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The Caucasus in Russian foreign policy strategy

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ABSTRACT

The Caucasus has always been a formative region for Russian foreign policy-making. While the North Caucasus has retained its position as Russia's most fragile and politically instable region, the South Caucasus provided the most pressing security challenges shaping Russian foreign policy since the early nineteenth century. In this article, we argue that the Caucasus comprises a distinct environment that exposes the underlying features of the Russian grand strategy, namely its propensity to hard power and balancing, and yet, at the same time, the fragility of Russia's position within such a turbulent region. The historical strategic equation with Turkey and Iran has in recent decades been supplemented with a competitive Russia-NATO security dynamic in the Black sea. The threat of possible NATO enlargement in the South Caucasus forces Moscow to draw particular attention to the southern direction of its defences. The situation has become even more complicated with the onset of the Ukraine crisis and Russian engagement in Syria. Historical experience teaches Russia to cease any other foreign policy endeavours until the Caucasus is at peace or at least does not threaten a spill-over of instability. For now, this is a very distant prospect.

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Introduction

For centuries, the region of the Caucasus has been a space where Russia, from the times of the Tsarist Empire to the Russian Federation, waged a great number of wars (Volkhonskiy 2018) and realized ambitious social-economic projects. On its own, the region is significant for all of its neighbours on account of its particularly turbulent environment. For Russia, it constitutes an especially anarchic and archaic periphery. With Russia being involved in armed confrontations for nearly fifteen consecutive years (1994–1996; 1999–2009) and with insurgents being able to inflict enormous damage on the former superpower, the Caucasus has once again become a burning issue for Russian strategy. Second, the economic incentives for regional development are low. Primarily, this is due to the absence of a stable security environment, lack of investments and heavy reliance on oil production that prevents the region from developing other economic spheres. Third, there are external challenges that are created by foreign powers, such as Iran and Turkey against which Russia is bound to balance. Thus, the Caucasus creates a great

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deal of security stresses for regional powers, including Russia, forcing them into applying military might and prioritizing hard power.

Our major argument is that the Caucasus is one of the three important international environments formative of Russian grand strategy. Since this environment shapes the grand strategy, we assume that the region exposes the key features that exemplify Russian foreign policy, namely its propensity to use hard power and intricate balancing strategies, as well as Russia's internal fragility, even though, as Neil MacFarlane claimed, "Russian weakness is a source of strength in the relationships with other great powers" (MacFarlane 1999, 11).

All of the abovementioned factors that create the region's complexity and Russia's vulnerabilities in both the South and North Caucasus, therefore, introduce several "red lines" that further determine Russia's security policy. First, every time crisis erupts in the North Caucasus it entails an existential threat to Russia's integrity. In these crises, Russia perceives terrorism as a mere tool of foreign powers used to undermine the country's territorial integrity: "the essence of the … situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya … is the continuation of the collapse of the USSR … . If we did not quickly do something to stop it, Russia as a state in its current form would cease to exist … ."[1] Also, the threat could manifest itself in ideological forms: "We should bear in mind that the Caucasus remains the target of a massive ideological expansion from abroad."[2] Second, as far as the South Caucasus is concerned, it poses a twofold challenge: it is perceived as the *lieu* of the West's unilateral power projection and possible NATO expansion. As stated by the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, "an unceremonious bid by well-known non-regional forces to redraw the CIS map to their own design can be perfectly seen in the region"[3]; it is also viewed as a foothold of further expansion of terrorist networks. More precisely, this was the major logic of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's justification of the absence of formal relations with Tbilisi. He connected it with "a necessity of ensuring security, when not only Central Asia, but also the Trans-Caucasus regions of the South Caucasus are becoming routes, which insurgents, extremists, terrorists and drug traffickers are actively trying to use."[4]

While analyzing the foundations of Russia's foreign policy in the South and North Caucasus, we generally build on two theoretical paradigms. First, we refer to a realist school of thought. In this vein many realist works remain of particular importance. For instance, Russia's denial of regional access to other major powers as well as Russia's balancing strategy in this article will be seen through the Mearsheimerian school of "offensive realism". Also, J. Mearsheimer's theory helps us to better understand why Russia's hard-line policy in the Caucasus is driven by the fears of possible NATO/US power projection to the region (Mearsheimer 2001). This argument resonates with S. Walt's argument on the *balance of threat* being a major factor behind a given country's foreign policy calculus. Also, the work of N. MacFarlane (1999) provides a valuable insight into applying a realist approach to Russia's foreign policy by saying that "Russia would attempt to use political, military, and economic instruments to control the other former Soviet republics" since it has experienced dire consequences due to the loss of control over its neighbours, after the USSR's downfall.

