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The events of the last decade, inevitably leading to a change in the world political order, concern not only the great actors of the political scene. Smaller countries are thrown into the vortex of hybrid games between world powers, sometimes without any intention on their part, and due to their geographical location, nationality issues, raw material resources, as well as due to long-standing regional animosities, they may be used in a global confrontation. Such countries undoubtedly include the countries of the Caucasus, a region in which all the above-mentioned attributes of countries, important from the point of view of geopolitical games, are reflected like in a mirror.

The Caucasus is an area located on the border between Europe and Asia, between the Black Sea in the west and the Caspian Sea in the east, and between the Don Plain in the north and Turkey and Iran in the south. Politically, the Caucasus region consists of the North Caucasus, located in the southern part of the Russian Federation, the Caucasus Mountains and the South Caucasus² (Transcaucasia), which includes the former provinces of Tsarist Russia and currently three independent states: Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Additional players should be added to the three countries mentioned – the so-called para-states: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and until recently Nagorno-Karabakh and an external actor – the Russian Federation. Independent existence of the so-called para-states is only possible thanks to the intervention of external actors (in practice, Russia). The history of the states and nations of this region were closely related and constituted an important element of the history of: the Caucasus, Russia, Turkey and Persia (Iran), the USSR³.

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² In the further course of this work, the region including Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan will be referred to as the Central Caucasus

³ T. Kołodziej, *Bilateral relations of the Transcaucasian countries of the Eastern Partnership with the European Union*, Krakow International Studies - Year 2015, Vol 0, Issue 4.

The Central Caucasus has a strategic geopolitical location. It is located at the junction of the continental communication routes of Europe and Asia: North – South (Federation Russian – Middle East) and East – West (Europe – Central Asia). In the past, the “Silk Road” running from China to Europe ran through this area. Therefore, over the centuries, the Central Caucasus was an area regularly conquered by Rome, Persia, Arabs, Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire, Mongols, Timurids, Khazars and Russia. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Turkey, Persia and Russia were the most active, then Great Britain, Germany, Italy and the United States joined the competition America, and in recent decades also the European Union.

Global processes taking place in the world indicate a noteworthy trend of growing interest of great powers in the Caucasus region, especially the Central Caucasus. Considering the widespread support in political and academic circles for the theory that the centers global influences and the geopolitical projects they export become areas of “competition” between the West, Russia and the Islamic world, it is crucial to at least broadly define the role and place of the Caucasus in future international relations. The loss or establishment and consequent strengthening or weakening of Western control over Eurasia in the Caucasus and Central Asia could lead to the unification of several superpowers against Western hegemony or, on the contrary, to their disintegration and isolation. The United States, through its geopolitical projects, is making every effort to establish control and political influence in this region in order to prevent Russia, the EU and Islamic integrationists from uniting through the Caucasus and Central Asia. The events of recent years in the South Caucasus region are undoubtedly related to the strengthening or weakening of the geopolitical influence of players. Tensions and complications in relations between states caused by armed clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are not the only serious and complex changes taking place in the Caucasus. This region is influenced by changes taking place in the international political system, but it is also subject to regional processes.

Following Azerbaijan’s regaining control of the entire Karabakh region and the exodus of the local Armenian population, Russia’s once-strong regional influence in Armenia and Azerbaijan became evident. The Nagorno-Karabakh War in the fall of 2020 and the military parade organized in Baku following its end, jointly hosted by the presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkey, Ilham Aliyev and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, highlighted the potential of the allied relations between the two countries. Baku and Ankara’s close ties stem from a strategic choice made almost three decades ago. Multifaceted efforts to strengthen cooperation have varied in intensity over the past three decades, but their direction has remained unchanged. As a result, Azerbaijan has gradually distanced itself from Russia and, through cooperation with Turkey, has drawn closer – primarily economically – to the West. Meanwhile, Ankara has strengthened its position in the Central Caucasus.

This has led to the formation of an Ankara-Baku axis, which poses a challenge to Moscow by limiting its influence in the region. However, the Turkish duo is careful not to directly antagonize Russia, and this approach is reflected in their acceptance (for a time) of its key role in resolving the Karabakh conflict⁴.

In turn, some of Yerevan's political moves, such as Armenia's accession to the Rome Statute and joint military exercises with the United States, have increased Moscow's irritation with Armenian leaders. In September 2023, Armenia conducted joint exercises with the US Army (Eagle Partner 2023) and increased its purchases of military equipment from India and, more recently, France. The country clearly intends to strengthen its security relations with the West. While Moscow's influence in the region is undoubtedly declining, Armenia remains a member of the CSTO, and Russian military bases remain on its territory.

