia punished all three countries by supporting separatism: indirectly, through Armenia, in Azerbaijan; directly in Georgia by invading and recognizing the “independence” of its Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions; and directly in Ukraine by annexing the Crimean peninsula and undertaking military aggression against the Donbas region in the country’s east.

The third security actor is the USA, which, alongside Turkey, is one of the two leading military powers in NATO. Turkey and Russia have diametrically opposite national interests in the South Caucasus and Eurasia generally.¹ From 2008 to 2020, under Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, the US became an indifferent and passive security actor towards Eurasia and the South Caucasus. Although Obama was a Democrat and Trump a Republican, they both opposed the “neo-conservative” geopolitical agenda of exporting democracy, and the NATO and EU enlargements that had been the hallmarks of Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. This was clearly seen in the Minsk process to resolve the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijan’s territories

1 Kuzio, T., ‘Turkey and Russia have different interests in the South Caucasus,’ *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 18, 2021, Available at: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-and-russia-have-different-interests-in-the-south-caucasus-op-ed-165608> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

becoming moribund. France especially, and to a lesser extent the US, which, together with Russia, were the leading powers in the Minsk Group mediation process, tended to be biased in favour of Armenia. Russia and Turkey moved into the vacuum, supporting Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively. The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict erupted into renewed hostilities in 2016 and again in 2020, when Azerbaijan liberated most of what had been occupied by Armenia in 1988–1994. With Russian peacekeepers in northern part of Karabakh region, the US needs to again become a security actor in Eurasia and the South Caucasus.

This article shows how three security actors – Russia, Ukraine, and the USA – have frequently interacted and competed since 1991. In seeing the former Soviet space of Eurasia as its exclusive sphere of influence, Russia has always attempted to include its neighbours in integration projects. When this has failed or been rebuffed, Russia has supported separatism – directly or through its local allies – in Azerbaijan and Georgia in the early 1990s and Ukraine since 2014. The US has sought to promote what former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski called “geopolitical pluralism” in Eurasia. The US under former Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush was an active security actor in Eurasia and the South Caucasus, where it upheld the right of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine to pursue independent foreign policies and, in the case of the last two, backed a NATO “open door” policy for their future membership.

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This article demonstrates that the US was a passive security actor towards Eurasia, and especially the South Caucasus, under Presidents Obama and Trump. Less than a year into his presidency, it remains unclear if President Joseph Biden will again make the US a security actor in these two regions and in the process revive US geopolitical competition with Russia and the pursuit of “geopolitical pluralism” in Eurasia.

Russia in Pursuit of an Exclusive Sphere of Influence in Eurasia

Russian politicians have viewed the disintegration of the USSR as both a catastrophe and a humiliation for Russia. They have therefore seen the end of the Soviet Union differently from Azerbaijanis, Georgians,

and Ukrainians, who welcomed it because they obtained their independence. Since 1991, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have prioritized nation-building, while Russia has prioritized building integration unions as its sphere of influence. Since 1991, all Russian leaders and most political parties have strongly supported integration within Eurasia and have always argued that there is no alternative to reintegration as the USSR's successor states cannot exist without Russian assistance and leadership. Therefore, in the case of conflict zones, Russia has always opposed the deployment of UN peacekeepers in the CIS area and Eurasia, because it believes this is a region where only it can act militarily.

Russia's democratic and nationalist opposition cannot make up their minds – disparaging their neighbours while at the same time insisting, they remain closely integrated with them. On the one hand, they use racist and Islamophobic discourse against Caucasians and Central Asians and chauvinism towards Ukrainians. On the other hand, they keep insisting that these territories belong to their exclusive Eurasian sphere of influence and join Russia-led unions.² For instance, a former *Financial Times* correspondent in Moscow, Charles Clover, described Navalny as the “pretty face of Russian nationalism” owing to his obnoxious racist and Islamophobic views.³ Navalny describes his nationalism as “normal”, in contrast to the Kremlin’s “abnormal” variant, because the latter includes imperialist discourse. But, from the vantage viewpoint of the South Caucasus, there is little difference between “normal” and “abnormal” Russian nationalisms. Navalny believes the disintegration of the USSR provides the possibility for Russia to be reborn, while Putin describes the end of the Soviet Union as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”. Nevertheless, they both support tight integration of Eurasian countries. Neither Russian nationalist dissident and historian Alexander Solzhenitsyn nor Navalny ever condemned Russian and Armenian leaders for manufacturing conflicts in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. Navalny never condemned the Kremlin’s attempt to break off so-called “New

2 T. Kuzio, *Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War*, London: Routledge, forthcoming.

3 C. Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016.

Russia” (*Novorossiya*) from eastern and southern Ukraine in 2014. Navalny supported Armenia’s position in its conflict with Azerbaijan and backed Russia’s invasion of Georgia’s South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions in 2008. In 2014, he said the way Crimea had been annexed had violated international law; nevertheless, the peninsula should be not returned to Ukraine.

