

## SMALL STATES IN GREAT POWERS' GEOPOLITICS: ARMENIA'S ROLE IN THE US POLICY ON THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the geopolitical importance of small states for great powers. The study focuses on the role and significance of Armenia – a small, landlocked state – through the evolution of American regional policy in the South Caucasus region.

Recognising the limited capability of small states, the paper argues that the geostrategic location enhances the small state's importance to great powers, thereby strengthening the position of the small state in the international system. The article concludes that despite geographical isolation, economic weakness, and scarcity of human and natural resources, Armenia is an important country for US national interests. The US interest in Armenia is due to its important geopolitical location at the crossroads of rival geopolitical interests, a number of US strategic priorities in the South Caucasus, Eurasia, and the Middle East as well as Armenia's proximity to energy resources in the Caspian region and other strategically important countries in the region. Another significant factor of the US interest in Armenia is the Armenian-American diaspora community, which projects a certain influence on US domestic policy and US policy in the South Caucasus.

**Keywords:** small states, geopolitical importance, foreign policy, Armenia, United States.

### INTRODUCTION

With the increase in the number of small states in the twentieth century due to decolonisation after World War II, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, today's international system is largely composed of small states. While the end of the First World War increased the importance of European small states in the world, the dissolution of the USSR brought to the political arena the newly formed small states whose geographical location, natural resources, political and economic orientation, and other factors are important to regional geopolitics and world politics.

As in many areas of political science, there is no clear consensus in the literature on the definition of what constitutes a small state (Maass, 2009). Variables such as population size, geographic size, lack of economic development, limited diplomatic resources, lack of military capacity, and vulnerability to resist the pressures of the great powers are used to formulate the definition of a small state and to describe its power and functions (Thorhallsson, 2018). In today's world, however, it is not enough to explain the size of a state simply by explaining these variables. Other factors, such as its geopolitical importance, role in international organisations or non-governmental organisations, response to global issues, and level of education and technological development, are also important for determining the size of a state in the global context.

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Despite the large and growing body of literature devoted to a variety of issues in small-state scholarship (Ingebritsen et al., 2012; Thorhallsson & Anders, 2006; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017), the majority of studies have focused on the inherent vulnerabilities and different strategies that small states adopt to alleviate the power asymmetry of international relations (Thorhallsson, 2018; Bailes et al., 2016). It is believed that small states have little capacity to influence global affairs (Keohane, 1969). The global international system is formed primarily by the interaction of the great powers pursuing their national interests, while small states are forced to accept the emerging balance of power and the imposed rules of the game (Vital, 1967; Hey, 2003; Thorhallsson, 2018). Yet, notwithstanding the objective limitations of small states, including the lack of human, economic, and natural resources, to influence world politics, small states are of great importance in today's world. In an era of great power competition, the zone of influence of the great powers in the world is heavily dependent on the policies of small and medium-sized states and their alliance choices (Walt, 1985). With that, little attention has been given to how post-Soviet newly independent small states have adapted to international policies and, in particular, their importance to major actors in world politics.

This paper examines the geopolitical importance of small states for great powers using Armenia as a case study. The issue of small states' geopolitical role for global actors is of particular interest and relevance, especially in the context of the contemporary clash of interests between global, regional, and local powers for geopolitical influence and the volatile developments in the Eurasian region and the world at large. The research will elaborate on the 'geopolitical importance' variable of the small states theory. Using geopolitics as a methodological framework for the research, the study will analyse the role of Armenia in the context of US geopolitical interests and policy priorities in the South Caucasus region and will showcase how a small state like Armenia can become important for greater powers to further their influence, interests, and policies in a situation of geopolitical contestation and rivalry. The study addresses the following research question: What is the role of Armenia in US geopolitical interests and regional policy in the South Caucasus?

The analysis is based on methods and approaches of qualitative research design. To conduct the study, I use a case study historical-comparative research method and qualitative content analysis techniques. The primary case selection criterion is that Armenia qualifies as a small state based on the definition provided in the small states scholarship. Another reason that contributed to the selection of this particular case, considering the requirement of the general framework, is Armenia's post-Soviet background and geostrategic location. The historical-comparative research method is used to examine the United States' policies, geopolitical considerations, and priorities in the South Caucasus region under various White House administrations in the post-bipolar period to show how Armenia as a small state has maintained its position in US interests throughout time.

Data collection consists of archival documentation, articles, newspapers, policy papers, published materials, and studies on US geopolitical interests and foreign policy priorities, including studies by Olcott, M. (2002), Khelashvili, G. & Macfarlane, N. (2010), Cornell, S., Starr, F. and Tsereteli, M. (2015), Rumer, E., Sokolsky, R. and Stronski, P. (2017), Poghosyan, B. (2022), and many others who have written extensively on the topic of this research. The materials used to conduct the research also include strategic documents, primarily US National Security Strategies (1994, 2015, 2017, and 2022), the US Department of State's Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) for Armenia (2022), official reports and information provided by the US Embassy in Armenia and US and Armenian state agencies as well as reports and working papers prepared by various institutions and thinktanks.

The article is divided into four main parts. The first elaborates on the concept of small states and geopolitics. The second describes the geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus and gives detailed insights into the primary drivers of US policy in the region. The third part presents the geopolitical interests of the United States vis-à-vis Armenia and offers a comparative insight into Armenia's role through the evolution of US policy on the South Caucasus. The results of the study are summarised in the final part.

## CONCEPT OF SMALL STATES AND GEOPOLITICS

There is a longstanding debate in International Relations academic discourse on the precise conceptualisation of small states. The problem of defining smallness is epitomised when the need to make a differentiation between the small state and the non-small state, the small state and the medium state, the small state and the microscopic one, and small states in developed and developing countries in terms of their characteristics. As Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006) point out, small states are best defined as states that are not great powers. Such a position could well be taken as a starting point in understanding small states. However, this definition is clearly insufficient to explain the capabilities of states or to classify them in terms of their size. Thus, it would be useful to provide some clarification to better understand the concept.

In small-state studies, population is the most common criterion to define the size of a state. In most studies, the threshold of the resident population variable varies from less than 10-15 million to as low as one million (Thorhallsson, 2018). In addition to population size, other traditional variables used by scholars to categorise states include geographic size, military strength, economic development, and resources. David Vital (1967) coupled population size with GDP and identified small states as those that have a population of 10-15 million people together with a GDP of at least USD 300 (economically more developed) or a population of 20-30 million people along with a GDP of less than USD 300 (economically less developed). According to Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017), most definitions of small states emphasise the lack of resources and capabilities that define power and influence.

