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## THE US SOUTH CAUCASIAN POLICY UNDER DONALD TRUMP

### **Abstract:**

*After providing a brief overview of the US policy in the South Caucasus from the beginning of the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as there have emerged three new countries in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the article mainly focuses on relatively less active engagement from the side of the United States into the affairs of the South Caucasus since the presidency of Barack Obama maintained if not untypically deepened even more under Donald Trump currently as well. These trends are explained through the prism of the general standpoints of the latest American administrations promoting the idea of less or non-interference of the superpower in other countries', regions' or continents' notably domestic matters. There are discussed major implications of such, i.e. the less active US foreign policy observed among others, also in the South Caucasus lately, although in the case of this region clearly primarily with less desirable effects as it appears in fact, taking into account on the other hand however quite diverse needs and interests of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. The article critically analyses the consequences the US recent withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, as well as its re-imposition of economic sanctions against Iran might have for the South Caucasian countries, addresses the factor of latest uncertainty over the NATO member Turkey, covers the Russian problem, and raises one of the crucial issues whether the current US President Donald Trump has more actual decisive power than the Congress, also in terms of foreign policy implementation, or not.*

### **Keywords:**

*The US, the South Caucasus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Donald Trump, the US foreign policy, Russia, NATO*

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## **Introduction**

Democracy and human rights, energy, and security are believed to be the three major pillars of the US South Caucasian policy.

Due to the States' interest in transporting possibilities of the Caspian basin's energy resources to Western markets, energy became the main priority in this regard for the Bill Clinton administration, while on the background of 9/11 and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, i.e. increased security concerns, the latter appeared to be the primary focus point under the leadership of George W. Bush.

During Barack Obama's presidency, America integrated rather liberal-interventionist foreign policy in the region that might seem more in accordance with the Democrats' governing style. Although, noteworthy to underline here as well Obama's distinguishing individual impact as of the highly value-oriented and principled politician in general.

## **Less Engagement**

Despite the fact that the US has clear strategic, although not the vital interests in the South Caucasus region, the latter has become less visible and covered in the US foreign policy agenda after the presidency of George W. Bush who was much more active in this context, as well as his predecessor Bill Clinton.

We can say, Barack Obama's non-active policy much more anticipated as such considering the fact that it is nothing surprising under the leadership of the Democrats, seems to be preserved under the presidency of Donald Trump as well.

However, along with continuation of certain inertia from the Obama period, the non-active policy has been preserved even more under Trump as he is famous for his declarations and practical approaches regarding decreasing the US interference in other countries' especially domestic affairs. Besides this, suggesting to some extent even isolation of the US represents one of the non-typical specificities characteristic to Donald Trump's policy as of individual that is different from Republicans' traditional standpoints - increased interference and more active foreign policy of the US mainly based on expanding its involvement in other states' affairs. Trump as an outsider, is a deviant, exceptional, and due to contradictory approaches not rarely, unpredictable player, however he won the elections based on populist rhetoric and vocalizing the interests of typically abandoned particularly for the last decades, middle-class white American majority so far.

## **Major Implications of the Less Active US Foreign Policy in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia**

When we are discussing such kind of non or at least less interference from the side of the US in the regional or state affairs in the South Caucasus, among the three countries, Georgia seems to suffer more from this policy as much

more depending state on the active Western and especially American support, oriented towards counterbalancing Russia's post-Soviet ambitions for reviving its former power also in the South Caucasus and over the regional countries in its direct neighborhood. The newer grounds for pessimism have emerged especially after the recent Brussels Summit of NATO (July, 2018) where Georgia once again got unclear message regarding when it can be expected for the country to gain MAP and its eventual membership of the Alliance. Although, the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11-12 July 2018 have reiterated the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia will become a member of the Alliance, with MAP as an integral part of the process; they reaffirmed all elements of that decision, as well as subsequent decisions. They have welcomed the significant progress realized since 2008<sup>2</sup>.