Russia has pursued security policies towards Eurasia that have been contradictory. Russia’s annexation of Crimea and continued military aggression against Ukraine have undermined traditional views of “brotherly” relations between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples. This will prevent the achievement of Moscow’s goal of the return to a “normalization” of Russian–Ukrainian relations and Ukraine becoming part of the Russian World. Contradictions in Russian security policies are especially prevalent in the South Caucasus. In the event of a renewed crisis or resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the incompatibility of the five security policies discussed below will lead to a crisis because Russia would be forced to choose which of them to prioritize.

The first contradiction in Russian security policy is the fact that Armenia was a founding member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which Russia created in the early 1990s as a kind of NATO for CIS countries. In addition to Armenia and Russia, the CSTO includes Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Armenia is also a member of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Armenia was frustrated by the CSTO’s unwillingness to intervene on its side in the Second Karabakh War in 2020. The Kremlin justified its inaction by saying the war was fought on territory internationally recognized as belonging to Azerbaijan. Armenia fired long-range rockets, including “Iskander” ballistic missiles, into Azerbaijan in the hope of provoking a counter delivery of missiles into Armenia, but Baku did not respond.⁴ Armenia hoped an Azerbaijani response fired into Armenia would have forced Russia under the CSTO charter to intervene in defence of one of its members.

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4 Muradov, M. and Kuzio, T. “The Iskander Saga Deepens Azerbaijani Mistrust of Russia”, *RUSI Brief*, May 5, 2021, Available at: <https://rusi.org/commentary/iskander-saga-deepens-azerbaijani-mistrust-russia> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

Defeat in the Second Karabakh War has pushed Armenia ever closer to Russia.⁵ Russia is seeking to expand its presence in Armenia,⁶ which continues to pressure Russia over the CSTO in response to recent border tensions with Azerbaijan, which have been exacerbated by Yerevan itself to draw external attention. Yerevan sought to activate Article 2 of the CSTO and “launch the mechanism of joint consultations” on a collective response to threats faced by members (Article 4, which is yet to be triggered, would request the CSTO’s military intervention).⁷

Russia’s second security policy towards the South Caucasus relates to its two military bases in Armenia, which were established in the Soviet era and in the 1990s. Gyumri, 120 km north of Yerevan, hosts the 102nd military base, which is part of Russia’s Southern Command. Erebuni Airport, 7 km south of Yerevan, is home to the Russian 3624th Air Base, which hosts MIG-29 fighters and Mi-24 attack helicopters. These are Russia’s only military bases in the South Caucasus, as pro-NATO Georgia and non-aligned Azerbaijan have always opposed hosting Russian military bases.

The third contradictory security policy is that Russia has always been Armenia’s main supplier of weapons and military training.⁸ Three times smaller in population than Azerbaijan and without its energy sources, Armenia does not have the financial resources to purchase Western, Turkish, or Israeli military equipment in the same manner as Azerbaijan can. Azerbaijan’s military relationship with Israel, including the purchase of its drones, has taken place over a far longer period than that with Turkey, the security policy of which became more assertive from 2015/2016.⁹

Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev reacted with incredulity when Russia announced it would assist Armenia in the “modernization” of its

5 Rácz, A., “In Russia’s Hands. Nagorno-Karabakh after the ceasefire agreement”, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, Conflict Series Brief 8, April 2021, Available at: https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_8_2021.pdf (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

6 Reuters, *Armenia seeks bigger Russian military presence on its territory*, February 22, 2021, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-russia-base-int-idUSKBN2AM1DY> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

7 Radio Free Europe, *Armenia Turns To Russian-Led CSTO Amid Border Standoff With Azerbaijan*, May 14, 2021, Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-putin-troops-border-withdrawal/31254474.html> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

8 Abay, E.G., “Russia provides 94% of Armenia’s arms in 5 years”, *Anadolu Agency*, October 29, 2020, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-provides-94-of-armenia-s-weapons-in-5-years/2023969> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

9 Kuzio, T., “The Role of Israel in Azerbaijan’s Victory in Nagorno-Karabakh”, *RUSI brief*, June 4, 2021, Available at: <https://rusi-europe.eu/publication/rusi-newsbrief/israel-azerbaijan-victory> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

armed forces following last year's defeat.¹⁰ Armenia's late-20th century Soviet and Russian weaponry and training proved to be far inferior to Azerbaijan's 21st century weaponry and the NATO-standard training provided for its officers by Turkey.