Studies described small states as being unable to cope with foreign policy challenges or make independent decisions. Rothstein (1968, p. 29) identified a small state as one 'which recognises that it cannot obtain security primarily by the use of its own capabilities and that it must rely fundamentally on the aid of other states, institutions, processes, or developments to do so'. Characterising small and weak states, Handel (1981) argues that the national strength of small states is based primarily on external factors (such as international regimes, organisations, or alliances), while great powers enjoy an abundance of domestic sources of power (such as natural resources, human capital, organisational capabilities, industrial development). Vital (1967) points out that, unlike large states, small states are unable to mobilise resources to be sustainable on their own. Developing Rothstein's and Handel's arguments and addressing notions of vulnerability in military and economic security terms, scholars argued that small states may not be able to defend themselves from hostile attacks and rely on other states and international organisations for defence and diplomatic support (Vayrynen, 1971; Bailes et al., 2016); therefore, they need to hold bilateral agreements with stronger countries and form or join alliances to survive, both politically and economically, in the world of larger states and great powers (Keohane, 1969; Thorhallsson, 2018).

Studies also focused on the influence that small states could have on various regional and international processes. Scholars argue that, due to their limited military capabilities, small states lack foreign policy options (Hey, 2003). In contrast to larger states, small states operate within narrow margins, as any ill-considered policy or reckless move may have serious consequences for their very national existence. With a limited set of human capital and natural resources to engage stronger powers, while vulnerable to external changes, small states need to adopt particular security strategies to ensure their survival, such as staying neutral, band-wagoning, balancing, or complementing (Walt, 1985; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Thorhallsson, 2018). Consequently, according to Keohane (1969), small states are unable to have a major impact on the international system on their own. However, Handel (1981, p. 6) argued that despite their weakness, small states 'have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to survive despite all the dangers they faced due to their lack of power'. As Handel (1981, p. 257) put it, sometimes they 'can manoeuvre within the international system to obtain help from other states'.

Thus, being heavily dependent on the external environment and vulnerable to asymmetrical power relationships, the question of security and survival remains central for small states. At the same time, the possible advantages small states can use to manoeuvre and broaden avenues for influence are, *inter alia*, their geopolitical importance, the availability of their natural resources, their alliances with great powers, and their participation in international organisations.

In turn, no consensus has formed on the applied meaning of the concept of 'geopolitics' either. Originally coined by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén in 1899, the concept of 'geopolitics' reflects the interaction of geography, politics, and power. Beginning as a study to describe 'the state as a geographic organism or phenomenon in space; that is as land, territory, area, or, most pregnantly, as country' (Kjellén, 1917, p. 46), the notion of 'geopolitics' has been further developed by a number of scholars and has evolved into a widely accepted and commonly employed concept.

The geopolitical framework used in this study is primarily based on the concept of the sphere of influence that states can exercise in certain territories. Given the diversity of meanings given to 'geopolitics', the present research will use the following definitions as a starting point. Hagan (1942, p. 485) defines geopolitics as 'a contemporary rationalisation of power politics'. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski (1986, p. xiv), geopolitics 'reflects the combination of geographic and political factors determining the condition of a state or region, and emphasising the influence of geography on politics'. Dalby (1988) defines geopolitics as the analyses of international affairs in terms of competition between superpowers. As per Van der Wusten and Dijkink (2002, p. 20), geopolitics can be used for 'a type of analysis using data concerning the international position of a country in light of its geographical features'.

Without going into the details of the development of geopolitical theory, several key concepts should be explained to understand the geopolitical reasoning of the study.

In his *Politische Geographie* published in 1897, Ratzel argued that the state is a biological organism acting in accordance with biological laws. According to Ratzel, the essential characteristics of a state are determined by its territory and location, and its prosperity depends on how well it adapts to the environment (Rumley et al., 1973). Integrating Ratzel's arguments and ideas on the traditional geopolitical division between sea powers or *Thalassocracy* (states whose power derives from supremacy on the seas) and land powers or *Tellurocracy* (the supremacy by possessing large stretches of land) into his theories, Haushofer considered the formation of a strong continental block to include Europe and the North and East of Asia – an alliance between Russia, Germany, and Japan – as the alternative to threats coming from the sea powers, mainly England and the USA, which in his opinion, have started so-called 'anaconda politics' (being in control of the Planetary Ocean, hence the shores, the sea powers could control the mainland, wrapping around and killing by strangling what is on the continent) (Costachi, 2011).

In his fundamental work 'The Geographical Pivot of History', Mackinder (1904) analysed the factors influencing how world power is concentrated in the hands of certain powers and expressed some aspects of geographical causation in world history based on the historical confrontation of land powers and sea powers. Mackinder divided the world into three strategic areas: pivot zone or *Heartland*, inner-crescent, and outer-crescent. According to Mackinder, the vast zone of continental and arctic drainage of Central Asia had long been the geographical pivot of history and remained the 'pivot of the world's politics'. Vaguely defined to include the region of central Eurasia from central Europe eastward across Siberia and the Himalayas to eastern China, this area was referred to by the British geographer as the pivot zone or the *Heartland*. Mackinder came to the conclusion that control of the *Heartland* could become the basis for global domination by one or a combination of continental powers. Thus, he considered it necessary that the maritime powers take steps to adapt to the threat posed by the continental powers.

Developing Mackinder's *Heartland* thesis, American political scientist Nicholas Spykman (1942, p. 8) argued that it was the 'inner-crescent or marginal crescent', the periphery (in Spykman's terminology, the *Rimland*), which really was critical, rather than the *Heartland*. Unlike Mackinder, Spykman believed that this particular land was of crucial strategic importance to control Eurasia.

Based on the theory of the *Heartland*, former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997, pp. xiii-xiv) characterised the rivalry between the USA and the USSR as a geopolitical struggle for control over Eurasia and the world. In Brzezinski's words, 'ever since the continents started interacting politically, some five hundred years ago, Eurasia has been the center of world power [...] American foreign policy [...] must employ its influence in Eurasia in a manner that creates a stable continental equilibrium, with the United States as the political arbiter [...] it is imperative that no Eurasian challenger emerges,

capable of dominating Eurasia and thus also of challenging America'. In *The Grand Chessboard*, he calls for the development and adoption of a new comprehensive and long-term geostrategy for the whole of Eurasia. According to Brzezinski (1997), it is vital for the United States to control and arrange the major geostrategic pieces on the Eurasian chessboard as well as the key geopolitical centres of Eurasia in order to preserve America's long-term and stable leading role in the world.

