

Armenia in a Triangle of Great Power Management: Regional competition on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict¹

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to examine the foreign policy approaches and interests of three regional powers – Iran, Russia and Turkey before the Second Karabakh War in 2020. The study argues that dissatisfaction with the results of the conflict, forced these countries to further advance their interests in the region through cooperation and regional influence by *soft power* rather than waging an unpredictable geopolitical confrontation. The study is based on the methods of foreign policy analysis and comparative analysis of political discourse of the three regional powers in application to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict using the Great Power Management (GPM) approach of the English School of International Relations. The study puts forward the idea that the predominance of the national interests of Russia, Turkey and Iran, disguised with ideational concepts in the framework of the GPM is fundamentally different from the principles of multilateralism, driven by the European Union and the West within the liberal paradigm of resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Keywords: Great Power Management (GPM), national interest, war, diplomacy, cooperation, European Union, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Armenia w trójkącie zarządzania mocarstw: regionalna rywalizacja na tle konfliktu w Górskim Karabachu

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie interesów i podejść w polityce zagranicznej trzech mocarstw regionalnych – Iranu, Rosji i Turcji na tle konfliktu w Górskim Karabachu w 2020 roku. W badaniu autor

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weryfikuje tezę, że w efekcie konfliktu ww. państwa zmieniły metody realizacji swoich interesów w regionie na współpracę opartą o instrumenty *soft power*. Tym samym odeszły od prowadzenia nieprzewidywalnej konfrontacji geopolitycznej. Badanie opiera się na metodach analizy polityki zagranicznej i analizy porównawczej dyskursu politycznego trzech mocarstw regionalnych w zastosowaniu do konfliktu w Górskim Karabachu z wykorzystaniem podejścia *Great Power Management (GPM)* angielskiej szkoły stosunków międzynarodowych. Autor dochodzi do wniosku, że dominacja interesów narodowych Rosji, Turcji i Iranu, zamaskowana ideowymi koncepcjami w ramach GPM, zasadniczo różni się od zasad multilateralizmu, którymi kieruje się Unia Europejska w ramach liberalnego paradygmatu rozwiązywania konfliktu w Górskim Karabachu.

Słowa kluczowe: Great Power Management (GPM), interes narodowy, wojna, dyplomacja, współpraca, Unia Europejska, Armenia, Azerbejdżan, Iran, Rosja, Turcja, konflikt w Górskim Karabachu

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was the first ethnic conflict in the USSR at its threshold of decline. It has started in 1988 as a demand of ethnic Armenians living in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomy Region under Soviet Azerbaijan Republic to join to the Soviet Armenian Republic due to raising discrimination of Soviet Azerbaijan's powers towards ethnic Armenians who were majority in that autonomic region. The waged ethnic clashes initiated by Baku with the blind inaction of Moscow have been transformed into the bloody war, which lasted almost 6 years. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and emergence of the new geopolitical reality in the entire post-Soviet region, the conflict has been moved to a new phase of development.

Further, the Armenians of the Nagorno-Karabakh region used their right of self-determination based on one of the fundamental principles of the international law and organised a referendum about independence from Azerbaijan. This fact led a new wave of a bloody war with Azerbaijan, which ended in 1994. The continuing intention of Azerbaijan to set its political and military control over that territory has been failed with signing of Ceasefire Agreement (1994) among conflicting parties, where the Armenians representative of Karabakh side was recognised as a part of the conflict.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict became the subject of territorial dispute which was agreed by the parties to resolve only through constructive conflict negotiations. For that particular purpose the international society established in 1992 a special conflict mediation group in the framework of the OSCE, which was called the Minsk Group, as an attempt to find a diplomatic solution to the problem in order to avoid further escalation of the conflict in existed unclear boundaries between states. The OSCE Minsk Group comprised by co-chairs from the United States, Russia and France was the only international legitimate negotiating format responsible for making constructive proposals in order to find the most acceptable and applicable approaches of peaceful settlement of the conflict.

From the perspective of dominant post-Cold War liberal paradigm, the formation of the OSCE Minsk Group became the embodiment of the triumph of the multilateralism over unilateralism. The world society vision with global societal identities and arrangements integrates the philosophy of individualism, multilateralism and system of liberal

values (Buzan 2001). Instead of ideologies rivalry of the Cold War (communism vs. capitalism), the societal ideas and non-ideological concepts started to play more active role in solution of global problems after end of bipolar world order.