Russia has not provided the answers demanded by President Aliyev about how Armenia came into possession of the Iskander missile system. One reason is Moscow's embarrassment at how the Israeli-produced Barak 8 air defence system operated by Azerbaijan successfully brought down Iskanders fired from Armenia.¹¹ Azerbaijan is also suspicious about who fired those Iskanders from Armenia. The technical skills required to fire the Iskander missile, coupled with their high-profile importance to Russian military prestige, could point to Russian personnel from one of its two military bases in Armenia operating the Iskanders.

Russia's fourth contradictory security policy is its force of 1,960 peacekeepers in Northern Karabakh, deployed in the aftermath of last year's Second Karabakh War. Russia's peacekeeping mandate comes with decades of negative baggage from unfulfilled and biased peacekeeping projects elsewhere in the post-Soviet region, where Russia has never sought to resolve frozen conflicts. Russia's interest has always been for these conflicts to continue to simmer, which provides it with a rationale for remaining as a peacekeeper. Believing Eurasia to be its exclusive sphere of influence, Russia has always opposed the UN, OSCE, and other international organizations undertaking peacekeeping operations in the post-Soviet space.

Russia's fifth contradictory security policy rests in the similarity of its approach in eastern and southern Ukraine since 2014 and Azerbaijan since 2020 to hybrid warfare. Russia is turning a blind eye to, and thereby facilitating, the transfer of Armenian military assistance to its proxy forces in Northern Karabakh using vehicles disguised as civilian transportation trucks. Russia has been delivering military equipment to its local proxies in eastern and southern Ukraine in the same manner through "humanitarian convoys".¹²

10 ITAR-TASS, *Azerbaijani leader says Russia should avoid helping Armenia upgrade its Army*, February 26, 2021, Available at: <https://tass.com/world/1260677> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

11 Kuzio, "The Role of Israel in Azerbaijan's Victory...", *op.cit.*

12 Zoria, Y., "The hidden invasion: Russia's military convoys to Ukraine since 2014", *Euromaidan Press*, November 6, 2018, Available at: <http://euromaidanpress.com/2018/11/06/the-hidden-invasion-russias-military-convoys-to-ukraine-since-2014/> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

On March 1, Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister, Jeyhun Bayramov, warned at the UN: "According to credible information available to the Azerbaijani side, which is also validated by the reports of independent mass media sources, members of the Armed Forces of Armenia, wearing civilian attire, are transferred to the territory of Azerbaijan through the 'Lachin Corridor' in civilian trucks, including disguised inside construction cargo, in an attempt to escape the control procedures of the Russian peacekeeping contingent."¹³

Additional to these deliveries are the controversial political actions of the Armenian government. At the heart of this military and political activity is Armenia's refusal to accept the need to demarcate and

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delimit its border with Azerbaijan and, importantly, accept that all of Karabakh is the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan. Armenia's diplomats, officials and politicians continue to campaign for international recognition of the "sovereignty" (understood by Yerevan as independence) of the quasi-state entity that they fabricated in the Karabakh region.

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Ukraine, GUAM and the Pursuit of Geopolitical Pluralism in Eurasia

Since they became independent in 1991, of the South Caucasus states, Armenia has always aligned with Russia; Georgia has pursued a pro-Western foreign policy and, following the Rose Revolution, sought membership of NATO and the EU; while Azerbaijan has pursued

13 Huseynov, V., "Azerbaijan Warns Against Threats That Might Undermine Peace Process With Armenia", *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 18 Issue: 44, March 17, 2021, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-warns-against-threats-that-might-undermine-peace-process-with-armenia/> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

14 Putin, V., "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", *Official website of Kremlin*, July 12, 2021, Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

a multi-vector foreign policy as a non-aligned country. Under their respective presidents at the time, Eduard Shevardnadze and Haydar Aliyev, Georgian and Azerbaijani foreign policies were both described as multi-vector and similar to that implemented by former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. Multi-vectorism was a pragmatic foreign policy that consisted of expanding cooperation with the West while also maintaining their relationships with Russia and CIS countries. While President Ilham Aliyev has continued Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy, albeit while preserving close relations with the West, Ukraine and Georgia have adopted the goals of NATO and EU membership.