Although the realist account of Russia's foreign policy is useful in identifying the logic behind Russia's major foreign policy steps, it is insufficient to explain the complexity of the

threats Russia faces, the nature of its vulnerability, and what actually constitutes the "Caucasus" as a "region" in Russian thinking. In order to enhance our analytical toolkit, we depart from Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's idea of regional security complexes (Buzan and Wæver 2003). This theory has generated several useful notions. First, as is said in Buzan's work, the regional security complex theory (RSCT) includes the logic of realism (the idea of balancing strategy applied by a given country in the region), neoliberalism (that describes the logic of institutions), as well as a constructivist logic, "because the formation and operation of RSCs [regional security complexes] hinge on patterns of amity and enmity among the units in the system" (Buzan and Wæver 2003, 40–46). Thus, it is a multidisciplinary approach that complements our realist lens. Second, RSCT provides an appropriate level of analysis that is not embedded in neorealist thinking (Buzan and Wæver 2003, 10) and, therefore, "complements the neorealist perspective on system structure, in a sense providing a fourth (regional) tier of structure".

Last but not least, it provides the necessary perspective on the logic of Russia's regional policy, since "superpowers by definition largely transcend the logic of geography and adjacency in their security relationships" (Buzan and Wæver 2003, 46). In this light it becomes clear that Russia sees both the North and South Caucasus as a unified sphere of interest, source of vulnerability, and field of responsibility. That is why both Chechnya (where Russia fights extremism and Western influence) as an internal region, and Syria (where Russia does the same) as a sovereign state, are intertwined within the region and constitute a single security environment in Russia's policy. Therefore, we depart from this holistic view of the Caucasus as a single security environment. It adds the necessary logic when we look either at the agency of political actors that Russia engages with in the South Caucasus or the regions that constitute the North Caucasus. In this article we take a wider view of the Caucasus as a RSC affecting, and affected by conflict in Syria, linked to the Caucasus by North Caucasus diasporas, geographic proximity and the circulation of foreign fighters.

Our paper proceeds as follows. First, we analyze the foundations of Russian foreign policy in order to place the Caucasus' turbulent environment into the context of Russian strategic thinking. Second, we will look at some previous Western works on the Caucasus to see how the region is considered in a broader framework. Third, we analyze the most relevant cases of Russia engaging the wider region: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Syrian operation. We conclude by arguing that the historical experience generated by the Caucasus makes Russia prone to hard-power strategies in pursuing its foreign policy.

The foundations of Russia's strategy

Russian strategic thinking relies heavily on the realist tradition, particularly its notions of power and power balance. As demonstrated in one of Vladimir Putin's latest interviews the principle of "balance of power"[5] is underscored by the Russian foreign policy establishment as the main principle of great power politics. Moscow sees international peace as a function of global political and military equilibrium. Russia is the largest country in the world, with very low population density and an intricate interplay of neighbours. Its vast territory makes Russia a self-sufficient universe containing everything it might need for development (Trenin 2002). On the other hand, low population density and

the permeability of borders make it internally fragile and heavily exposed to the influence of its neighbours.

Since Russia's key development opportunities lie within the country, its main foreign policy goal is to block external negative influences and avoid being drawn into confrontation with opponents (Stent 2007). Historically, international peace and internal political stability, which are closely interrelated for Russia, have always been the principal condition for utilizing the country's advantages (MacFarlane 1999). Despite internal and external challenges, Russia maintained its position among the leading world powers. The Russian state has several significant vulnerabilities which have always determined its grand strategy (Marshall 2015). Historically, Russia was characterized by the absence of natural defenses against external invasions, exposed lines of communication, large distances between cities, a harsh northern climate and a short growing season (Bezrukov and Sushentsov 2015). Many regions of the country are not suitable for farming, and the main industrial centres are far away from energy sources. Also, over the past three centuries, Moscow has been the dynamic core of Eurasia and a major attraction for its neighbours. Russia was among the first to bring the fruits of European culture to the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Far East (Suny 2007).