Plans for integration with the West by another Central Caucasus country, Georgia, have become complicated. Georgia, aspiring to EU membership, has faced heavy criticism from the European Commission due to its "ambiguous" stance on Russian aggression in Ukraine. The country's EU accession process was de facto halted by Brussels in 2024, officially due to democratic regression, the adoption of the "foreign influence" law, and the government's authoritarian course. In November 2024, the Georgian authorities also officially suspended accession talks until 2028 and rejected EU subsidies, accusing the European Union of blackmail. Despite this, it is likely that the European Union's and the United States' efforts to permanently strengthen their position in the Caucasus, including Georgia, will intensify in the near future.

Geoeconomic rivalry also influences the situation in the Central Caucasus region. This region is home to two transport corridors of significant importance for Southwest Asia. The first is the International Trans-Caspian Transport Route (TMTM; Middle Corridor), which runs from China through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The second corridor runs through the Black Sea and Ukraine to Slavkov via the LHS line. The Middle Corridor allows for bypassing Russian territory, which could be important, for example, for food exports from Europe to China. A number of strategic energy infrastructure projects have been implemented within the Middle Corridor: the Baku-Supsa pipeline, which transports oil from Azerbaijan to Georgia; the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline; and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline, which transports oil and gas from Azerbaijan to Turkey. Furthermore, the Middle Corridor has expanded beyond the rigid framework of energy cooperation and is constantly being expanded with new components. This includes expanding rail transport and ports on the Caspian Sea, and establishing free trade zones. After Xi Jinping

⁴ W. Górecki, M. Chudziak, *(Pan)turecki Kaukaz. Sojusz Baku–Ankara i jego znaczenie regionalne, Komentarze OSW*, <<https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2021-02-01/pan-turecki-kaukaz-sojusz-baku-ankara-i-jego-znaczenie>> (01.02.2021).

announced the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, the Middle Corridor began to be considered in the context of the Chinese project. It is the shortest route from China to Europe. It is not only an alternative to the sea route through Suez, but also to the Northern Corridor, a land connection running through Russia and Belarus⁵.

The second is the Southern Corridor (International North-South Transport Corridor – INSTC), which runs from Azerbaijan through Iran to India. The INSTC is an old concept, dating back to the 19th century and the so-called Great Game, the British-Russian rivalry for influence in Central Asia. This concept was revisited in 2002, when Russia, Iran, and India signed an agreement to build the North-South Corridor, a multimodal trade route connecting Russia with India and the Indian Ocean. The route would begin at the Indian port of Mumbai, from where goods would be transported to Iranian ports on the Persian Gulf, and then transported north by rail, via Azerbaijan or the Caspian Sea, to Russia. It is estimated that transporting goods from India to Russia using the INSTC could be approximately 30% cheaper and 40% faster than using the competing route, leading through the Suez Canal. Initially, work on the INSTC progressed very slowly, but accelerated rapidly in 2022. This was due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Western sanctions imposed on the Russian economy. The INSTC proved to be an ideal alternative for Russia, which was seeking trade routes bypassing Europe and Suez.

Another factor making the situation in the Caucasus region less predictable is the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. Until recently, this phenomenon stemmed from the radical Sunni sectarian movement that emerged and spread in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East (Wahhabism), and is now directly linked to extremist groups originating from the terrorist organization Islamic State, which until recently controlled large areas of Iraq and Syria. The number of Caucasian mujahideen operating in Syria was small, but the Caucasian fighters were quite influential and combat-ready. The “Islamic Caliphate” gained enormous influence and replaced “Al-Qaeda”. It is the true striking force of global jihad. The influence of Islamic fundamentalists in the Caucasus is expressed primarily through geostrategic parameters. Islamic fundamentalism was automatically identified with Wahhabism, as it opposed Islam, steeped in the traditions and customs characteristic of these regions, and the existing clerical administrations. The fundamentalists made their first attempt to establish an Islamic caliphate in the Caucasus, specifically in the territories of Chechnya and Dagestan, in 1998-1999, when a local Taliban organization emerged in Chechnya. This led to the expansion of Chechen “Talibanism” into the western Caucasus. Caucasian

⁵ T. Rydelek, *Wojny korytarzowe kształtują Nowy Bliski Wschód. Geopolityczny wyścig korytarzy transportowych*, <<https://gt-bt.com/raport-lat-dwudziestych/wojny-korytarzowe-ksztaltuja-nowy-bliski-wschod/>>, (22.07.2025).

accents were evident in the Syrian war, and the so-called Syrian factor played a significant role in the development of the so-called “Caucasian policy” of the then Russian authorities in the 1990s. Today, Islamic fundamentalists view not only the northern but also the central Caucasus as an integral part of the “Green International”. Generally speaking, if we are talking about the threat posed by the “Islamic Caliphate” not only in the global but also in the regional geopolitical context, then the “liberation” of the entire Caucasus from Islamists united under the auspices of the “Islamic Caliphate” would also include the territories of Azerbaijan and Georgia.