Because of Russian support for separatism in Ukraine, its officials and pro-Western political parties were sympathetic to Georgia and Azerbaijan, the territories of which had also been occupied by Russia and its ally Armenia, respectively. Ukrainians have always connected Azerbaijan's formerly Armenian-occupied territories to Russian attitudes towards Ukraine's territorial integrity.

There is no ethnic or religious hostility to Armenia in Ukraine. Nevertheless, Armenia has always voted with Russia in the UN and other international organizations against Ukraine's territorial integrity. In Yerevan's eyes, Crimea's "self-determination" was viewed through the lens of its demand for the right of ethnic Armenians in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan to have "self-determination", contrary to the international principle of the territorial integrity of states.

Ukrainians and Azerbaijanis have a similar distrust of France. In the case of Ukraine, this is because of France's long-standing Russophilia and anti-Americanism. In the 2017 French presidential elections, three of the most popular four candidates (one on the left and two on the right) were pro-Russian. France and Germany seek to reset relations with Russia. In the case of Azerbaijan, distrust is a product of France's long-standing bias in favour of Armenia. In late 2020, both houses of the French parliament voted to recognize the so-called "independence" of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.¹⁵ In the two

15 Independent, *Azerbaijan slams French Senate's vote on Nagorno-Karabakh*, November 26, 2020, Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/azerbaijan-slams-french-senates-vote-on-nagornokarabakh-resolution-azerbaijan-government-nagornokarabakh-french-b1762360.html> (Accessed on June 30, 2021); and Ozcan, Y., "French National Assembly approves decision on Karabakh", *Anadolu Agency*, December 14, 2020, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/french-national-assembly-approves-decision-on-karabakh/2065200> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

OSCE Minsk forums devoted to the Karabakh and Donbas conflicts, France's multi-vector foreign policy supported the contradictory stances of separatism in Azerbaijan and territorial integrity in Ukraine.

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Western double standards on Georgia and Azerbaijan's right to retake their sovereign territory would presumably also apply to Ukraine if it sought to militarily retake Crimea or send its security forces to liberate the Donbas region. Ukrainians remember the 2014 crisis for three reasons. The first is how the UK and US ignored their security commitments to Ukraine under the "Budapest Memorandum", signed two decades ago which provided (worthless) security guarantees to Ukraine in return for Ukraine's denuclearization. The second is that the West pressured Ukraine not to resist Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. The third is that then US President Barack Obama vetoed sending US military equipment to Ukraine. The European Union continues to oppose Western countries supplying military equipment to Ukraine.

After Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 the West did not introduce sanctions. Then newly elected Obama team rewarded Russia with a "reset" of their relations. The West's weak response to the events of 2008 sent the wrong signal to Russian leaders that they could get away with invading and annexing Crimea. Tough Western sanctions against Russia were only introduced after the July 2014 shooting down of Malaysian civilian airliner MH17, killing 298 passengers and crew. Yet such sanctions were not imposed on Armenia by the West to end former's occupation of Azerbaijan's territories, and no pressure was put on Armenia in this context.

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The West did little to oppose and resolve Russia's manufacturing of protracted conflicts and prevent them becoming soft security threats to Europe.¹⁶ Ethnic cleansing of between three quarters and one

16 Kuzio, T. "How Conflict Zones From Afghanistan to the Caucasus Fuel Drug Trafficking", *The Greater Middle East*, Research and Studies, July 19, 2021, Available at: <https://tgme.org/2021/07/how-conflict-zones-from-afghanistan-to-the-caucasus-fuel-drug-trafficking> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

million Azerbaijanis from the Karabakh region and seven surrounding districts, and Georgians from South Ossetia and Abkhazia, was ignored by the West. Russia is pursuing the same policy of ethnic cleansing in Crimea by repressing Tatars and pressuring them to leave the occupied peninsula.

From 1991 until the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, pro-Western political parties always supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia. The key political forces were national democrats such as the Ukrainian Popular Movement (known by its abbreviation *Rukh* [Movement]), Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine, and the Petro Poroshenko Bloc (which was renamed the European Solidarity Party).

Pro-Western political forces in Ukraine supported Baku's mid-1990s initiative to create the GUAM (Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova) organization, which brought together four countries remaining outside Russian-led integration projects in the CIS area. Meanwhile, some of its members supported NATO membership (Georgia and Ukraine) while two others opted for non-aligned status (Azerbaijan and Moldova).