For a generation after the Cold War, the main purpose of Russia's policy was to remove valuable Soviet infrastructure facilities from under the influence of hostile neighbours, while building preferential relations and alliances with friendly states such as Belarus, Kazakhstan and Armenia, therefore trying to restore its own influence lost in many respects due to the collapse of the USSR (MacFarlane 1999, 11). Russia also tried to reduce its dependence on Ukraine by laying alternative oil and gas pipelines bypassing Ukraine, building a new base for the Black Sea Fleet in Novorossiysk and relocating defence contracts from Ukrainian enterprises to Russian contractors. Following the incorporation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has no more vital interests left outside its borders: neither the space launching facility in Kazakhstan, nor cargo ports in the Baltic States, nor the railroads and pipelines in Belarus can serve as a pretext for Moscow's claims. Russia would interfere in the internal affairs of post-Soviet states only if ethnic Russians living there were subjected to oppression. In all other instances, Russia will avoid getting involved in conflicts along its borders.

The key external threats to Russia come from Islamic extremism in Syria and Iraq, drug trafficking from Afghanistan, a possible escalation of conflicts in the post-Soviet space, and crises involving North Korea or Iran. The imperative of maintaining strategic stability with the United States forces Moscow to modernize its armed forces, military-industrial complex, global navigation and space communication systems. Unresolved problems of European security and the bloc approach to it leave Russia no choice but view NATO as a potential military adversary (Kortunov 2015). Russian authorities try to address the country's fragility and permeability by strengthening military security and stimulating steady population growth (Donaldson and Nogee 2015). By doing so, they try to increase the vitality of the state and make it more resilient to external and internal stresses.

In the twenty-first century, the future of Eurasia will not be shaped entirely by Russia, which will have to compete with China, the European Union, the United States, Turkey and Iran. Russia should secure its place among the great powers at the negotiating table in order not to become an item on their menu.

The unique nature of the Caucasus as a foreign policy environment

To examine the challenges that Russia faces in the region, we assume that Russia's stance is tested in several dimensions. First, the Russia-Turkey and the US-Russia rivalries introduce great power competition to the region. Second, the local conflicts like those in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are of burning relevance when one analyses the state of affairs in the region. Third, the Caucasus is home to separatism and insurgency movements, as the two Chechen campaigns explicitly demonstrate. Moreover, as it was attested during the Ingush-Ossetian conflict, the region is ridden by inter-ethnic strife. As Thomas de Waal rightfully stated, "put simply, the present-day region is such a tangle of closed borders, roadblocks, and dead ends that it is a region more in mind than on the ground" (de Waal 2002, 57). All these pressing challenges require Russia's determined and forceful response.

That being said, the region has been the most daunting source of all military threats for Russia for 30 years. Both the South and North Caucasus expose three major Russian grand strategy features: (1) external power stresses and the lack of economic incentives create "perfect" conditions for Russia to exert hard power; (2) numerous regional power competitors force Russia into applying a balancing strategy; and (3) given the multiethnic character of the region and its ongoing security shocks, it exposes Russia's fragility which stimulates Moscow to grapple with a corresponding "power gap" throughout its history of involvement in the region.

With the region being a distinct environment, it has generated all the peculiarities that characterize Russia's foreign policy. On the one hand, Russia has gained a propensity for hard power and balancing strategies. On the other hand, Russia has become especially vulnerable to near-border security shocks. If one wishes to study close-up Russia's foreign policy strategy, then the Caucasus is bound to be a textbook case for students of Russian politics.

The Caucasus region has been studied at length. All the three arguments that we have put forward, namely on Russia's hard power, balancing strategy and the exposure of Russia's fragility in the region appear repeatedly in academic publications. As regards Russia's fragility, the majority of scholars look at this problem in a twofold manner. First, the region is characterized by a complexity, either religious or ethnic, that fragments it into a multitude of simmering conflicts (Gammer 2007; O'Loughlin and Witmer 2011; German 2012; de Waal 2018; Yarlykapov 2019). As D. Sagramoso argues, "about 40 ethnic groups of Turkic, Iranian and Caucasian origin are currently living in the region, each of which has its own distinct national identity, language, history and culture" (Sagramoso 2007, 684). Second, concerning the North Caucasus, many scholars pinpoint that although an ongoing political and economic transformation is underway, the region continues to be home to corrupt elites and suffers from underdevelopment (Nation 2007; Sagramoso 2007; Mankoff 2009). Interestingly enough, the Caucasus has become a touchstone of Russian internal politics. Many scholars make reference to Chechnya while analyzing Russian politics. This process, dubbed the *chechenisation of Russian politics*, bred "an iron Putin" (Hodgson 2003; Russell 2005; Thomas 2005; Hahn 2008; Lyall 2010). The Chechen war stands out as a particularly telling case of Russia's weakness. It exposed the daunting challenges to the former superpower in several ways: lack of military strategy (Oliker 2001; Cassidy 2003), lack of resources (Lieven 1998; Kramer 2005), and Russia's inability to