In accordance to the new world order, all three powers – France, Russia and the United States – were recognised by the world society and especially by the parties to the conflict as legitimate and impartial in order to demonstrate their diplomatic leverage to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict based on the same recognised international norms and principles. The negotiation process in the framework of the Minsk Group tried to keep the number of co-chairs inviolable, which caused dissatisfaction by Turkey. The latter, from the very beginning of the war, actively promoted the interests of Azerbaijan and demonstrated its biased position in this process. At the same time, throughout the history of the negotiations, Turkey has not stopped its efforts to become a co-chair of the Minsk Group, seeking to strengthen its geopolitical influence on the conflict settlement and diligently getting involved in the regional disputes over ethnic conflicts in post-Soviet space (Karabakh, Abkhazia and Chechnya).

However, the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and its consequences were already far from the liberal normative values of the world society. The war was the embodiment of the post-Cold War cracked liberal paradigm and the continuing end of American global hegemony, which has started to be treated as an incoherent empire (Mann 2003) referring to the roots of its unjustified actions in previous military campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, etc.

The aim of this article is to examine the foreign policy approaches and interests of three regional powers – Iran, Russia and Turkey before the Second Karabakh War in 2020. The hypothesis of the study is that dissatisfaction with the results of the war, forced them to further advance their interests in the region through cooperation and regional influence rather than waging an unpredictable geopolitical confrontation. The study is based on the methods of foreign policy analysis and comparative analysis of political discourse of the three regional powers in application to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict using the Great Power Management (GPM) approach of the English School of International Relations (Buzan 2001; Cui, Buzan 2016).

The paradigm of International Society and Great Power Management (GPM)

The crumble of the liberal order determined the transformation of the world towards International Society (IS) presenting it as a community of states, which is not necessarily considered in the framework of a coherent system (Bull, Watson 1984). In a broad sense, the International Society has offered dialogue, consent about common rules and institutions on behalf of relations among states with recognition of their reciprocal interests in commitment of these arrangements. In this regard, the International Society proposes another pattern of solution, referring to the concept of Great Power Management (GPM). The emergence of latter is in keeping with the spirit of reality caused by the disruption

of the incoherent US military hegemony (Mann 2003) and the rise of regional powers, seeking to expand their regional weight and maximise their geopolitical influence.

At its core, GPM is combined by a strong interest in the material distribution of power and ideational structure of International Society (a term conducted in the scope of English School of IR referring to the institutionalisation of shared interest and identity). The great powers included in the International Society as GPM intuition, operate in three directions: distribution of power, distribution of ideology, and the normative foundations on which ideologies can prevail (Buzan 2001; Cui, Buzan 2016). In GPM the powers need to “attract legitimacy to support their unequal status as leaders by accepting special responsibilities as well as claiming special rights” (Cui, Buzan 2016: p. 182). The GPM as one of five main institutions of International Society alongside with international law, war, diplomacy, and the balance of power found its empirical reflection among regional powers in the period of the Second Karabakh War.

All three regional powers – Russia, Turkey and Iran operated from a Great Power Management (GPM) perspective, advancing their national interests or deterring the advancement of others. The second active player in the Karabakh war after Russia was Turkey, which, apparently, was mostly adhered to using the war and international law prerequisite within the paradigm of the International Society. Ankara pursued its interests as a rising regional power, tending to revise previous arrangements in a regional configuration, while Iran and Russia positioned themselves as proponents of diplomacy, peace-oriented efforts and further securitisation of the region in the framework of international law. The war resulted in the rearrangement of the geopolitical essence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which transformed from a post-Soviet ethnic conflict between two parties into a conflict outside the former Soviet borders with the physical presence of Islamist mercenaries and the actual deployment of Turkish forces in the territory of Azerbaijan.

Research results

Russia

The Russian imitation to play western liberal democracy from the scratch at the beginning of the 1990s was very fruitful for keeping the post-Cold war world order. The crumble of the Iron Curtain and the end of the bipolar world order heralded by Francis Fukuyama (1992) about “End of History” and triumph of liberal values in history. The world society was sure that ideological rivalry had come to its logical conclusion, opening the prospect of perpetual peace and the irreversibility of democratic form of governments. The new world order was able to deliver the belief that world affairs are going to move in the form of sustainable multilateralism based on liberal values and institutionalism.