In contrast, pro-Russian political forces such as the Party of Regions and Communist Party of Ukraine supported Russia's actions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). In 2008, the Party of Regions, Communist Party of Ukraine and Crimean separatists supported Russia's recognition of the so-called "independence" of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia separatist regions of Georgia. A resolution in support of such "independence" was voted down in the Ukrainian parliament but was adopted by the Crimean Supreme Soviet. This was the only instance in Eurasia (outside Russia) of support for the "independence" of these two Georgian separatist territories. Traditionally pro-Russian Belarus and Kazakhstan did not support Russia's stance on separatism.

Since 2014, pro-Russian forces have been marginalized in Ukraine. The Party of Regions no longer exists, and the Communist Party of Ukraine is banned from participating in elections because it continues to use communist symbols that are banned under the country's decommunization laws adopted in 2015. Representation in the Ukrainian parliament of the Opposition Bloc and Opposition Platform – For Life, two successors to the Party of Regions, has collapsed, with only 44 out of 423 elected deputies.

The lack of a pro-Russian political presence inside Ukraine also means that Ukrainian views and policies towards the South Caucasus will not support the “independence” of separatist regions there but will endorse the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia and be critical of Armenia voting in favour of Russia within international organizations. All Ukrainian political parties and the Ukrainian media supported Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War; the only exception was the two marginal successors to the Party of Regions.

The US as a Security Actor and Proponent of Geopolitical Pluralism in Eurasia

Since the 1990s, former US Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush supported security engagement whereas Presidents Obama and Trump were indifferent and passive towards Eurasia and the South Caucasus. The election of President Joseph Biden opens up

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an opportunity for the US to resume its place as a security actor in the region. A Turkish–Azerbaijani strategic partnership, as witnessed in the Second Karabakh War and Shusha Declaration of June 2021, would support US national interests in the South Caucasus. Acting as a renewed security actor for Eurasia and the South Caucasus would boost Washington’s existing support in Eurasia more broadly to Georgia and Ukraine.

In October 2001, the US Senate amended the Freedom Support Act to permit presidents to waive Section 907. Former US Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama authorized the assistance to Azerbaijan, which had proved itself to be an important security ally of the US and NATO and a contributor to military missions in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. President Biden should permanently amend the Freedom Support Act so that Section 907 can no longer be used to deny the US military aid to Azerbaijan and integrate Azerbaijan within the US Code’s Section 333 on “Authority to Build Capacity”. The US could aid Azerbaijani security forces in counterterrorism,

countering trans-national criminal activities, and strengthening border security and cooperate in military intelligence activities. Azerbaijan always believed this policy was patently unfair because it was the only country in Eurasia penalised in such a manner. This also sent a signal to Armenia that it was being rewarded for illegally occupying Azerbaijani territory.

Central to the US resuming the role of security actor is Turkey, with which Washington needs to mend its relationship. Turkey is an important member of NATO and possesses its second largest armed forces, larger than that the combined forces of France and the UK. Incirlik Airbase has been important to the US military deployments in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan and as a transit hub from other locations. Turkey is the only regional player (other than Russia) with boots on the ground and the willpower to play a geopolitical role in the South Caucasus. Turkey is the only security actor in the South Caucasus that is able to counterbalance Russian support for Armenia. Importantly, Turkey and Russia have different interests in the South Caucasus region and more broadly, as seen in the growing military and security cooperation between Turkey and Ukraine.¹⁷

The reinstatement of the US as a security actor in Eurasia and the South Caucasus would also assist in acting as a counterweight to Iran, which is Russia's main ally in the region. Turkey is the only regional player with the means, capability, and willpower to take on Iranian proxies, which are active throughout the region. Although the Biden administration is seeking to renew the Iranian nuclear deal, tension between Tehran and US allies in the Greater Middle East will continue.

The US, as a renewed security actor, could take advantage of Azerbaijan's long-term geopolitical cooperation with Israel, the main US ally in the Greater Middle East. Israeli and Turkish drones both played important roles in Azerbaijan's defeat of Armenia in last year's Second Karabakh War.

One aspect of the US reviving itself as a security actor in Eurasia and the South Caucasus could be in

The US should support a GUAM+ format that includes Turkey thereby promoting Brzezinski's concept of "geopolitical pluralism" in Eurasia.