get to grips with a crystal-clear military goal (Lieven 1998; Kramer 2005). As it was stated by Olga Oliker, "whatever else the Russian army proved itself capable of in Chechnya and Grozny over the last five years, it could not and cannot bloodlessly and effectively capture a large urban area from an insurgent force" (Oliker 2001, 84).

Concerning Russia's hard power argument most scholars analyze Russia's readiness to apply a big-stick policy against radical-Islam terrorists and insurgents in the region (Mesbahi 1993; Lepingwell 1994; Naumkin 2002; Dunlop and Menon 2006; Sagramoso 2007; Abushov 2009). For decades, the region has been a hotbed of many insurgent groups, into the struggle against which Russia has put in a Herculean effort (Yalowitz and Cornell 2004; Nation 2007; Kelkitli 2008; O'Loughlin and Witmer 2011). In this sense, Chechnya is not the only republic which has posed this threat. As J. O'Loughlin puts it, unlike the Chechen wars, the current insurgency is "diffuse, diverse, geographically and ethnically disparate and less visible on the television screens. It has evolved into simmering violence across the six ethnic republics (Chechnya, Dagestan, Karachaevo–Cherkessia, Kabardino–Balkaria, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia) and the predominantly ethnically Russian Stavropol' kray" (O'Loughlin and Witmer 2011, 179). Also, Chechnya is seen by Russia's leadership as a tool for the destabilizing of the country by Western powers: "Some want to tear off a big chunk of our country. Others help them to do it. They help because they think that Russia, as one of the greatest nuclear powers of the world, is still a threat, and this threat has to be eliminated. And terrorism is only an instrument to achieve these goals."[6]

Russia's balancing strategy has also been widely debated in the Western scholarship. On the one hand, Russia balances against the United States' growing posture in the region (Baran 2002; Naumkin 2002; Yalowitz and Cornell 2004; Sagramoso 2007; German 2012; Fedorchenko and Krylov 2015). Some scholars consider this incentive the main one behind the Russo-Georgian war (Marshall 2015; Tsygankov 2019), yet the reasoning is not limited to the NATO expansion argument. In Markedonov's view, Russia's swift response to the attack on South Ossetia by Georgian forces in August 2008 was governed by the concern that, if Russia stood aside, forces in the North Caucasus could seek to emulate Georgia's actions (in, for example, the conflict over North Ossetia's Prigorodny district). Ex-president D. Medvedev argues with the same logic, underscoring that the Caucasus is a distinct, holistic environment that is made up of interdependent elements of regional security: "my priority was to maintain lasting peace and stability in the South Caucasus and the region as a whole. I believe it was the only possible solution".[7] Yet the argument also falls into the balancing category (Kanet 2010). On the other hand, Russia is balancing against the growing influence of Turkey and Iran in the region (Mesbahi 1993; Lepingwell 1994; Cornell 1999; Baran 2002; Abushov 2009; German 2012; de Waal 2018). As attested by the rich history of Russo-Turkish relations, this argument is not lacking in sense.

All the three arguments are intertwined and reveal an anarchic and turbulent environment in the region. Moreover, we argue that these characteristics constitute a formative experience for Russian grand strategy. Noteworthily, few analysts view the Caucasus as being of utmost importance for Russia's stance in world politics. In the next sections of the article, we will look into two cases, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Syrian military campaign in order to substantiate how Russia has addressed its vulnerability and applied hard power and a balancing strategy.