The failure of the USSR resulted by the political stagnation of governance, non-ideological nomenclature, unsuccessful invasion to Afghanistan and high economic expanses since the Cold War arm race with the USA (Brzezinski 1989) was accelerated by the internal ethnic conflicts in the periphery of the state continuing change the political

map of the region. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh was the first flared ethnic skirmish that Moscow had to face in the post-Soviet space. Traditionally, Russia has always treated the Caucasus as "a zone of existential interests" (Nation 2015), which continues to be strategically significant for Russian national security. The world society did not dispute that Russian capacity to manage the issues in USSR's former periphery was still high, and it was the only influential power with its significant political, military and economic leverages capable to prevent the escalation of conflicts.

However, Russia's tough behavior during the Russia–Georgia conflict of August 2008 was a vivid expression of Moscow's negative and growing antagonism towards Western foreign policy and the entire Western liberal paradigm. Growing Russian irredentism coincided with the emergence of the leaked secret doctrine of Paul Wolfowitz's (Cheney 1993). It has increased anti-Americanism in Russian political and public discourse expressing deep disappointment in the US desire to manage the global world order under its control (Pozner 2018). The postulates of the doctrine were repeatedly reminded and criticised by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who actually launched his anti-American criticism after the Munich speech (see: Putin 2007), where official Moscow announced its policy of disobedience to the American idea of global domination.

At the same time, the United States did not object to the role of Russia in Nagorno-Karabakh issue, acting in terms of structuring multilateral relations in foreign policy aiming to resolve the conflict together in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. Russia, on the one hand, could successfully pose a leading position between the conflicting parties in the South Caucasus (Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and on the other hand, constituted its exclusive role in the process of conflict management. The lack of an acceptable scenario and apparent tools for resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict determined Moscow to continue the process of conflict management among conflicting parties. However, since the 1994 ceasefire, frequent flare-ups on the front line have become the norm throughout the entire period of the frozen conflict, when the Russian leadership had to pacify the parties through direct diplomatic interaction.

Until November 10, 2020, Nagorno-Karabakh was the only disputed territory in the post-Soviet space where there was no military presence of the Russian Federation, and its peacekeeping missions outside the UN mandate have already been deployed in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the 1990s. The diminishing diplomatic influence of Russia in the South Caucasus has started to be apparent after Russia–Georgia conflict in 2008. At the same time, Russian foreign policy began to demonstrate clearly the growth of post-imperial ambitions, striving even by military means to restore the traditional sphere of its geopolitical influence on its periphery.

On the way to restoring its sphere of influence, Russia purposefully began to initiate various economic, political and military integration projects aimed at uniting the regions of Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia under its regional hegemony. The Russian objective to include Azerbaijan to any of its economic or military integration projects – e.g. Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO, rus. ОДКБ) or Eurasian Economic Union (EEU, rus. ЕАЭС), which was effectively succeeded in case of Armenia, –

has been failed. The hydrocarbon-rich soil of Azerbaijan forced Baku to pursue a foreign policy of non-alignment and a relatively independent policy in a multi-vector spectrum. Increasing the benefits from the export of hydrocarbons and participating in various regional infrastructure initiatives, especially since the operation of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline made Azerbaijan feel more confident, economically independent and powerful (Elkind 2005). The latter was the reason for the purchase of an unprecedented amount of military equipment not only from Russia, but also from Turkey, Israel, South Africa, Pakistan, Belarus, etc. (Sultanova, Poghosyan 2013). Increasing its military arsenal, mainly directed against the Armenians, Azerbaijan began to purchase naval equipment as well, presumably aimed to Iran and Russia.

The economic independence of Azerbaijan from Moscow was obvious, and the weak economy of Armenia would not be able to compete and participate in unequal arms race with Azerbaijan, which sooner or later would try to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by military means. However, at that time, Russia was unable to restrain Azerbaijan's further integration into the energy initiatives of the West, depriving it play sovereign energetic policy. The restart of the war in Karabakh and the possible triumph of Azerbaijan could be regarded by Moscow as another challenge to Russia to lose its regional influence in the post-Soviet space. Hence, Moscow had to do everything to deploy its peace-keeping mission on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in order to keep its physical presence in that part of the region and pose its control over trans-regional communications.