The above briefly presented updated geopolitical situation in the Caucasus, and mainly in the Central Caucasus region, aims to introduce the reader to the issues covered in a very interesting monograph by Vakhtang Maisaia and Bakura Kiguradze entitled “Georgian-Caucasian geopolitics”. As the authors of this work state, “The Caucasus has always been in the crosshairs of the nations of the world, but in recent decades this region has become the center of particular attention. This was due to various events that, from a political point of view, took place in almost every corner of the region”. Willy-nilly, these events, along with other factors, turned the Caucasus into a so-called “hot spot” and drew this region into the sphere of interest of the international community. This situation influenced the emergence of many geopolitical concepts related to the security of the Caucasus. The work presents the impact of confrontation on the development of the region’s geopolitical vectors and presents concepts for resolving emerging conflicts.

The authors situate these concepts are placed within the historical, cultural, religious, and state-building framework of the region and its constituent states. Against this backdrop, they analyze the essence of the Caucasus model of regional security, positioning and discussing Georgia’s role within this model. The history of the Caucasus has seen many conflicts and periods of “war”, which to some extent resemble the present. Both in those ancient times and today, attempts have been made to resolve the Caucasian conflicts, but periods of peace have always proved very brief. Since the early 1990s, numerous projects and initiatives have been developed aimed at bringing peace and stability to the Caucasus, such as the “Dieter Boden Plan”, the “Steinmeier Initiative”, the “Model for the Territorial Division of Abkhazia”, and others. Unfortunately, none of them have been implemented and have been rejected by the parties to the conflicts. This hasn’t prevented global and regional powers, as well as local players involved in the Caucasus, from developing their own geopolitical projects in this crucial region of the world. The authors list and characterize several of them, including:

The “Soviet Union-3” Project

At Russia’s initiative, a new neo-Eurasian project, conventionally called “Soviet Union-3”, is being implemented. This project harkens back to two Soviet-

era projects, but is based on new pragmatic postulates and incorporates so-called realpolitik, giving it a multifaceted dimension – geopolitical, geostrategic, and especially geoeconomic. The geopolitical driver of the “Soviet Union-3” idea is a megageoeconomic initiative: unifying the Caspian, Azov, and Black Sea basins through a dedicated waterway with a total length of 780 km. The key element of this waterway is the “Eurasian Canal”, whose construction is expected to cost \$7 billion. It runs along the coastal strip of the Caspian Sea in Russia, connecting Amirabad (a Caspian port in Iran) with Chabahar and Bandar-Abbas (ports on the Gulf of Oman in Iran), and from there with other seaports in India and China. It follows from the above that the “Soviet Union-3” project will be fundamentally and qualitatively different from previous Russian projects and will extend beyond the post-Soviet space. It is highly likely that Russian President Vladimir Putin is basing his project on the idea of the so-called “New USSR of Novo-Ogaryov”, put forward in 1990 by the last Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev. The “Novo-Ogaryovo” Treaty envisioned a single political union combining elements of a federation, confederation, and association, a modern version of which might include a regional hegemon, the participation of sovereign states, and quasi-state actors. It is possible that the involvement of Caucasian actors – Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia – is also being considered, as well as the implementation of a new regional security model in the “3+3”⁶ format, one of the main initiators of which was the Russian Federation.

British-Anglo-Saxon Initiatives

The London administration changed its policy to prevent the rise of powers in the East and restore Great Britain’s position as a world power. According to the “Global Britain”, London is attempting to reform the existing world order by pushing Russia out of Central Asia and into India, taking control of land and rail logistics routes for the transport of all strategic raw materials. The initially enigmatic “Global Britain” project has become increasingly clear over time. One of its elements was the “Greater East” initiative, now called “Greater Afghanistan”. The project envisions the construction of a communications and logistics corridor from Europe to India, requiring Britain to resolve several fundamental political issues in the countries along its route. In Europe, this includes Ukraine, in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and in Central Asia, Kazakhstan. The project’s route is intended to traverse the geographic areas of Central Europe, the Central Caucasus, and Central Asia, creating a single geopolitical