At this point, we have demonstrated that both the South and North Caucasus constitute a single security complex that poses multifaceted threats and, thus, exposes Russia's vulnerability, as well as shapes Russia's security policy. But in which forms does Russia's security strategy manifest itself? To demonstrate the following, we have chosen two sharply contrasting conflicts in which Russia takes an active role: in Nagorno-Karabakh and Syria. The choice of strategy adopted by Russia relies heavily on the risks the Caucasus regional complex presents. In the context of the former conflict, Russia is bound to apply a balancing strategy, since Turkey acts as a stakeholder supporting Azerbaijan. By contrast, Syria provides an example where Russia resorts to a hard power policy, as the war threatens to ignite instability and the spread of extremist groups deeper into Russia's territory even though there are many regional powers, i.e. Iran, Turkey, and the US, that have maintained their interests in the country.

Russia's policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh

The vulnerability of the situation in the Caucasus region is nothing new to policymakers in Russia, however, using hard power there has become somewhat more precarious. This is especially clearly exemplified by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Mesbahi 1993), where Russian position is "locked" into a multitude of interests intertwined and pursued by many regional players, so the country resorts to a *balancing strategy*. This strategy is threefold: first, Russia balances Azerbaijan by preserving a military alliance with Armenia, second, it supplies both countries with arms with a view to deterring them from waging an all-out war, and, not least, Russia maintains military cooperation with both parties in order to balance the Western influence and possible NATO encroachment to unlock the frozen conflict.

The settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of the key foreign policy priorities for Russia, although the Russian leadership understands that there is no chance that this conflict would be resolved unilaterally, without Turkey's interests taken into consideration (Markedonov 2018b). Moscow also understands that time is not on its side: "besides, the continued "no war, no peace" situation hinders the development of our relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia."[8] As seen from Moscow, the main threat is the resumption of hostilities, with a local conflict escalating into a regional war involving third countries, primarily Russia and Turkey (Ter-Matevosyan and Ghazaryan 2019, 1–16). Aware of Russia's "locked" position, Yerevan seeks to shift the responsibility for safeguarding the results of its victory in the 1991–1994 conflict to Moscow and starts to fret when Russia fails to do so. Azerbaijan also tries to capitalize on this deadlock, feeling that it is becoming an increasingly important regional player which is ready to defend its interests militarily even if this means spoiling relations with Russia. The situation is made even more complex by the Turkish factor – Moscow's relations with Ankara remain fluctuating and crucially dependent on the larger geopolitical context, for example, on Russia's course in Syria. All these factors taken together make the situation increasingly unstable and unpredictable as the status quo grows more fragile (Markedonov 2018a).

Given all the odds Russia encounters in this conflict, it is interested in settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as is evidenced by a series of Moscow-led diplomatic initiatives in recent years (Markedonov 2018b). After being approved by other members of the Minsk Group, they form the framework of the settlement process. But Moscow lacks the

"golden share" in the political process. As long as the parties are not ready to accept a settlement, no one is able to force them. That is why Moscow has assumed a posture aimed at deterring Baku and Yerevan from resuming hostilities (Markedonov 2018b).

In this context, Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan could be characterized as bilateral confidence-building and military transparency measures. Despite a series of military incidents in recent years and the armed clashes in April 2016, it is clear that, on the whole, the Russia-mediated system of military and political checks and balances does work, considering that Baku is not after a big war even though it is beginning to use force to indicate its political interests and disagreement with the status quo. The existing military balance between the parties and Russia's military guarantees to Armenia make a big war improbable, although isolated military incidents cannot be ruled out (Allison 2016, 27–60).

Also, Russia's tight military cooperation with both Armenia and Azerbaijan may be analyzed not only in the sense of deterring the conflicting parties, but also as thwarting the West's attempts to extend its influence. Another reason why Russia is in no hurry to curtail its defence cooperation with Azerbaijan is that it forms the backbone of a multifaceted cooperation between the two countries (Mammadov 2015, 29). With the backbone gone, Baku will have to look for solutions to its problems, including in Nagorno-Karabakh, in circumvention of and opposition to Russia. An example of this kind of policy in the Caucasus is Georgia under Saakashvili (Silaev 2009).

Russia could start to gain from the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict rather than from its freeze, yet the status quo is detrimental to Russia's ally, Armenia. Given its maximalist stance on conflict settlement, Yerevan is slowly falling behind its opponent, while growing increasingly irritated by actions taken by Russia which, in its view, should solve Armenia's problems. Being a landlocked country, Armenia has no common border with Russia; it is blockaded by Turkey and is geographically cut off from the key regional transport and energy infrastructure. These and other factors are leading to an economic slowdown. Even its membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) will not solve the problem (Giragosian 2016, 67–84).