Russia's attempts to deploy its mission of peacekeepers have been repeatedly discussed by the Russian Foreign Ministry since 2016 (Legucka 2021) in order to challenge the rapid build-up of Turkey's military and economic presence in Azerbaijan, maintaining its influence in the South Caucasus. The securitisation of the region was perceived by Moscow as an important stage in the further deepening of the Russian integration initiatives in post-Soviet space. The prospect of the Eurasian Economic Union for Azerbaijan would look more attractive if the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict reached its final resolution.

The deployment of Russian peacekeepers on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh after the war pursued several goals: maintaining the post-war order in the region, providing the necessary security guarantees for the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh and controlling the reorganisation of regional development, where the UK, Turkey, Iran, China and India demonstrated undoubted interest in this.

Turkey

The common identity of authoritarian regimes based on ethnic and linguistic commonality is capable to establish strong non-institutionalised alliance, which was noticeable in regard of Turkey and Azerbaijan. Despite some valuable achievements of Turkey in the development of democratic institutions before the presidency of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the country began to move towards authoritarianism, populism (Levitsky, Ziblatt 2018) and ethno-religious fascism (Albright 2018). The external policy of Turkey in the period of Erdogan has started to be more ambitious with revelation of various ideational nationalistic doctrines existed long time before in Turkish political mythology.

The ideational pillar of the Turkish-Azerbaijani bilateral relations is the concept of "one nation, two states", which has been actively promoted since the time of Kemal Atatürk, who became the founding father of the Turkish nation and civil nationalism. The concept of "one nation, two states" was aimed at linking the two states with so-called Turkic origin around a common grand strategy to straighten mutual relations around common economic, military, political and national goals. This origin of "one nation, two states" paradigmatic approach addressed the mythological past, genetic and linguistic classifications, but ignores the different historical experiences of two states with many ethnic and national components (Beilinson 2019). From GPM perspective, this paradigm has presented for Turkey as a premise for construction of certain ideational structure inside international society integrating under its umbrella all Turkic-speaking people from Balkans to Altay.

After the declaration of independence of Armenia in 1991, Turkey was one of the first states, which recognised the independence of the Republic of Armenia. Despite this fact, Turkey did not want to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia, allegedly referring to the fact that the Armenians have territorial claims against Turkey. However, the Armenian side has never officially announced any territorial claims against Turkey. Further processes around the Armenian-Turkish relations demonstrated that the gaps in achieving some progress were related to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Since that time, the Turkish side, along with Azerbaijan, did not intend to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia and, practically contrary to international law, blocked the borders of Armenia, trying to put pressure on Yerevan in order to achieve concessions in terms of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. When the Armenian armed forces went on the offensive in 1992 around Karabakh and Azerbaijan recorded serious losses, the issue of normalising Armenian-Turkish relations came to a deadlock.

The process of normalisation of relations between Armenia and Turkey started in 2008 has been eminent in activation of bilateral relations between official stakeholders of Armenia and Turkey. However, throughout the entire period the process was accompanied by protests and criticism by Turkish and Azerbaijan societies. The reason is that Azerbaijan saw the normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations as a threat violating its interests, connected with Baku's intention to return Karabakh. Azerbaijan was convicted that it will lose an important instrument in the negotiation process on Nagorno-Karabakh (Mikhelidze 2010). Azerbaijan feared that its policy of blocking Armenia, creating communicational and economic difficulties for the Armenians would ruin its plans if the Armenian-Turkish border was opened.

Despite Turkey's clear intention to normalise diplomatic relations with Armenia (Torbakov 2010); *Realpolitik* calculations of Ankara related to Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon sources outweigh the cost of normalising Turkish-Armenian relations. In addition, the continuing systematic energy intimidation of Azerbaijan in regard of Turkey forced the latter to demonstrate an open pro-Azerbaijani foreign policy. The Turkish side increasingly began to defend Azerbaijan's position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict again in its official announcements and any aggravation in this direction was accompanied by a pro-Azerbaijani reaction of the Turkish leadership and unconditional support of Azerbaijan.