## **GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND THE PRIMARY DRIVERS OF US POLICY IN THE REGION**

The dramatic changes that took place in the early 1990s – the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War – were the consequences of as well as powerful stimuli for large-scale shifts and changes in the geopolitical structure and world map in the post-war decades. First of all, the state that, to a large degree, occupied, in Mackinder's terminology, the zone of the 'pivot of the world's politics' or the *Heartland* disappeared from the political map of Eurasia, which changed all the major geopolitical definitions on the Eurasian continent. Second, the geopolitical map of the world has undergone significant changes due to the fragmentation of the post-Soviet space into 15 sovereign states, the geopolitical changes on the European continent as a result of the unification of Germany, the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia as well as the obvious pro-Western orientation of most countries of Eastern and Central Europe, including the Baltic states.

The South Caucasus region is particularly important due to its geopolitical significance. The strategic importance of the region, which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, is largely due to its geographical location. The region is located between the Black and Caspian seas and borders Russia in the north and Turkey and Iran in the south. Situated in the middle of Eurasia, the South Caucasus is a convenient strategic foothold for influencing neighbouring states, such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, the Central Asian republics, and China.

Today, the South Caucasus, having been for many centuries the arena of Russian-Turkish, Russian-Iranian, and Iranian-Turkish political, economic, and military confrontation, to a large extent remains an object of vital interest for many centres of power. The South Caucasus is located at the intersection of the interests of the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, China, the European Union (EU), and a number of countries in the Arab-Islamic world. The region has played and continues to play a key role in the process of shaping the foreign policy of a number of countries in the Caucasian, Eurasian, and Middle Eastern directions (German, 2022; Cornell et al., 2015; Fallahi & Shafiee, 2020; Balla, 2014).

In the post-Soviet period, the region acquired special significance when significant oil and gas fields were discovered in Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries. In addition, the transit potential of additional Caspian energy resources plays a major role in raising the strategic importance of the South Caucasus to local and global powers. Of particular significance nowadays are the pipeline projects for the transit of energy resources from the Caspian Sea to Europe, reducing its dependence on Russia (Rondeli, 2004).

At present, the region has serious prospects of becoming an important hub of integrated transcontinental transport systems along the North-South and East-West lines. The existing and planned trade and communication routes are important in providing transport corridors connecting Europe and Asia, Russia, and the countries of the Middle East and South Asia. This region is of great importance in rebuilding the Great Silk Road and China's 'One Belt, One Way' initiative (Silk Road Strategy Act, 1999; Inan & Yayloyan, 2018). Experts claim that 'the Caucasus is the most direct and hence crucial link in the emergence (or re-emergence, after centuries of dormancy) of land-based continent-wide trade corridors that connect China and India with Europe and the Middle East, and vice versa' (Cornell et al., 2015, pp. 17-18). The region therefore plays a central role in Western strategic and commercial access to and from the heart of the Eurasian continent as well as in future interactions between Europe and the Middle East.

The geopolitical importance of the region is also associated with its conflict potential, predetermined by ethnocultural, religious, and political diversity, the disputed boundaries among the countries, the frozen conflicts, the existing unrecognised



and partially recognised states as well as the lack of constructive solutions to the conflicts. Nowadays, the security environment in the South Caucasus is deteriorating continuously and steadily as a result of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the Ukrainian crisis (Macfarlane, 2022).

At the same time, in the spirit of classical geopolitics, the South Caucasus is a traditional sphere of confrontation between the Sea and the Land states, between *Thalassocracy*, associated with the West and the ideology of Atlanticism, and *Tellurocracy* associated with the East and Russia and the ideology of Eurasianism, respectively. It is a sphere of confrontation between Russian and Western European geopolitical interests called the 'Eurasianism-Atlanticism' dualism in geopolitics, the control over which is of strategic importance to global geopolitical actors (Bekiarova, 2019, p. 2).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States became one of the key powers actively pursuing its South Caucasian vector of foreign policy, which, thanks to its economic and political-military power, began to intensively influence the development of the geopolitical situation in the region. Even though some experts argue that none of the US interests in the South Caucasus fall under the 'vital' category, the United States has important security and economic interests in the region (Rumer, Sokolsky, & Stronski, 2017).

The important geopolitical position of the region, the presence of vast energy resources, and the region's role in the security architecture of the Greater Middle East are among the factors that determine the long-term strategic interests of the United States vis-à-vis the South Caucasus region (Olcott, 2002). From the US perspective, this region lies between two zones that were for many decades considered very important to the United States. To the north, it borders Russia, which inherited the USSR's nuclear potential and whose potential as an antagonistic power to the US has become evident in recent years. To the south, the region borders NATO member Turkey, an important partner to the United States in American Middle Eastern policy and, as a secular Islamic state, in the US strategy towards the Islamic world. It also borders the Islamic Republic of Iran, a country that has been hostile to the United States since 1979 and whose nuclear initiatives are of great concern. The South Caucasus is considered by Anglo-American strategists as the most important key region in the global construction of new political relations in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, designed to prevent the resuscitation of the Russian superpower and the growing influence of Iran and China (Cornell et al., 2015). Moreover, being included in such geopolitical constructs as 'Greater Middle East' and 'Eurasian Balkans', the influence on this region is the key to global control (Brzezinski, 1997).

Turning to economic issues, although the South Caucasus itself does not represent a significant market for American goods, mainly due to its insignificant size, the strategically important geographical location of the region makes it a potentially important crossroads of world trade. Through the South Caucasus, the United States gains access to the rich natural resources of Central Asia and the Caspian region as well as control over transportation and energy routes important for American and Western companies (German, 2008).

The military-strategic location of the South Caucasus is also particularly important for the United States. Together with Central Asia, the South Caucasus is considered a connecting bridgehead between Europe and East Asia in the post-bipolar US security system (Cornell et al., 2015, p. 13). Additionally, the military-strategic importance of the South Caucasus region is determined by its proximity to the Middle East, where the United States has long-term strategic interests and vulnerabilities, and the Persian Gulf zone, which has been declared a zone of 'vital interest' for the United States (Odom, 1999). The South Caucasus region has potential strategic importance as an alternative transit point for American military assets in the event of serious security challenges in the Middle East. At the same time, the region is considered a strategic buffer zone against a broad spectrum of security threats, such as terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, Islamic extremism, uncontrolled migration, and drug and human trafficking, emanating from the vulnerable Middle East (Cornell & Starr, 2006, pp. 21-23). The South Caucasus is also a potentially useful land bridge for the logistical support of American units operating in Southwest Asia. Nowadays, given the shift in US strategic interest towards the Asia-Pacific region, the South Caucasus region is important for the further strengthening of the United States on the Asian continent, both in the context of maintaining global leadership and in terms of American policies towards China, India, the Persian Gulf states, and the states on the southern outskirts of Eurasia (Clinton, 2011).

