



Armenian Foreign Policy in the Context of the Transformation of Global Order

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The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union have ushered in hopes of humanity's happy and harmonious future. The ideas such as "End of history" became very popular both within academic circles and with policymakers. There was a widespread belief that the entire planet would live under liberal democracy, and inter-state conflicts will become bad memories from history.

However, the beginning of the XXI century crushed these hopes. Russia - West relations started to deteriorate after the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, while the 2014 Crimean crisis brought bilateral relations to the lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, the astonishing Chinese economic growth and the emergence of the multi-million middle class did not bring about political changes in China.

The turning point was the 2008 world financial crisis. It started in the US and shook the Western-dominated international financial system. It coincided with the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, which proved the ascent of China. The old mechanisms such as the G-7 (later G-8) were unable to implement effective global governance, and the first summit of the G-20 in November 2008 was the harbinger of an upcoming tectonic shift in the world order. The establishment of new multilateral organizations such as BRICS and India and Brazil's rapid growth were clear signs that the world was drifting away from the "Unipolar Moment" towards a more complex multi-polar world¹.

The election of President Trump in November 2016 brought about new impetus in the US-China rivalry, while despite the perceived pro-Russia policy of President Trump, there were no significant improvements in the US - Russia relations. The 2017 US National Security Strategy explicitly put the great power rivalry at the center of the current international relations accusing Russia and China of their revisionist efforts².

The emergence of the "multipolar world order" will inevitably trigger regional instability and the rivalry for regional hegemony³. The absence of the world hegemon or the "world policeman" means that the second-tier states will be more inclined to use coercion as the primary tool to push forward their national interests. These states now enjoy much more flexibility in choosing their alliances and playing one great power off another. One of the best examples of this situation is Turkey. Being fully anchored in the US sphere of influence during the Cold War, Turkey now effectively balances between the US and Russia, opposing Washington in Syria and Kremlin in the Black Sea region⁴. The Greater Middle East is an excellent example depicting the rivalry for regional hegemony between Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, while external players such as Russia, the US, and China seek to push forward their national interests.

¹ Richard Haass, Charles Kupchan, The New Concert of Powers, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-03-23/new-concert-powers>

² US National Security Strategy, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

³ Robert Blackwill and Thomas Right, The end of World Order and American Foreign Policy, Council on Foreign Relations, 2020, https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/the-end-of-world-order-and-american-foreign-policy-csr.pdf

⁴ Turkey's Nationalist Course, Implications for the US – Turkish Strategic Partnership and the US army, RAND Corporation, 2020, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2589.html

If an emerging multi-polar world creates new possibilities for the second-tier states, the small states face growing challenges and threats. The rivalry for regional hegemony, growing instability, the erosion of accepted rules and norms, and the emphasis on coercion in interstate relations creates complex problems for small states. It is especially valid for small states which are located on the fault lines of great powers. They may quickly become the "gray zones" or "areas of hybrid operations" with possible proxy wars and permanent instability.

The South Caucasus is one of such areas which are contested by Russia, Iran, Turkey, the US, the EU, and recently China. The harbinger of the more volatile and insecure world for the region was the 2020 Karabakh war, which resulted in the defeat of Armenia. It was an example of cooperative/competitive relations of regional powers vying for hegemony – in this case, Russia and Turkey – and of the growing role of military power in the conflict settlement process.

Meanwhile, the 2020 Karabakh war was a harsh lesson for Armenia. Yerevan should reconsider its foreign policy if it does not want to lose what remained from Karabakh. The key here is not to ruin the strategic alliance with Russia. If Russian soldiers leave Karabakh, no state or organization globally – the US, France, Germany, China, India, NATO, or EU, will prevent Armenians' massacre or forced deportation. The alliance with Russia is an absolute necessity but not sufficient to secure the future of Armenia and Karabakh⁵.

The growing global influence of China brings relations with Beijing into the foreign policy agenda of almost every state in the world. Armenia is no exception, and since the launch of the "Belt and Road" initiative (BRI) in September 2013, active discussions have taken place in Yerevan on possible ways to include Armenia in that mega project⁶.

The 2020 Karabakh war and its consequences were the wake-up calls for Armenia. The shock of the Karabakh war will inevitably force Armenia to re-evaluate its foreign policy priorities, and the development of relations with China should be one of the critical components of this process.

⁵ Benyamin Poghosyan, The Realistic Policy of Armenia towards Nagorno Karabakh, <https://www.newgeopolitics.org/2021/04/22/benyamin-poghosyan-the-realistic-policy-of-armenia-towards-nagorno-karabakh/?fbclid=IwAR1AKiNcrwm306qbDRwLG1jNG4f6wNRjOX2Ruyrw8gFgTlflB2OVyQfgqGU>

⁶ Benyamin Poghosyan, China's OBOR Initiative — Opportunities for the South Caucasus, <https://www.indrastra.com/2018/07/China-OBOR-Initiative-Opportunities-South-Caucasus-004-07-2018-0003.html>

Armenia needs to seriously consider making China a key partner seeking to balance its future relations with Russia and the West. Meanwhile, Armenia should not sit and wait until China approaches Yerevan with suggestions. Armenia is too small for China to put Armenia into its strategic calculus. Yerevan needs to develop a solid strategy towards China, and as the first step, Armenia needs to send clear messages underlying Armenia's friendly attitude towards Beijing. Armenia should support China in areas significant for Beijing and as a minimum requirement to refrain from participation in projects that are viewed as hostile in Beijing. In this context, the first tangible message which Armenia may send to China should be the cancellation of Armenia's participation in the "International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance" or a public statement that Armenia will not sign any declaration or statement of the alliance criticizing China. Such steps will create a favorable perception among the Chinese leadership regarding Armenia and establish a solid base to start serious negotiations with Beijing on economic, political, and defense cooperation.