Turkey was well aware that further advancement and positioning in the region as a strong regional middle power would require a more ambitious and decisive demonstration of its authority and political will to its allies. Since the Arab Spring, Turkey demonstrated open adherence to Islamist political, military and paramilitary groups in Libya, Syria, Egypt, etc. (Başkan 2018). By 2020, Turkey has already begun to supply Azerbaijan with unmanned drones "Bayraktars", which, thus, became one of the reasons for the certain military successes in the Turkish-Azerbaijani offense in the south plain of Karabakh.

The geopolitical and historical value of Karabakh was too high for both states of the South Caucasus, and the price of control over it was accompanied by huge human and infrastructural losses. Seizing a historic opportunity, Turkey – by helping Azerbaijan to wage war in Karabakh – pursued the goal of expanding its geopolitical influence in the Caucasus, which had been lost since the Ottoman Empire nearly 200 years ago.

The efforts of the former Foreign Minister of Turkey Ahmed Davutoğlu, with his "Zero Problems with Neighbors" foreign policy doctrine aimed at establishing good relations with Turkey's neighboring states and maintain peaceful stability in the region (Davutoğlu 2010), have been called into question since the „Arab Spring" and the last decade of Erdogan's rule, which were accompanied by political purges in the ranks of the Turkish military leadership and aggressive external policy towards its neighbors, undermining the hope to see a trustworthy and predictable regional power. The tough and impulsive regional policy in Syria, Libya, the intimidation of the EU by refugees from the Middle East, "mosque diplomacy" among overseas Muslim community (Tabak 2017), the recruitment of Islamist mercenaries for its expansionist policy had a negative impact on Turkey's image in international relations.

Turkey has never concealed its goal to play a prominent role in the reconstruction of the region, striving to take the appropriate regional position as the leader of the Muslim and Turkic world, exploiting pan-Turkic and Sunni religious sentiments in its foreign policy. From its side, the Erdogan's administration has staked on a quick victory in the war, Russia's geopolitical withdrawal from its traditional sphere of influence in the Caucasus, and a consistent reshuffling of regional power in the region. For its part, Azerbaijan needed military, advisory, administrative and logistics aid of Turkey to wage a war against Karabakh, while the official Baku has never denied the feasibility to resolve the issue with military means, intensively preparing its society for war with incessant militant rhetoric and anti-Armenian propaganda (Hakobyan 2016).

The military success in Nagorno-Karabakh has opened a new perspective for Turkey in the South Caucasus. With the consent of Russian side, the Turkish surveillance military unit was deployed in the territories taken by Azerbaijan during the 44 days war in Karabakh. The deployment of its military unit on the territory of ex-Soviet republic was an unprecedented geopolitical advancement for Turkey. After the Second Karabakh War, Turkey began to position itself as an unmanned power (Kinik, Çelik 2021). At the same time, Turkey as a member of the North Atlantic Alliance has insured the presence of the NATO in the region.

In the atmosphere of new conditions, Ankara seeks to achieve maximum resilience by playing a very dubious role with the EU and the US, using its diplomatic leverage to demonstrate its obedience to the West positioning itself as part of the Western community in rivalry with Russia, while seeks various models of cooperation in designing the regional economic, security and geopolitical architecture with non-western Russia and Iran. Consequently, Turkey will actively launch the process of the so-called Armenian-Turkish normalisation in a post-war period, using it primarily as a diplomatic trick to demonstrate to the Western partners its intention to resolve the perennial issue and show its growing weight in regional affairs.

Iran

From the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict Tehran has had its own clear position in term of this conflict, which has not been changed since last thirty years. The Islamic Republic of Iran has always been adherent to the principle of territorial integrity in international law *versus* self-determination of the people and referred consistently to this important point in regard all territorial disputes in the world. Such foreign policy behaviour was determined by objective reasons related to the vulnerable neighbourhood and security risks for Iran on its border (Sharashenidze 2011). Tehran sought to prevent the adversaries from using the problems of national minorities and ethno-confessional diversity to generate a separatist movement within Iran (Iranian Kurdistan, the East Azerbaijan region, etc.). The ethnic and confessional rich diversity of Iran stipulated Tehran to run very precarious and consistent domestic and external policy in order to prevent the emergence of any insurgencies within the state and beyond its borders.