The strategic importance of the South Caucasus for the United States may also be determined by the fact that, in the long term, in the case of further Islamisation and divorce between Turkey and the United States and NATO, the region could be a potential alternative to Turkey as a strategic partner on the Euro-Asian chessboard. Experts claim that the Islamisation of Turkey has been slowly progressing over the past few decades (Baker, 2018). The growing strength of political Islam in Turkey is evidenced by the success of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a party with Islamic roots led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in the last two national elections. Despite being defined as a 'conservative-democratic' party, experts argue that it has a hidden Islamic agenda and that its dominance threatens the secular democratic character of the Turkish state (Rabasa & Larrabee, 2008). As for the NATO-Turkey controversy, aside from the Turkish-Greek rivalry that has always impeded NATO's unity, the recent fierce dispute between Ankara and the rest of NATO was the inevitable result of the growing rapprochement between Turkey and Russia, in particular, Ankara's 2017 decision to purchase the Russian S-400 air defence system and Turkish declarations of collaboration with Russia to develop a fifth-generation fighter, which led to Washington's subsequent decision to impose sanctions and exclude Turkey from the F-35 fighter programme (Zandee, 2019).

Another set of factors that determine the strategic interest of the United States in the South Caucasus is related to the three unresolved conflicts in the region. The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetian, and Abkhazian conflicts have a significant impact on the processes and main directions of development of interstate relations in the South Caucasus countries. The United States is interested in resolving regional conflicts as such unresolved conflicts hinder the process of cooperation and the building of an effective system of regional security (Cohen, 1998). Moreover, armed conflicts in the region pose a serious security threat as they may involve other countries in one form or another, thus becoming potential sources of international military and political problems. In addition, the situation is complicated by oil geopolitics, namely the intertwining of the problems of peacekeeping and oil diplomacy into a complex geopolitical knot (Halbach, 2005). The 2022 Ukraine war has further emphasised the significance of the region for the West in terms of the deterrence of Russia in the post-Soviet space as well as strategic stability in the NATO neighbourhood.

Another dimension of US foreign policy in the region is the promotion and strengthening of democracy as well as the proliferation of America-centric values on the Eurasian continent, which has become an important cornerstone of the strengthening and growth of America's regional and global interests in accordance with the US grand strategy of liberal hegemony (Poghosyan, 2022).

Moving beyond domestic aspects, among the key drivers of the US policy towards the South Caucasus, ethnic Diasporas and interest groups should also be mentioned, mainly Armenian-American lobby groups and oil interest groups that have a selective influence on the US policy in the region (Khelashvili & Macfarlane, 2010).

## ARMENIA'S ROLE IN THE US POLICY ON THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

### First decade of partnership: from the establishment of diplomatic relations to the events of September 11

Armenia is the smallest country in the South Caucasus and unlike oil-rich Azerbaijan and pro-western Georgia, the landlocked country has, arguably, little to offer. Yet, despite being geographically isolated, economically weak, and sparsely populated, Armenia is an important country for US national interests.

Geopolitically situated in the heart of Eurasia at the crossroads of various civilisations, rival geopolitical interests, and integration projects, from a geopolitical point of view, Armenia occupies an important position as a gateway between Europe and Asia and West and East as well as a link between North and South. According to the ideologists of Eurasianism, in the Moscow-Tehran axis, Yerevan automatically becomes an important strategic link for the spread of the Eurasian impulse from the Centre to the Iranian *Rimland*, which binds Russia to Iran and cuts Turkey off from continental spaces. Through Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey can gain access to Azerbaijan and further to Central Asia. In this sense, Armenia, as a wedge

driven into the Turkic-speaking world, serves as an important strategic base to prevent Turkish expansion to the North and East – to the regions of the Central Asian Turkic world (Дугин, 1999). At the same time, Armenia serves as a transit route for Iran via Georgia to the Black Sea, Russia, and Europe. Moreover, in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project, Armenia can offer new connectivity opportunities through its territory between India, Iran, Russia, and Europe (Tasnim News Agency, 2011).

In the early stages of Armenia's independence, due to difficulties in state-building, severe socio-economic conditions, the dire shortage of energy resources, the burden of the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey resulting in the country's near-total isolation, the country adopted Russia-oriented foreign and security policies as evidenced by bilateral security and economic agreements between the two states. Armenia is a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Since 1995, a Russian military base has been located in Gyumri as a stronghold of Russia in the region. In addition, from a strategic point of view, Armenia is part of the buffer zone created around Russia in the Caucasus, but at the same time, it does not border Russia. Given Washington's interest in preventing Russia from regaining dominance in the South Caucasus, as well as the nature of Armenian-Russian relations, the United States is objectively interested in reducing Russia's influence in Armenia and strengthening the Euro-Atlantic political influence in the country (The White House, 1994).

At the same time, in view of US concerns about the spread of Islamic extremism (Lane, 2023), Armenia's territorial proximity to Iran and the nature of Armenian-Iranian relations further increase Armenia's geopolitical significance. As a Christian country with a rich Western culture that has close relations with countries of the Islamic world, such as Iran, Syria, and Libya, as well as the developed Armenian communities in the Middle East, Armenia could serve as a conduit for Western cultural and political influence in the region as well as a 'bridge' in a possible US-Iranian dialogue (Priego, 2007, p. 9).

Another important factor predetermining US interest in Armenia is its proximity to the rich oil and gas sources of the Caspian Sea. Armenia is considered a potential transit state for oil and gas transportation to the West. Experts claim with the increase in perspectives of Iran coming out of the international sanctions regime after reaching an agreement regarding its nuclear programme, Armenia may become a transit country for Iranian energy resources to the Western markets (O'Byrne, 2019).

The United States recognised the independence of the Republic of Armenia on 25 December 1991, after which diplomatic relations between the Republic of Armenia and the United States were established on 7 January 1992.

In the early years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States was new to the region and ill-prepared for what followed. Due to the absence of vital interests in the region, as well as the historical tradition of participation in the region before the collapse of the USSR, the United States had no clear strategic interest and motivation for strategic engagement in the region. During the years of Soviet rule, Washington's approach to the region was integrated into its broader policy towards the USSR. Unsurprisingly, in the early years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US government adopted a 'Russia first' approach, concentrating on relations with Moscow – as Russia remained the privileged interlocutor for American leaders while shaping its foreign policy in the post-Soviet space – at the expense of the other newly independent republics (Rumer, Sokolsky & Stronski, 2017, p. 5).

During this period, Washington focused on issues directly related to US national security. At the dawn of the beginning of the post-Soviet period – that is, after the colossal geopolitical explosion following the collapse of the USSR – the future foreign policy of Russia and the issue of nuclear weapons of the USSR were the most serious problems for the United States. Its main goal at this stage was to ensure stability in the post-Soviet space and to prevent Russia from returning to the former system of relations with the post-Soviet republics (Brzezinski, 1997, pp. 118-119).