The current trends indicate that the status quo will be substantively less favourable than it is now and that Russia's balancing stance would not be beneficial to it. Even though many international conflicts cannot be solved politically, it is extremely important for Moscow to find a formula that would make it possible to wrap up the confrontation in Nagorno-Karabakh to everyone's satisfaction. The status quo is increasingly fragile and fraught with a permanent threat of a local or regional war, something that is weakening Russia's hand in the South Caucasus and eroding Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and EAEU unity (Nikitina 2016). By settling the conflict, Russia would remove the perpetual threat of war in the Caucasus, strengthen its influence in the region, bolster its ally, Armenia, and involve Azerbaijan in a closer cooperation.

The problem is that the elites and the public in Armenia do not see the opening of borders, legalization of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), normalization of relations with neighbours and accession to regional transit projects as a sufficient prize and incentive to sign a mere document on the basic aspects of settlement pursuant to the Madrid Principles. As a result, Yerevan's defence of the postwar status quo (territorial gains in exchange for isolation) is condemning it to a slow stagnation and weakening in the context of historical regional rivalry (Yalowitz and Cornell 2004).

Like Yerevan, Baku is bogged down in an intractable military conflict and is as radical as its opponent. But in contrast to Armenia, Azerbaijan has preserved stable relations with all its neighbours. Baku has cooperative relationships with Russia and Iran, its influence is evident in Georgia, and it has formed a tandem with Turkey (Markedonov 2018a). Long-term economic and demographic prospects are more favourable for Azerbaijan than Armenia, even if we factor in low oil prices. Azerbaijan is a hub for most regional transit projects – railway, road, and pipeline. Finally, Baku is slowly getting a military edge over both Armenia and the NKR. The public is inspired by the military clashes in April 2016 and the loss of life sustained does not appear to have been considered unjustified in public opinion. Azerbaijan feels confident enough to periodically test the NKR and Armenia's readiness to defend what they gained during the 1991–1994 war. Annual small-scale military clashes and the adjustment of the Line of Contact may become a new element of the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh. But the existing state of affairs cannot suit Russia.

The key objective for Russia is to restore Armenia's and Azerbaijan's confidence in the Madrid Principles, the implementation of which would make it possible to achieve a balance of benefits and costs for all parties to the conflict. In other words, there will be no losers. Baku will return to areas surrounding the NKR and bring back the refugees. Yerevan will emerge from its regional isolation and will legalize the NKR. This case shows explicitly the paradox of Russia's strategy. On the one hand, Russia is bound to apply a balancing strategy due to the impact of the Turkish factor and the relative stability of the situation. On the other hand, this policy further freezes the conflict. The balancing strategy causes additional difficulties that do not allow the situation to be resolved via decisive acts of mediators.

Russia's Caucasus concern: the connection to Syria

Syria represents a drastically different set of circumstances encouraging Russia to resort to a hard-line policy. Mainly, the threat of extremist networks advancing deeply into Russia plays an upper hand in Russia's calculus of foreign policy options: "the goal is terrorism and we are not supporting anyone against their own people. We fight terrorism … As far as I understand, the coalition announced ISIS and other associated groups as the enemy and the coalition does the same as Russia [does]".[9]

Yet being a part of the broader regional security complex, Syria has tight historic connections to the Caucasus' many ethnicities, serving as a testing ground of Russia's crisis management. Yet again, Moscow has to balance between those groups which traditionally enjoyed its protection and those which choose to fight on the side of Islamist fundamentalists, while being citizens of Russia or one of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries traditionally close to Russia, for instance, Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan. Also, there are other regional players, and entering the scene, Moscow had to adapt to the geopolitical play in the region, including the resort to hard power, to which its both mildly antagonistic partners in the Astana format, Turkey and Iran, are no strangers. Moreover, the links between the nationals residing in the North Caucasus and the representatives of various North Caucasian diasporas in Syria (Circassians, Abaza, Vainakh peoples) made the Russian military brass wary of the risks that the situation may influence Russian politics via these diasporas spreading fundamentalist ideas and perpetrating terrorism (Yarlykapov 2011).