Historically, Iran and Turkey has always been engaged in competition for regional hegemony. In recent last decades this competition was apparent especially in the spectrum of Syrian conflict, post-war Iraq destiny and the fight against ISIS devastating causalities in the region which caused losses of hundred thousands of civilian lives. Both countries aim to pose their superiority in the leadership of the Muslim world, but confessional distinction as a dichotomy – Sunni Turkey *versus* Shiite Iran make the relations competitive, acting very carefully in order not to provoke “zero sum” war (Nasr 2021). Both Turkey and Iran realise that being non-Arab Muslim states they need to cooperate in order to become regional powers in the Middle East (Cengiz 2021).

The recognition of explosive character of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict for the region Iran has been inclined to keep the peaceful diplomatic negotiation process as the solution of the internationally disputed region. From the very beginning of the conflict, Tehran tried to take on the role of a mediator in the conflict, but Abulfaz Elchibey, elected president of Azerbaijan in 1992, rejected any initiatives coming from Iran (Ramezanzade 1996), showing a more pro-Turkish dimension in his foreign policy. The eruption of the Second Karabakh War forced Tehran to demonstrate active political position offering its mediation aid in peaceful resolution of the war trying to prevent spillover of the conflict from Karabakh to its territory. However, Tehran's readiness to join the peaceful settlement of the conflict did not find a positive resonance in the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem.

The dissatisfaction of Tehran in regard of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict derives from the following aspects.

Firstly, Iran never would like to see the advancement of Turkey in the Caucasus, because Turkey is one of the central members of the NATO and the second army in the alliance after United States. It means that military deployment of the Turkish army in Azeri-controlled territories of Karabakh after the war in 2020 with the mission of so-called monitoring group is considered by Iran as direct challenge for its national interests.

Secondly, there has been always ideological and civilisation confrontation between Iran and Turkey. The antagonistic and pseudo-nationalistic concept of pan-Turanism driven by Ankara in the Caucasus and Central Asia sees unacceptable for Iran, which appraises the presence of Turkish troops as a challenge for its regional and civilisational dominance over people of Arran (people who identified themselves as a part of Iranian civilisation) (Mjtahed-Zadeh 2009). The dichotomy of the mythologem of Turan (belonging to the Turkic world) and Arran (Persian world) as a dialectical struggle goes back to the *Shahnameh* poetry written by the outstanding Persian poet Ferdowsi, which found a new revised political essence and sense in the geopolitical rivalry between Turkey and Iran. In the perspective of a clash of civilisations, the regional rivalry between Turkey and Iran for hegemony will raise, particularly in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Meanwhile, Tehran's policy of regional securitisation of the neighbourhood is quite successfully delineating a new geopolitical reality in the Middle East through cohesive effort to build a Shiite crescent from Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut, and in recent years, the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, widely and apparently supporting the Houthi movement (local branch of the Shiites) in Yemen. In this regard, "threats emanating from Turkey forced official Iran to mitigate its behaviour towards another regional counterpart – Saudi Arabia. The authorities of latter will never tolerate the Turkish president's claims to the role of being the political leader in the Sunni Muslim world. This factor determined the Saudi leadership to reconcile religious, political and regional dissents with Iran, seeking to find a new way of *modus operandi* in further bilateral relations." (Khachatryan, Voskanyan 2021: p. 30; see also: Yeranian 2021).

The third reason is the Azeri minority, settled down in the northern part of Iran. There is only one large border divides Iranian Azeri people from their compatriots in Azerbaijan. The established new control of Baku in the south Karabakh, which was almost 30 years under control of the Artsakh Republic by Armenians, enlarged common Azeri-Iranian border around 30 kilometres. Despite the fact, that official Tehran sent its congratulations to Baku about Azerbaijan restoration of territorial sovereignty on its internationally recognised territories (Hashem 2020), the new emerged challenges related to the geopolitical changes have not stopped to concern Iran.