Other countries, for example, Azerbaijan seems to gain less pressure during Trump's presidency as there are having been heard less pretensions over the human rights' violations in the state; it is simply less important and corresponds to Trump's non-interference policy agenda. Although, such less-active policy of the US in the region, to certain extent quite logical if we also consider Trump's careful and more business-oriented relations with Moscow, seems to have less profitable influence not only for Armenia's increased balancing needs and strategies under the changed reality that suggests to at least raise more pro-Western rhetoric during the new – since May, 2018 “revolutionary” leadership of the Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, but also for the Azerbaijani economic interests as well to attract more Western and American partners and investment dealing with its oil and gas, especially in the reality of the decreased Russian contribution considerably caused due to the anti-Russian sanctions.

### **The Iranian Factor**

Another important factor playing its specific role in the South Caucasus region during Trump's presidency is the US recently announced (in May, 2018) withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, which makes the viability of this agreement vulnerable, and re-imposition of the US significant economic sanctions against Iran.

These conditions are believed to bring back the previous picture of Iran's at least increased isolation containing halt of the business relations and projects with the South Caucasian countries and their businessmen as well.

Along with other regional energy and business projects to be under certain threat due to re-imposition of the US important economic sanctions against Iran, there has to be noted also the International North–South Transport

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<sup>2</sup> *Brussels Summit Declaration*, Press Release (2018) 074, Nato.int, 11.07.2018 (Updated: 13.08.2018), <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm)> (10.08.2018).

Corridor, which has been designed to connect Northern Europe with South-East Asia involving Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran, and at the same time, emerging vulnerability of this greatly valuable initiative.

Such a negative move will not only have economically detrimental consequences not necessarily only for Iran as it can be clear, but also for the whole regional security.

There is obvious in any event that if the Trump's US does not engage more in the South Caucasus, deterioration of the business or other relations with Iran from the side of the three regional countries is a game where these South Caucasian countries are losing more than they gain or to put it into other words, they unfairly are not gaining anything adequate back from the US on the expense of failing their business projects with Iran and thus losing new significant commercial or energy development opportunities due to the superpower's negative interference in this case as it appears.

### **Uncertainty over Turkey**

Not mentioning the certain proximity of another critical and broadly war-torn region – Middle East, which makes the South Caucasus issue additionally delicate, uncertainty over Turkey occurred remarkably in the last years due to the internal political divides and clashes, increasing autocracy, renewed tensions with Kurds in its southeastern provinces when facing the persistent ethnic conflict since the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and different sorts of external pressure evolving based on diverse grounds, including from Turkey's major NATO ally – the US in the light of controversially acclaimed Turkish contribution into the Syrian campaign<sup>3</sup>, or other heavily complicated circumstances altogether, Turkey's EU accession talks stopped among others due to the highly criticized from democratic point of view Turkish constitutional referendum of 2017, etc., reflected eventually in complex political, economic, security, diplomatic or other crises, is noteworthy to consider.

### **The Russian Problem**

Despite Trump's primarily business-based and bargaining approach towards Russia as well (not mentioning popular, however still not confirmed allegations in keeping special bonds with the Russian leadership even to the degree of having them the decisive influence on the outcome of the last US presidential elections) another factor is anti-Russian sanctions supported and

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<sup>3</sup> D. L. Phillips, *Research Paper: ISIS-Turkey Links*, Huffingtonpost.com, 09.11.2014 (Updated: 08.09.2016), <[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke\\_b\\_6128950.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke_b_6128950.html)> (14.07.2018).

as it has been promoted, even pressured on Trump by the US Congress in further<sup>4</sup>.

### One Important Question

An additional principal question arises though, is it about Trump's superiority over the Congress regarding the actual decision-making, including when it comes to the foreign policy, or not? Some analysts detect such a trend, however what about the constitutional restraints and checks and balances then?!

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<sup>4</sup> K. Rapoza, *Latest Anti-Russia Sanctions Bill Does Not Target Nord Stream II*, Forbes.com, 24.07.2018, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2018/07/24/latest-anti-russia-sanctions-bill-does-not-target-nord-stream-ii/#6785797b2996>> (10.08.2018).