However, in the early years after independence, the newly independent Armenian state received special attention and affection from Washington. Relations with Armenia were strengthened largely thanks to the active and well-organised Armenian-



American community and Armenia's adherence to the principles of democracy. The US policy towards Armenia was based on two main principles: preserving and maintaining the independence of the Republic of Armenia and integrating Armenia into the world community of market democracies (Olcott, 2002).

An important aspect of the US policy towards Armenia in this period was the adoption of Section 907 to the 'Freedom Support Act'. Owing to the considerable efforts of the Armenian diaspora, Congress condemned the policy of blockade imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh by adopting Section 907 in 1992 as an addendum to the Freedom Support Act, which prohibited Azerbaijan from receiving US financial and technical assistance so long as the Azeri hostilities towards Armenians continued and the blockade against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh persisted (Freedom Support Act, 1992). In addition, the Armenian community lobbied actively to stop US economic and military aid to Turkey through the 'Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act', which prohibited the provision of US federal aid to countries obstructing the delivery of US humanitarian aid to third countries (Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act, 1994). In addition, Armenia was the largest recipient of American humanitarian aid among the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries and ranked third in the world (after Israel and Egypt) in terms of its volume per capita (Gregg, 2002, pp. 23-24).

The second half of the 1990s became the starting point for a new American strategy in the South Caucasus, which was largely due to the US energy priorities in the Caspian region, the completion of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Baltic states by August 1994 and of the nuclear arsenal from Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan by 1996 as well as the deterioration of US-Iranian relations, as evidenced by the imposition of sanctions against Iran in 1996 (Iran-Libya Sanctions Act – ILSA) and the strengthening of the policy of its international isolation (Kauzlarich, 2001).

Another important aspect that prompted the United States to intensify its actions in the South Caucasus was the adoption of the new Russian foreign policy towards the CIS, the so-called 'New Strategic Course' in 1995, in which the territory of the CIS was declared as a zone of 'main vital interest of the Russian Federation in the fields of economy, defence, security, and protection of the rights of Russians, the provision of which is the basis of national security'. The 'New Strategic Course' also stressed the necessity of 'strengthening Russia as a leading force in the formation of a new system of interstate political and economic relations in the post-Soviet space' (Указ Президента Российской Федерации, 1995).

The central element of the new US policy was a reassessment of Russia's foreign policy, which, according to the Clinton administration, had become more rigid and less stabilising than before. Another objective was to contain Iran and Islamic fundamentalism (Kauzlarich, 2001). The key point of American policy in the Caucasus during this period was the policy in the oil and gas sector and the creation of the East-West transit corridor. The United States supported the construction of several pipelines in the region in order to reduce world energy prices by diversifying global energy supplies as well as to reduce the importance of routes through Russia and Iran (Rumer, Sokolsky & Stronski, 2017).

The change in American policy has borne fruit in the shortest possible time. After a 12-day visit to the United States by Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev in 1997, where he met with President Bill Clinton and some members of Congress, a number of promising documents with the US were signed. Notable among these were four new contracts with Exxon, Mobile, Chevron, and Amoco. From the US perspective, these new energy projects were to stimulate economic aid and infrastructure development (including pipelines) and support for strengthening independence, security, democracy, and civil society development as well as to promote US business and strategic interests in the region (Cornell et al., 2005).

Another outcome of the shift in US policy was the rebalancing of relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. The growing US interest in Caspian energy created a domestic 'oil lobby' that effectively opposed the influence of Armenian diaspora lobby organisations in US relations with the two states. This was particularly evident in the US government's political support for the construction of a large Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the parallel Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline to transport Azerbaijani oil and gas through Georgia to the Black Sea and further into the Mediterranean Sea, bypassing Armenia and thereby strengthening its regional isolation (Cornell et al., 2005).

A clearer strategy towards the states of the South Caucasus region emerged during the second term of the Clinton administration when it became clear that the development of Caspian resources, the creation of trans-Eurasian communications, and the implementation of geopolitically advantageous oil transportation routes for the United States could not be successful without establishing the stability and security of the states of the region and strengthening sub-regional stability in the zone of passage for oil and gas pipelines (Talbot, 1997; Cohen, 1998).

Thereby, since the second half of the 1990s, the priority direction of Armenian-American relations has been the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey (primarily by opening the border between the two countries), and the inclusion of Armenia in the Euro-Atlantic structures. According to the American plan, the solution of these issues would not only contribute to the delineation of critical communications and the establishment of a secure transport system in the region to ensure the safe operation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines, but would also greatly contribute to solving more important foreign policy and strategic tasks: the ousting of Russia from the region (including by eliminating Armenia's security dependence on Russia), the reduction of Iran's influence, the strengthening of Turkey's position in the region, the development of the East-West regional axis, and the creation of a situation of preferential control over the region (Nichol, 2008; De Waal, 2010; Cornell et al., 2015).

To this end, in early 1997, the United States stepped up its efforts to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by becoming co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group together with France and Russia. As co-chair of the Minsk Group, the US supported the 1996-1997 negotiations by proposing solutions based on a 'step-by-step' approach that delayed the settlement of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Still, the opposing approaches of the conflict sides cut those initiatives short (Hopmann, 2014).

At the same time, since the second half of the 1990s, some ambivalence in the attitude of the United States towards Armenia has been noted. This can be explained by the fact that Washington was not satisfied with a number of important aspects of Armenia's foreign policy closely related to the country's geopolitics. The US political establishment did not approve of the strengthening of Armenia's ties with Russia and the expansion of Armenia's political and economic contacts with Iran (Hunter, 1994). At the same time, the difficult socio-economic situation and growing corruption led to the political demoralisation and illegitimacy of the Armenian political establishment. As a result, Armenia lost its once-very positive democratic image in the eyes of the West. Another factor hindering the development of Armenian-American relations was the position of the Armenian government on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, which became more hardline after the ouster of Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan by his successor Robert Kocharyan (former President of Nagorno-Karabakh). However, the growing nature of US-Azerbaijani relations, particularly in the energy sphere, should be noted as the main constraint in the development of Armenian-US relations at this stage.

The arrival of a new Republican administration in Washington in early 2001 led to a change in the priorities of the US policy towards the South Caucasus. The policy of President George W. Bush was based primarily on the deployment of the National Missile Defence system; therefore, oil interest was secondary to US priorities at this stage. However, conflict resolution was still an important element of the US political agenda for the region (Jaffe, 2001). In this regard, perhaps the most notable US initiative during this period was Colin Powell's efforts to untie the Nagorno-Karabakh knot by the authority of the top US political leaders through a series of bilateral meetings between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Key West in April 2001 (Hopmann, 2014). However, no success was achieved in the negotiation process. The two leaders left the meeting convinced that the terms of the proposal for a negotiated peace, in particular over the possible status of Nagorno-Karabakh, would be unacceptable to their peoples.