Russia was weighing its involvement in Syria at least since 2013 when it first proposed to replace Austrian peacekeepers with Russians in the Golan Heights. Since 2013, Moscow took a major role in disarming Syria of chemical weapons – and the first serious contacts with Damascus on battling Islamists started then. Parallel to this, Russia engaged in a strategic military dialogue with Iraq, reaching a USD $4.2 billion weapon deal with Baghdad in 2012 and supplying much needed Su-25 fighters in 2014. In July 2015, Russia reached an agreement with Iran to join efforts in securing victory for Syria in the battle against ISIS. From that time, the question of assaulting ISIS was not "if", but "when" and "how." The Ukraine crisis did not change the calculus but postponed the move. From the outset of the conflict till its mission was almost accomplished, Russia heavily criticized the failed US policy that further destabilized the situation, rather than contributing to de-escalation and the crushing of terrorists: "through its actions, the U.S. makes the already catastrophic humanitarian situation in Syria even worse and brings suffering to civilians. […] The current escalation around Syria is destructive for the entire system of international relations."[10]

The security interests at stake motivated Russian agitation. Allowing ISIS to consolidate its control in Syria and Iraq would mean that, in 5 years, a new spurt of well-prepared terrorists would return to the North Caucasus and Central Asia (Trenin 2013). By Russian estimates, out of 120,000 ISIS fighters up to 10,000 are Russian and CIS citizens. (Fedorchenko and Krylov 2015). Thinking strategically, the effort of battling them in the Middle East will deliver bigger long-term gains at a relatively low-cost than facing them off at home. Yet again the prospect of spreading terrorist perpetrators exposes Russian fragility and is, thus, addressed by balancing with regional powers – Iran and Turkey.

The Russian strategy in Syria had two scenarios. The first one was limited in scope and posture. Its advantage was that, by applying minimum resources and keeping the bar low, Moscow could still make significant gains. First, Russia was supposed to disrupt the terrorist infrastructure and prevent extremists from holding ground without the necessity of defeating them completely. North Caucasian terrorists are eliminated at home, but in Syria's "no man's land" they can rebuild training facilities and launch the export of terror to Russia – as they did in Afghanistan under the Taliban (Yarlykapov 2019). Second, Moscow would sustain a friendly regime in Syria and help it to secure power in the newly liberated areas by using military police forces. The Syrian operation is an exhibition of Russian armament, satellite communication and the GLONASS geolocation system – specifically, its deadly effectiveness, high-precision and reliability. This show is staged primarily for the customers of the biggest and the fastest growing weapon market in the world: the Middle Eastern countries. However, it also certifies that Russia maintains full sovereignty in matters of twenty-first century warfare.

The above-mentioned goals are the minimum achievements Russia can accomplish. The high bar of the second strategy is bigger – and riskier – than this, and it is less promising. With assistance from Syria, Iraq and Iran, Russia can aspire to defeat and eliminate ISIS in the region including its CIS fighters (Markedonov 2018a). If attained, this monumental achievement would pave the way for a restoration of the traditional borders of Syria and Iraq and secure their allegiance to Russia for the future. Russia asserts itself as a leading Middle East power capable of effective expeditionary military operations. Before that, no one else besides the U.S. could have projected power so far from its borders. In Syria, Russia has displayed its renewed ability to affect events in far-away regions and thus significantly changed calculus in the Middle Eastern capitals.

However, these challenges can be realistically tackled only by applying much more formidable resources and in coordination with a broader coalition, which should include Western powers, Turkey and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Russia's military resources are enough to maintain an effective long-term commitment in Syria (Trenin 2016). In 2015, V. Putin said that the money for the operation in Syria comes from the budget of Defence Ministry: "in principle, we can keep training for quite a long time there without unduly denting our budget" (Putin 2015). Russia has been deeply involved in conflict management in Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan in the 1990s even when the Russian economy was particularly weak (Mukhanov and Shakov 2018).