The point is about consistent foreign policy approach towards territorial integrity approach and affirmation its position towards Azerbaijan as the second major Shiite Muslim state after Iran, demonstrating its civilisational solidarity to Shiite community. The same foreign policy principle has been used by Tehran in application to the ongoing violation of Armenian territorial sovereignty by Azerbaijan, which Iran has called as "a red line",

which aimed to demonstrate its strong position towards any violation of internationally recognised border of the Republic of Armenia (Mkrtchyan 2021). Meanwhile, this approach was aimed at pushing aside Turkey's influence from the region and minimising the public antagonism of the Azerbaijani people towards Iran, seeking alternative space for further cooperation with Baku, underestimating the growing political, economic and military influence of Ankara in Azerbaijan.

The fourth cause for concern is Israeli surveillance, which systematically began to operate on the Iranian-Azerbaijani border with drones after the unleashed Azerbaijani-Turkish war in 2020. "The use of unmanned Israeli reconnaissance drones, which Iran saw as a tool that could target its position and receive intelligence information about Iran's positions" (Khachatryan, Voskanyan 2021: p. 30; see also: Hashem 2020).

The fifth major cause for concern is "related to the movement of Islamist mercenaries from the Turkish-controlled region of Syria, which officials in Tehran stated as an unacceptable act to carry the axis of terrorism on its border" (Khachatryan, Voskanyan 2021: p. 30; see also: Esfandiari 2020).

A wide spectrum of challenges made Iran look for new ways of cooperation with Turkey and Russia as the main geopolitical beneficiaries. Meanwhile, Iran tries to balance its bilateral relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, aiming to securitise its northern neighborhood. In this context, Tehran considers Armenia's southern border (Syunik province) with Iran serves as a safe, alternative and strategic passage for Iranian export-import logistics. In this regard, Iran called unacceptable Azerbaijan's intention to claim the internationally recognised territories by Armenia, especially in the south near the border with Iran, considering it a "red line" for Iranian national interests (Kaleji 2020).

Cooperation

A complex of reciprocal existential threats and incompatibilities prompted all three regional powers – Iran, Turkey and Russia to go on cooperation via regional integration. The idea of the "3+3" initiative is aimed at the creation of a new regional model of cooperation withdrawing direct participation of the Western powers from the regional rearrangements. In accordance to this format, three countries of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) alongside with Turkey, Russia and Iran would build a common regional economic project aiming to unite the potential of three small states in cooperation with regional powers, proceeding from the importance of establishing regional peace and stability in the region on the basis of mutually beneficial perspective (Kucera 2021).

Even though, the Georgia's skeptical attitude towards Russia, the Turkish image of the enemy for Armenia, and Azerbaijan's reluctance to integrate with Iran and Russia make this proposal very fragile and unrealistic in the near future. In the scope of new reality the regional cooperation seems very blurred with an ample amount of unpredictable consequences (Stronski 2021). At the same time, the consistent policy of Russia before and after the Second Karabakh War has been designed to bring Azerbaijan closer to the military and

economic integration with Moscow. Regional powers are systematically moving towards the creation of small alliances with the countries of the South Caucasus. Only Georgia will demonstrate a clear pro-Western foreign policy, refusing to change its course towards integration with the West with alliances of non-European powers in the region.

There is no serious expectation about peace-building initiatives by the above-mentioned regional powers. Undoubtedly, the EU has much to offer in order to achieve a lasting peace through confidence-building, compromise and reconciliation, rather than through military victories and drones conducted Turkey as a tool for conflict resolution (Meister 2022). To restore a positive image of reliable and sustainable partner the all three participants of the Eastern Partnership Initiative in the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), the EU needs to use its powerful set of soft foreign policy instruments.

Conclusions

The reflection within GPM of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in relation to Russia, Turkey and Iran was an attempt to demonstrate what drives the regional powers to cooperate, taking into account the hazardous consequences of the confrontation. The analysis has demonstrated that all three powers used ideational categories in accordance to the English School of International Relations, arguing on civilisational or cultural components and turning them into an instrument of foreign policy. The didintegration of the USSR and emergence of the new geopolitical map in the space of the entire Soviet state beget rise to a new stage of competition and opportunities for great powers around. The new emerged conflicts on that space were a possibility to gain certain benefits in the geopolitical and geo-economic aspirations of these states. In this range, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was not only a dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also an opportunity for regional powers to improve their regional position and use leverage in favor of their national interests. A prerequisite for national interests in the foreign policy of Russia, Turkey and Iran was the pursuit to benefit from the change in the *status quo* around the conflict through the process of regional securitisation, as well as to build a new economic perspective for the entire region.