Further development of Washington's approach to the region was influenced strongly by the September 11 terrorist attacks, the consequent declaration of the War Against Terrorism, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The protection of US security interests around the world became a top priority for the Bush administration. Armenia, along with the other two South Caucasian countries, joined the war on terror and contributed troops to the US-led coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Carney, 2011).

One of the results of George W. Bush's policies during this period was the lifting of Section 907 restrictions for the fullest implementation of the War Against Terrorism. In October 2001, the Senate passed a bill allowing the president to withdraw Section 907 if he decided that it was in the interests of US national security to do so (H.R. 2506-107<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2001). Starting with President George W. Bush in 2002, both Republican and Democrat US presidents have waived Section 907 annually ever since despite the continued blockade of Armenia by Azerbaijan and Turkey and intense protests by the Armenian-American community (US Department of State, 2003).

After September 11, the issues of the newly independent states, their democratic transitions, the energy infrastructure corridors, and even the conflict resolution in the South Caucasus became second-tier priorities on the US foreign policy agenda.

### **US-Armenia relations in the 2000s: from 'rose revolution' to the Ukrainian crisis**

The situation changed after the 'rose revolution' in Georgia in 2003, which led to a reorientation of US policy in the South Caucasus. The new Georgian government demonstrated a strong commitment to democratic and market reforms by taking bold steps to fight corruption, launching a massive privatisation campaign, and many other reformist initiatives. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan was increasingly retreating to a more oppressive authoritarian regime amid the transfer of Heydar Aliyev's presidency to his son, Ilham, massive corruption, and abuse of power. Armenia's democratic transition was also uncertain, as political power was largely concentrated in the hands of a small group of political and business elites responsible for the growth of oligarchic monopolies, corruption, and fractional rivalry. In light of these developments, and also because the energy infrastructure construction in the region was mostly completed, the United States shifted the focus of its policy in the South Caucasus from Azerbaijan's energy resources to Georgia's democratic reforms and Euro-Atlantic aspirations (Rumer, Sokolsky & Stronski, 2017).

The war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 was another turning point in the evolution of US policy towards the South Caucasus. Russia's resistance to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, which ended in the August war, made it clear that it would not tolerate the expansion of NATO and the EU in the 'sphere of privileged interests' (Clover, 2008). However, the August war in Georgia had wider implications for the region. Having lost its regional favourite, US policy towards the South Caucasus had actually lost its focus and intensity, which later paved the way for a transfer of policy leadership in the South Caucasus to the European Union (Rumer, Sokolsky & Stronski, 2017). This move in favour of the EU (and also, arguably, Turkey) was aimed at reducing the risk of disagreements with the Russian Federation and rebooting the relationship with Moscow (Khelashvili & Macfarlane, 2010).

In the case of Armenia, shortly after the Russian-Georgian war, the most important diplomatic initiative of the United States was the intensification of dialogue between Armenia and Turkey aimed at restoring diplomatic ties and opening the Armenian-Turkish border. However, this initiative was not crowned with success, since the Turkish side associated the opening of the border with the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict under an agreement acceptable to Azerbaijan (De Waal, 2010).

By the end of the Bush administration, given the increasing salience of Russian policy in the region coupled with growing Russian assertiveness, the US policy toward the South Caucasus focused mainly on managing the status quo in the region, preventing a new conflict between Russia and Georgia, avoiding the disruption of the sluggish negotiation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and helping Georgia to navigate a potentially difficult political transition in the post-August war era. Another goal was to maintain access to the region as a gateway to the Afghan war theatre (Rumer, Sokolsky & Stronski, 2017).

With the election of Barack Obama, the United States revised its foreign policy vis-à-vis the South Caucasus. The impact of US involvement in Iraq, the uncertainty in Afghanistan, the unresolved Iranian nuclear issue, and the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis led to a change in US foreign policy. The main priorities of the US were focused on the

formation of a more balanced regional security system in the region, not separated from efforts to improve relations with Russia (Khelashvili & Macfarlane, 2010). This required the resolution of conflicts, stability, and cooperation in the region by involving regional powers.

President Obama's first foreign policy initiative was an attempt to break through international mediation on the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement in 2009. Aside from foreign political and geopolitical factors of US involvement in the mediation process, there were some subjective factors. Faced with the realities of big politics, President Obama was forced to rely on Turkey as an ally in the 'Muslim world' and reneged on his promise to recognise the Armenian Genocide that he made during his election campaign. Therefore, the only dignified exit strategy for Obama was direct engagement in the mediation of the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement (Shugaryan, 2016). In addition to certain geopolitical benefits for the US in the Black Sea/Caucasus region, the prospect of establishing diplomatic relations and opening the border between the two countries was also important in the framework of US global security interests, the fight against terrorism, and the promotion of US interests in Eurasia and the Middle East. In this vein, under the Swiss-American mediation, the 'Zurich Protocols' on the normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations were signed by the foreign ministers of Armenia and Turkey in Zurich in 2009. However, the protocols have never been ratified by either party.

At the same time, since regional stability was at the top of the US agenda in the South Caucasus, the United States, together with Russia and France, as co-chairs of the Minsk Group, also tried to promote a consensus between the parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and to negotiate a solution based on mutual compromise. Hence, the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was one of the main topics on the agenda during US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's regional visit to the South Caucasus in July 2010 (Reuters, 2010).

Another major shift in US policy vis-à-vis the South Caucasus was triggered by events in Ukraine in 2014. Despite the temporary improvement of the relations between the United States and Russia due to the Obama administration's 'reset' policy, starting in 2014, the differences between the two nations ran deep, and relations strayed mainly due to the crisis in Ukraine, the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea, and the war waged by Russian forces in eastern Ukraine (Trenin, 2014).

The Ukrainian crisis demonstrated that Moscow would fight back against the enlargement of NATO and the EU into the post-Soviet space, claiming an exclusive geopolitical sphere of influence around its periphery. The Kremlin sought to gain, or rather regain, its influence over its 'near abroad' using leverage such as energy and security as well as Eurasian integration projects (Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации, 2015).

As a result of Russia's intervention in Ukraine and the unlawful annexation of Crimea, the United States and its European partners expelled Russia from the G8. Both sides exchanged mutual accusations and imposed a series of economic and political sanctions, which have been in place since 2014.

At the same time, Russia, a long-standing ally of Syria, obstructed US policy aims by supporting the Bashar al-Assad government against rebels backed by the United States. As experts from Carnegie Endowment put it, after the annexation of Crimea 'in Syria, the Kremlin has capitalised on its intervention to highlight Russia's return to global prominence', thereby reasserting Russia's great-power status (Rumer, Sokolsky & Wess, 2017, p. 13).