⁶ Format 3+3 to inicjatywa współpracy regionalnej na Kaukazie Południowym, obejmująca Armenię, Azerbejdżan, Gruzję (tzw. 3) oraz Rosję, Turcję i Iran (tzw. +3). Ma na celu rozwiązanie konfliktów bez udziału Zachodu, stabilizację transportu i zwiększenie roli regionalnych mocarstw, przy czym Gruzja wykazuje dystans do projektu ze względu na wpływy rosyjskie.

space. Within Central Europe, the project encompasses Poland, northwestern Ukraine, and Turkey; in “Central Asia”, it runs through Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, within the “Central Caucasus” framework, the project concerns Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. It is believed that in the 21st century, whoever controls the transport routes will control the world, and it was from this strategic concept and the struggle for control over these routes that the war in Ukraine arose. Britain’s ambitious geopolitical projects represent an attempt to seize control of logistics routes and wrest the initiative from China. The new strategy, unveiled by the United Kingdom, aims to transform the UK into a “global power” from a geopolitical perspective.

The “Great Turan” geopolitical project

Turkey is implementing its own geopolitical project, dubbed “Great Turan”, which aims to build unity among Turkic-speaking states. To this end, Ankara is making efforts to build cooperation within the Organization of Turkic States (OTG). Turkey’s first steps within the “Great Turan” project involve the supply of Turkish weapons. By arming the armies of Central Asian countries with weapons, the Turks are binding these states together and taking a major step toward creating a Turan army under Turkish leadership. As part of this project, Turkey has not forgotten the Transcaucasus: the 829-kilometer Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTC) railway line was launched, connecting Turkey with the North Caucasus and China via Azerbaijan and Georgia, bypassing Russia. As a result, Turkey’s influence in the region has significantly increased, not only economically but also politically. Ankara is gaining support for the project from China, interested in the continued transport of goods to Europe. At the same time, the BTC is becoming an alternative to the North-South route, which should connect Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, and India. As can be seen from the above, the geopolitical uniqueness of the Central Caucasus allows state actors, who are trying to establish a presence in this region through various means, to gain access to three oceans simultaneously (the Atlantic, Indian, and Arctic) and establish a certain kind of hegemony. This potential hegemony primarily concerns control of transport routes, but also the region’s natural resources. It is also related to international security in the broad sense. This invaluable potential of the region, according to the authors of the monograph, should be wisely utilized by Caucasian political entities. They note that “The strategic interest of the South Caucasus region lies in leveraging its own geopolitical location, properly selecting the most desirable international project from among the proposed geopolitical projects, and supporting its development and thus defining its functions for the next hundred years, strengthening the possibilities of peaceful, stable development and protecting territorial integrity”.

The geopolitical projects of the great powers are confronted with their own initiative, called “Caucasus Geostrata”⁷. According to the principles of this initiative, “Geopolitical and geoeconomic processes in the Caucasus region should take place in conditions of peaceful coexistence and the absence of confrontation. In this case, the geostrata is intended to serve as a natural spatial object, the embodiment of an ‘island of peace’ to avoid confrontation and violence”. The authors cite the example of the “Swiss geostrata” – a strategy that ensured peace and open or secret dialogue between the parties to wars in Europe, and thanks to which Switzerland became not only a continental (i.e., European) but also a powerful intercontinental financial center from the 18th century onward. Another, equally important geostrata functioned once with the Kingdom of Nepal, located between China and India. The main political basis of the “Caucasus Geostrata” is the shaping and development of a distinct regional security system by the three main actors in the Central Caucasus: Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Due to its geographical conditions, the Caucasus can naturally act as a “peace buffer” between Western, Islamic and Orthodox-Slavic civilizations, and on a latitudinal scale it can act as a buffer connecting Western civilizations with Confucian, Buddhist and Shinto civilizations, where civilizational harmony and all kinds of cooperation will exist in one geopolitical space.