There have been several real instruments of Moscow's influence on regional affairs since the end of the Soviet era: military power, weak but still effective economic levers and diplomacy. An appraisal of its tangible potential kept Russia on the position of conflict management in a dispute, but not on a side of the final resolution of the conflict. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was an instrument for Russia to keep Armenia and Azerbaijan under its political, security and economic control, which limited the resilience of the foreign policy of both states.

However, the common premise for the action of the three regional powers was dissatisfaction with the outcome of the Second Karabakh War, which led them to cooperate. In this regard, the political processes around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict of the last decade claim to be considered in the context of effective Russian-Turkish cooperation. The OSCE's ability to use a set of soft tools to find a peaceful solution to the conflict has

been replaced by Turkish hard power, with the diligent consent of Moscow and without diminishing Russia's dominant influence in the conflict resolution process.

The trilateral Ceasefire Agreement² between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia dated November 9, 2020 was Russia's first step towards balancing and institutionalising bilateral interests with Turkey in the region. Moscow has institutionalised its military presence in the conflicting territory as a peace-keeper, while Turkey achieved consent of Russia to station its so-called monitoring units in Azerbaijan to observe the peace process, breaking Russia's geopolitical monopoly in the South Caucasus.

In the post-war period, the appeal of Russia and Turkey to the three states of the South Caucasus had sometimes coercive nature, especially in relation to Armenia, which after the defeat did not have enough space for geopolitical maneuver. Being squeezed between a hostile Turkey and Azerbaijan on the one hand, and very high security dependence on Russia on the other, Armenia was sharply limited in its foreign policy choices and ability to prioritise its own national interests.

The statement about absolute triumph of Azerbaijan's victory over Nagorno-Karabakh could be said with some reservations, since Baku and Ankara failed to gain full control over Karabakh, which made their victory doubtful. The lack of a sense of complete triumph in a war, Azerbaijan will not cease pretensions towards Armenia. The unresolved border issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the decline of the USSR will continue to play the main cause of enmity between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, which will go beyond the geographical borders of Karabakh.

Behind this new geopolitical configuration, Iran continues to seek its rightful place in two main dimensions – as a mediator and initiator of new formats of cooperation with all involved players in order to balance its interests in the region and avoid geopolitical and geo-economic isolation. This approach will become more vivid when Iran starts to take a very strong position, given the United States could reset relations with Iran through the lifting of long-term sanctions. In parallel, Chinese and Indian geo-economic projects through Iran could turn Tehran's regional potential into a new centre of influence on broader regional affairs.

Unfortunately, the European and Western efforts within Minsk Group of OSCE has not been capable to achieve its goal of establishment peace through negotiations and constructive diplomatic dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The established format of Minsk Group was applicable to the post-Cold War world order with strong principles of liberal democratic values and principles of multilateral cooperation of co-chair states (France, United States and Russia). The dynamic changes from multilateralism into unilateralism in world order left no chance for OSCE Minsk Group to exploit the same instruments of soft diplomacy and dialogue.

The military imbalance between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the competitive cooperation between Turkey and Russia, the post-Soviet imperial symptoms of Russia for domi-

² See more: *2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement*, <https://karabakh.org/treaties/2020-nagorno-karabakh-ceasefire-agreement/> (09.11.2020).

nance in its traditional geopolitical sphere of influence, have dramatically changed the negotiation processes. The outcome of the war and its direct security consequences settled down by the regional powers do not guarantee regional stability and reconciliation process by conflicting parties. The sustainable development, peaceful co-existence with conflict resolution efforts and securitisation of the region are possible to be achieved only through long term presence of the USA and EU, as the major players in the South Caucasus. However, the image of the EU and USA has been weakened in the region during the war being incapable to pose serious efforts on stopping the war. At the same time, the Second Karabakh War became an opportunity for Turkey and Russia to get out of the geopolitical constraints in post-Cold War order imposed by the West, to design a new regional geopolitical architecture, settling down their ideational presumptions about regional development and foundation of West-free supremacy in regional affairs. Even though, all three regional powers try to act coherently and precariously in the logic of the Great Power Management within the mutual consent about actions cooperating and deterring each other in the region.

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