Ukraine's crisis marked the end of the post-Cold War era, when Europe, Russia, and the United States united to achieve common security without divisions or spheres of influence. There was an urgent need to shape a new policy framework of engagement with the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, 'in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, the three states of the South Caucasus find themselves in a geopolitical no man's land between Russia and the West' (Rumer, Sokolsky & Stronski, 2017, p. 20).

The growing struggle between the West and Russia in Eurasia has significantly frustrated Armenia's delicate multi-vector foreign policy, making it difficult to manoeuvre between the country's Europeanisation and security partnership with Russia. Having succumbed to the Kremlin's political pressure due to the country's overreliance on Russia in traditional security,



energy, and economic matters, in September 2013 Armenia cancelled its plan to sign its already negotiated Association Agreement with the EU and made a geopolitical choice in favour of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Subsequently, however, Armenia succeeded in regaining a degree of balance in its foreign politics. As a result of resumed negotiations with the EU, the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed on November 24, 2017, creating a new framework for further cooperation between the EU and Armenia (Gevorgyan, 2021).

The unpredicted victory of Donald Trump brought new approaches and shapes to the US foreign policy agenda. During Trump's presidential campaign, new commitments to advancing American interests were proposed. According to this new approach of the Trump administration, in all US foreign policy global issues, American national security and economic interests were to prevail. This found its reflection in adopting the 'America First' foreign policy principle. In addition, in contrast to President Obama's National Security Strategy, which stated that the protection of democracy and human rights is related to all enduring national interests (The White House, 2015), the Trump administration in its first National Security Strategy made it clear that it is 'not going to impose our values on others' (The White House, 2017).

President Trump's new approach to foreign relations issues seemed to provide a new opportunity to improve relations with Russia and to resume talks and dialogue on a number of complex issues. In this vein, Trump's apparent interest in lowering traditional American commitments abroad, particularly to NATO allies, was seen in Russia as another positive signal, given Russia's anxious attitudes to NATO's eastward enlargement and expanding the Alliance's military potential in Eastern Europe (Sanger & Haberman, 2016). However, time proved that the structural differences between the two nations were not amenable to an easy solution, and Trump's expectations to lift US-Russian relations from the crisis crashed into reality over the conflict in Syria.

At the same time, US relations with Turkey suffered as a result of the country's transition to an increasingly authoritarian political system. Ankara came under pressure from the West over its purchase of Russian S-400 air defence systems. In response, the US imposed sanctions against Turkey for its purchase of Russian weapons as part of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. Given Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rapprochement with Vladimir Putin, it became clear that Ankara was unlikely to play the role of the West's partner in the South Caucasus, but rather pursue its own agenda in the region.

Meanwhile, the 2018 'Velvet Revolution' and the subsequent power transition in Armenia promised new opportunities for the advancement of US-Armenia relations. While the leaders of the new administration did not seek to change Armenia's foreign policy priorities or alter Armenia's geopolitical alignments, Armenia's commitment to strengthening its democratic path was positively received in the West (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2018).

The Trump administration showed some signs of readiness to play a more active role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution given its significance in reducing Russia's influence in the region. In particular, the visit of US National Security Advisor John Bolton to the region in October 2018 showed that the US stood for a compromise that would bring both Azerbaijan and Armenia closer to the West. It is noteworthy that commenting on Armenia's potential security alternatives, John Bolton stressed that 'the surest way to reduce excessive outside influence in Armenia is to reach a resolution on Nagorno-Karabakh'. The US National Security Advisor also spoke of possible US arms sales to Yerevan, an ally of Russia in the South Caucasus (Tamrazyan, 2018).

Overall, however, while Russia was pursuing a tougher line, claiming its exclusive geopolitical sphere of influence, the United States, for the time being, focused on other global and regional issues, from fighting against the 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria to the challenge of a rising China, remaining a bystander in the South Caucasus and leaving many uncertainties about Washington's policy in the South Caucasus (Rumer, Sokolsky & Stronski, 2017).



## The Perspectives of US-Armenia Relations after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War

The Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 and the election of Joe Biden, whose main foreign policy goals were aimed at strengthening the transatlantic alliance between the US and Europe and returning the US to its leadership role among world democracies to address the urgent global challenges, marked another milestone in US policy towards the South Caucasus (The White House, 2022b).

Starting on September 27, 2020, with an Azerbaijani offensive, the Nagorno-Karabakh War lasted 44 days and ended in Armenia's near-total defeat, with a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement finalised on November 9, 2020. In addition, the January 11, 2021, meeting of Presidents Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan set in motion the creation of transport links between Armenia and Azerbaijan (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2020).

This not only completely altered the balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also fundamentally changed the military and political map of the South Caucasus and created a new regional order. As mediator and guarantor of stability in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with Russian boots on the ground, Moscow managed to wield leverage in the South Caucasus, sidelining the role of the United States and France as Minsk Group co-chairs and maintained influence both in Armenia and Azerbaijan following the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Azerbaijani victory in the war, achieved with the massive diplomatic and military support of Turkey (ranging from supplying Turkish Bayraktars and sending Syrian mercenaries to fight on the Azerbaijani side to threatening Armenia at the diplomatic level) has significantly bolstered Azerbaijan's and Turkey's positions, reinforcing their political and military influence in the region and cementing Ankara as a new security actor in the region. Meanwhile, the US, the European Union, and the OSCE – the international mediator of the conflict for over two decades – have been unable to project any influence in the region both during the clashes and in the conflict settlement process (Meister, 2021).

Moreover, Azerbaijan has further exacerbated the crisis by continuing to bring its troops into the territory of Armenia. Starting in May 2021, Azerbaijani troops crossed several kilometres into Armenian provinces Syunik and Gegharkunik, occupying around 41 square kilometres of the internationally recognised territory of Armenia. Azerbaijan refused to withdraw the troops from Armenian territory despite repeated calls to do so by the US, the EU, France, and Russia. In July and November 2021, new clashes occurred, as a result of which Azerbaijan occupied additional Armenian territories.

Armenia's defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, as well as the continuing tensions along its border, in particular the invasion of Armenia's sovereign territory by Azerbaijani troops, stressed the importance of the United States' more active involvement in the region by strengthening its role as co-chair of the Minsk Group and in other diplomatic efforts to regain its place in South Caucasus geopolitics. This found its reflection in the Integrated Country Strategy for Armenia adopted by the US Department of State in May 2022 (US Department of State, 2022).

Another important event in US-Armenia relations during Biden's presidency was the official recognition of the massacres and deportation of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915-1923 as genocide by President Joe Biden in 2021, which made him the first US president to use the word 'genocide' in an annual presidential speech addressed to Armenians (The White House, 2021). This historic move was in line with the Biden administration's foreign policy agenda to promote democratic values and to further human rights on the international stage. It was welcomed by Armenia and the Armenian diaspora, especially in light of the events that took place in the region starting in 2020.