In their work, the authors present the main assumptions of the “Caucasus Geostrata” and then subject them to a detailed SWOT analysis. One of the main objectives of this analysis is to present the actual geopolitical role and place of the Caucasus region in contemporary international politics and the global security system. According to the authors, the use of the SWOT analysis method allowed for a better understanding of the region’s current situation, the geopolitical status quo, and its future potential. Within this analysis, the authors presented the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the aforementioned initiative, while the challenges (including threats), the fourth element of the SWOT analysis, were presented in the previous chapters of the work. Overall, the SWOT analysis allowed for a positive assessment of the region’s geopolitical positioning. The Central Caucasus has the potential to make a positive contribution to world peace and contribute to international political stability. This is possible thanks to the unique geopolitical space in which it exists and the potential to create a kind of status quo as a “peace buffer”. However, further drawing conclusions from the SWOT analysis, the authors cite a number of political, geopolitical, economic, historical, religious, and social issues that divide the states and nations of the Caucasus, and which must be overcome to launch the “Caucasus Geostarata” project. Therefore, we do not receive a clear answer as to whether this highly

⁷ Geostrata to obszar geograficzny o strategicznym znaczeniu, który stanowi charakterystyczną strefę efektywnej współpracy między aktorami światowymi (cywilizacjami, państwami, narodami itp.), gdzie relacje konfrontacyjne zastępowane są konstruktywnymi interakcjami.

ambitious and somewhat idealistic project could be implemented, and under what conditions.

More details can be found in the section devoted to the concept of the “Central Caucasus Geostate”. Here, after presenting the general project assumptions, the authors analyze the geopolitical and geoeconomic situation of the three countries in the region and formulate the conditions that must be met for the implementation of the aforementioned concept. They also discuss the legal framework and issues related to strengthening the status of the so-called “Central Caucasus Geostat”⁸. The authors assess that the success of the “Central Caucasus Geostate” initiative depends on many factors, including the internal stability of the countries in the region, the international political situation, and the quality of the implementation of guarantees by external entities. At the same time, the viability of the “Geostate” could be long-term if the right conditions are created. The main factors influencing its sustainability include: balanced international support, the internal stability of the countries in the region, the geopolitical situation, geostatistical precedents, international commitments, etc.

The work entitled “Georgian-Caucasian geopolitics” is a typical academic monograph. In accordance with the principles of this type of work, the authors defined the study’s objectives, research subject, and research problem, and formulated research hypotheses before proceeding with its development. They also selected research methods: comparative-historical analysis, analysis of political texts, thematic research, and case studies.

Answering the research questions that constituted the research problem, the authors determined that:

- The Caucasus is a unique geopolitical formation with specific parameters – geophysical, geographical, and political. The study demonstrated that the Caucasus is the gateway to the “core” of classical geopolitical space and one of its important elements. In contemporary political processes around the world, the Caucasus region should receive special attention.
- Regional security parameters in the Caucasus are related to the so-called «political stratification of the Caucasus region,» which reflects the region’s geopolitical status quo. This approach is confirmed by the new, discussed and already established regional security system: “3+3”.
- Georgia’s role in the Caucasus regional security system is central and strategically important, as evidenced by its geoeconomic role (intense energy pipelines) and communication links.

The research hypotheses were also confirmed:

⁸ Geostat – termin nie wyjaśniony przez autorów monografii. Na podstawie treści można sądzić, że chodzi o stabilność prawną i traktatową, a także gwarancje polityczne dla państw regionu.

- The first hypothesis, which suggested that new types of integration processes are developing within the Caucasus' regional security system, which has a unique geopolitical identity, especially during the “new Cold War” period, with Georgia playing a significant role in the development of such integration models, was fully confirmed by the research. The concept of the “Caucasian geostrata” is one of the important prerequisites for creating a new, Caucasian world and achieving the geopolitical aspects of the return of a Caucasian identity.
- As for the second hypothesis, it was also confirmed that recent political and economic events of the 21st century may radically change the regional security conditions in the Caucasus and create new realities in the global political system.

In summary, I find the monograph very interesting, and the concept of the “Geostrata Caucasus”, which envisions transforming the conflict-ridden Caucasus region into an oasis of stability and peace, into a region where the common political and economic interests of the three countries in the region are prioritized over the interests of global powers, into a region free of weapons of mass destruction and excessive offensive weapons, as a thoroughly compelling idea. The analyses conducted by the authors of the monograph certainly highlight the difficulties that may arise in implementing this project, but this does not change its assessment as a signpost, pointing in the right direction for cooperation between the countries of the region towards creating a better future. I believe that similar considerations regarding security in Central Europe, as an alternative to bloc solutions, could also be explored in our Polish political science community. Finally, a few minor comments. The authors use rather liberal terminology to describe the three Caucasian states – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – calling them the Central Caucasus, the South Caucasus, the Transcaucasus, and only halfway through the text do they explain that the proper term should be the Central Caucasus. After that, they return to the considerable freedom in using this term. My second comment concerns the unnecessary, in my opinion, repetition of the same text fragments in subsequent chapters.