17 Ramani, S., "Turkey's Balancing Act Between Russia and Ukraine", *Circle Foundation*, May 12, 2021, Available at: <https://circlefoundation.org.uk/2021/05/12/turkeys-balancing-act-between-russia-and-ukraine/> (Accessed on June 30, 2021)

supporting the revival of the GUAM regional group. All four countries have been strong supporters of cooperation with transatlantic and European structures. Azerbaijan has developed close relations with NATO and participated in many NATO-led peacekeeping missions. Turkey could be Azerbaijan's bridge to a deeper strategic partnership with NATO.

The US should support a GUAM+ format that includes Turkey thereby promoting Brzezinski's concept of "geopolitical pluralism" in Eurasia. US support would be important in backing Turkey providing a security umbrella to the four countries. GUAM+ could become an important vehicle for promoting transatlantic cooperation with NATO's Partnership for Peace programme. Re-energising GUAM+ would also support US diplomacy in international organizations, such as the UN and OSCE.

Russian military bases in Armenia project power into the South Caucasus and constitute an "endorsement" of Russian foreign policy. Washington's support for Turkish–Azerbaijani security cooperation would be a deterrent against Russian intentions of transforming its

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"peacekeeping" mission in Karabakh into a permanent military base.

Another important factor is energy. The US has traditionally opposed European countries relying on Russian oil and gas supplies. That can be avoided by supporting existing Azerbaijani energy supplies through Turkey and Georgia into the European Union and Ukraine and their expansion. Turkish and

Azerbaijani cooperation could be strategically useful to US interests in Central Asia, as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have reached an agreement on jointly exploiting gas deposits in the *Dostluk* (Friendship) field in the Caspian Sea. Azerbaijani oil and gas became a real alternative for easing Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies and thereby reducing Moscow's influence over EU and NATO members. In promoting Azerbaijani energy, Washington would be supporting Ukraine and Georgia's energy independence from Russia, which has long been a US objective.

Conclusions

Russian officials and politicians of all political persuasions have always believed that reintegration of the former Soviet space (what they consider Russia's "exclusive sphere of influence") should be a priority. Russian officials and political parties have devoted their energy to building unions and not a nation state. Since 1991, neither in the Soviet Union or the post-Soviet era has the Russian understanding of "Russia" ever been limited to the country within the Russian SFSR or Russian Federation. Russian and Soviet identity were one and the same and, since 1991, Russian and Eurasian identities are integrated.

Russia's preoccupation with the reintegration of the former Soviet space has competed with the US promotion of "geopolitical pluralism" under Presidents Clinton and Bush and the right of countries such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine to prioritize nation-building over Eurasian integration and pursue independent foreign policies. Ukraine and Georgian leaders understood their national security as being best served by pursuing membership of NATO and the EU. In contrast, Azerbaijan pursued a multi-vector foreign policy of cooperation with NATO while remaining non-aligned. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine have worked together in GUAM.

The years 2014 and 2020 proved to be watersheds in this triangular geopolitical competition among Russia, GUAM, and the USA because of Russia's annexation of Crimea and military aggression against Ukraine, and the entry of a fourth security actor, Turkey, into the South Caucasus. Until 2014, Russia had supported separatism with the goal of creating frozen conflicts in countries that had shown no interest in Russian-led integration projects in Eurasia. Since 2015-2016, Turkey's growing security assertiveness has led it to expand military and security cooperation with Azerbaijan and Ukraine.¹⁸ A GUAM+ format (GUAM plus Turkey) is potentially a new dynamic in Eurasia.

The US administration under Biden should return as a security actor to Eurasia and also in the South Caucasus. The US, in resuming

18 Kuzio, T., "Time to recognize Azerbaijan as a new regional power: Op-ed", *Hurriyyet Daily News*, May 29, 2021, Available at: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/time-to-recognize-azerbaijan-as-a-new-regional-power-op-ed-165091> (Accessed on June 30, 2021); and Kuzio, T., "Looking Beyond NATO and the EU: The Turkish-Ukrainian Strategic Partnership", *RUSI brief*, July 8, 2021, Available at: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/looking-beyond-nato-and-eu-turkish-ukrainian-strategic-partnership> (Accessed on July 30, 2021)

becoming a security actor, has a ready-made NATO ally – Turkey – that is already active in supporting “geopolitical pluralism” in Eurasia. Turkey complements long-term US support to Georgia and Ukraine, which should be now expanded to include Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, as this article has shown, Russia is stretched thin in the South Caucasus, where it is pursuing contradictory security policies.