US antagonism towards Russia has grown exponentially following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which has had ramifications around the world and significantly increased the confrontation between Russia and the West. Following the Russian invasion, the United States, the G7, and the EU imposed a series of harsh financial, economic, and political sanctions on Russia, aimed at collapsing the Russian economy and deterring Russia's aggressive policies. In this vein, the United States has been pursuing a strategy aimed at further limiting Russia's role in the post-Soviet area and reducing Russia's great-power capabilities (Gvozdev, 2023).

The war in Ukraine has also exacerbated regional tensions in the South Caucasus. By taking advantage of the created power vacuum in the region as Russia focused its attention almost entirely on Ukraine, in September 2022, Azerbaijan launched a new offensive and occupied more territories of sovereign Armenia, thereby forcing Armenia to accept all Azerbaijani demands (Grigoryan, 2023).

With Russia's limited reaction to Azerbaijan's attacks against Armenia and the inability of the CSTO to stop the ongoing hostilities on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, the EU led the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan on a future peace treaty, countering Russia's unilateral actions in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Isayev et al., 2022). The United States has also stepped up its diplomatic and other efforts to make a new role for itself in the negotiation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh as well as to encourage and facilitate the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey. Amid renewed hostilities by Azerbaijan on the border with Armenia, on September 17, 2022, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken called Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev several times, seeking to contribute to the establishment of the ceasefire. Then, on September 19, 2022, Blinken organised a trilateral Armenia-Azerbaijan-US meeting on the margins of the UN General Assembly (US Embassy in Armenia, 2022a).

Furthermore, around the time of the mid-September Azerbaijani aggression, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, joined by Chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce Frank Pallone, and representatives Anna Eshoo and Jackie Speier, arrived in Armenia for a three-day visit to convey 'the strong and ongoing support of the United States' for Armenia for their security and democracy (US Embassy in Armenia, 2022b). Since Armenia's independence 30 years ago, Pelosi has been the highest-ranking US official to visit Armenia. The Speaker of the US House of Representatives held meetings with Prime Minister Pashinyan and other senior Armenian officials to discuss US-Armenian relations and the current security situation. She strongly condemned Azerbaijan's attacks on the sovereign territory of Armenia as well as the role and policy of Turkey in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (US Embassy in Armenia, 2022b). In addition to geopolitical interests, the visit had some domestic political motives aimed at securing the support of a large Armenian-American community for the Democratic candidates in the mid-term elections of November 2022.

Nancy Pelosi's visit caused a pro-American movement in Armenia. Given Russia's ambiguous position during the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020, an increasing number of Armenians are turning to Washington for support in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At the same time, several pro-Western political parties call on the government to withdraw from the CSTO or at least freeze Armenia's membership in the Russian-led military alliance (RFE/RL, 2022).

Washington's engagement in the Armenian-Azerbaijani talks reached a new level on September 27, 2022, when US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan held a meeting at the White House between Armen Grigoryan, the Armenian Security Council Secretary, and Hikmet Hajiyev, a senior foreign policy advisor to Aliyev (The White House, 2022a).

Throughout 2023, the United States significantly increased its involvement in the South Caucasus region, particularly in fostering peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Through a series of statements and diplomatic meetings, the US administration demonstrated its commitment to supporting negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Notably, on February 18, during the 2023 Munich Security Conference, US Secretary of State Blinken convened a tripartite meeting with Prime Minister Pashinyan and President Aliyev, marking a pivotal moment in advancing bilateral peace talks (U.S. Department of State, 2023a). Subsequently, in early May 2023, another round of negotiations was conducted at the George Shultz National Training Center for Foreign Affairs, with the participation of foreign ministers from both Armenia and Azerbaijan. During these discussions, Ministers Ararat Mirzoyan and Jeyhun Bayramov engaged in meetings with US Secretary of State Blinken and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan (US State Department, 2023b). The final negotiations of 2023, facilitated by US mediation, occurred between June 27-29, once again at the George Shultz National Training Center for Foreign Affairs, where Minister Mirzoyan and Minister Bayramov convened for discussions (US State Department, 2023c).

Thus, after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the US intensified its policies in the South Caucasus. Having created the American platform for the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace talks, along with the Russian and European talks, the United States restored its role as an active player in the South Caucasus region, successfully beating Moscow's monopoly on mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan and further limiting Russia's role and influence in the region.

## CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the vulnerabilities and limited capability of small states, this paper concludes that geostrategic position enhances small states' importance to great powers, thereby contributing to strengthening a state's positioning in the international system. Having analysed the role of Armenia for the United States in the context of US geopolitical interests and policy priorities in the South Caucasus, the study shows how a small landlocked state can become important for greater powers to further their influence, interests, and policies.

The geopolitical interest of the United States in Armenia is due to its important geostrategic location at the crossroads of rival geopolitical interests and integration projects, a number of strategic priorities of the US in the South Caucasus, Eurasia, Asia, and the Middle East as well as Armenia's proximity to energy resources in the Caspian region and other strategically important countries in the region, namely Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Another significant factor of US interest in Armenia is the Armenian-American diaspora community, which projects certain influence on US domestic policy, US policy in the South Caucasus, and mainly US-Armenian relations.

For most of the post-Cold War period, US policy in the South Caucasus lacked a strong strategic impulse due to a lack of vital interests, strategic urgency, and a historical tradition of participation. At the same time, the increasing antagonism between the West and Russia due to the war in Ukraine and the increasing role of Russia and Turkey in the South Caucasus in connection with the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, which significantly changed the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus region, have provided a structural basis for a more strategic American approach to the region. The United States has intensified its policies in the region to reflect the changing dynamics and to play a more active role in regional processes.

The critical goal of the US in the Armenian direction, taking into account American geopolitical interests and foreign policy priorities in the region, is to minimise the political-military and economic influence of Russia in Armenia and to weaken Armenian-Iranian ties, while maximising US political influence. Therefore, the US is interested in breaking up the Russian-Armenian alliance, ending Armenia's membership in the CSTO, and bringing Armenia into closer integration with the Euro-Atlantic community. To secure and advance American strategic interests, the US has been interested in strengthening Armenia's sovereignty and independence as well as ensuring security, stability, and democracy in the country. The main priorities of the United States also included the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict within the framework of international structures (eliminating Russia's unilateral actions), the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement (primarily opening communications), the inclusion of Armenia in the regional East-West axis as well as the use of the vast Armenian diaspora in promoting American interests.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the importance of Armenia as a small state for the United States is a very complex topic and, given the rapidly changing situation, it certainly invites further research on this dynamic part of the world.

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