Though the gains from the Syrian campaign seem to be solid for Russia, the operation is not immune to risks. First, Russia runs the risk of spoiling its ties with an important regional partner – Turkey. Although 2018 and 2019 saw a close cooperation between Moscow and Ankara to provide a stable situation in Idlib governorate, Ankara is interested in ousting Assad, and using the fight against ISIS to suppress the Kurdish militia on the Syrian part of the border (Fedorchenko and Krylov 2015). Despite the claims that politics does not interfere with economic relations between the countries, the start of an ambitious "Turkish stream" gas pipeline was rescheduled several times. The incident when a Russian Su-24 was shot down in 2015 dramatically worsened the relations between the two countries. As of 2020, the crisis unfolding in Idlib involves both parties exchanging military strikes. This is not the first time Russia and Turkey have differences on regional issues, although they managed to avoid confrontation in the past.

Second, Russia can get stuck in Syria, as did the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. That is why Moscow is only acting after careful considerations, with viable local allies and a clear exit strategy. Having gone through both the Afghanistan and Chechnya experiences, Russia is well prepared for a low-intensity war dynamic (Safranchuk 2017). Moreover, Russia does not aspire to engage in the rebuilding of Syrian governance as was the case in Afghanistan. The most important risk, though, lies in the possibility of Russia being dragged into a regional Sunni-Shia conflict on the Shia side. Having a Sunni majority inside Russia, Moscow should be particularly careful. Critics say that, by fighting ISIS, Russia is bound to confront all Sunnis in the region. This would essentially mean that all Sunnis support ISIS – and that is not true.

This issue is taking us to the point that is currently lacking in Russia's Syrian strategy – viable Sunni opposition to ISIS. Well-aware of its Chechen conflict experience, Russia would search for a resolution to the Syrian civil war by allying with potent local Sunni leaders who would join the battle against terrorists. If such a Sunni force emerged triumphant, it would eventually fill the power vacuum left by ISIS, as Ramzan Kadyrov did in Chechnya. Applying the Chechen scenario in Syria is very tricky, but it is the only way to reach a deep and comprehensive settlement in that war-torn country.

Conclusions

This article aimed to present a broader picture on the topic of the Caucasus and its role in Russian foreign policy strategy. Western scholarship does not sufficiently recognise the region as a theatre of formative experiences for Russian foreign policy, hence in this article we have broadened out the debate on the role of the Caucasus for the Russian strategic calculus. Departing from the realist take on international relations and the theory of regional

security complexes, we outlined that, from Moscow's perspective, this region constitutes a distinct, holistic environment within which the Russian grand strategy is most clearly exposed.

The region's multi-ethnic and multi-confessional nature moulds its explosive character whereby all the regional powers, including Russia, tilt toward hard power. The tacit geopolitical rivalries between the majority of regional powers unfolding in the region as well as the growing interest of external powers, including the European Union, the U.S., and NATO in the aftermath of the Soviet downfall forces Russia to resort to balancing strategy to preserve the status quo. Although Russia's position in the region is hard-power-centric, this environment exposes the country's fragility and is placed near to Russia's soft underbelly.

To illustrate the above-mentioned argument, we have gone through the most relevant cases of Russian policy in the region, namely the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Syrian operation. Broadening our insight of the region as a single unit of analysis helps us to look deeper into the causes of Russia's foreign policy logic in Syria, exploring the links between the various North Caucasus diasporas within this country, as well as how the impending threat of terrorist ideologues and perpetrators influencing the North Caucasus motivates the Russian involvement in Syria.

Notes

1. Fiona Hill citing V. Putin on Chechnya. https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-real-reason-putin-supports-assad/.
2. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visits North Caucasus Federal District and attends United Russia interregional conference. http://archive.government.ru/eng/docs/11301/.
3. Move toward "military absorption": Diplomat blasts NATO, US activity around South Caucasus. https://tass.com/politics/1052109.
4. Is Georgia Too Dangerous For Russia to Lift Visa Restrictions, as Lavrov Claims? https://www.polygraph.info/a/russia-georgia-visa-regime/28327358.html.
5. Russia's new hypersonic weapons help maintain global strategic balance – Putin. https://tass.com/politics/1125437.
6. Putin Tells the Russians: 'We Shall Be Stronger'. https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/05/world/europe/putin-tells-the-russians-we-shall-be-stronger.html.
7. Dmitry Medvedev's interview with Kommersant newspaper. http://government.ru/en/news/33568/.
8. Start of Negotiations between Russia and Azerbaijan. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24357.
9. Remarks by Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov. https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/01/middleeast/russia-syria/index.html.
10. Statement by President of Russia Vladimir Putin. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57257.

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