



EURASIA AFTER THE RISE OF CHINA: THE ROLE OF ARMENIA

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Abstract: Aiming to create a future where all roads lead to Beijing, China now plans to obtain a global role in politics by putting itself at the center of global economic affairs through the Belt and Road initiative (BRI), which is the most ambitious geo-economic vision in recent history. The Belt and Road initiative and its goals, that have been given many different evaluations, suggest cooperation in Central Asia, West Asia and Eastern Europe. To maintain a balanced security environment at the conjunction of Europe and Asia and to ensure a successful realization of the BRI, China will need a reliable strategic partner in the South Caucasus. This essay points out why Armenia is most likely to be the strategic ally China will need, drawing out the main perspectives and paradigms for more advanced Sino-Armenian relations.

In the beginning of the 21st century, the Cold War legacy divided Eurasia into two main zones of influence: the Western influence zone that included significant parts of Western and Central Europe, West and South Asia; and the so-called Post-Soviet space consisting of Russia, Central Asia, the South Caucasus and significant parts of Eastern Europe. In recent decades, Russia's and the US' weakening and the rise of China have been causing huge shifts and changes in Asia, making it implausible to assume that the power distribution there will remain the same as in the beginning of the century.

Aiming to create “a future where all roads lead to Beijing”¹, China now plans to obtain a global role by putting itself at the centre of global economic affairs through the Belt and Road initiative (BRI). Formerly known as “One Belt, One Road”, it was announced in 2013, consisting of two main components: an overland Silk Road Economic Belt connecting China with Central Asia and beyond, and an ocean-based 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to China’s south. Rather than extracting raw materials, the initiative is seeking to shift China's heavy industry to less developed countries. In other words, for the first time

China is seeking to export its development model to other countries.

The BRI is the most ambitious geo-economic vision in recent history as it lists 16 areas for cooperation and can claim to cover roughly 70 percent of the world's population. But an initiative as ambitious and far-looking as OBOR will require a well-thought-out strategy to become reality. The list of China's competitors in transforming Eurasia includes both Eurasian power centers – such as Russia, India, South Korea, Japan, Iran, Turkey etc.– and the US, which is currently the leading global power. And yet, China's main strategic competitors are Russia and the US.

A number of US researchers who focus on the defense finds that the odds of a peaceful US-China power transition may be even lower than expected. Ray Leonardo stated that there is no reason why US officials should assume that PRC will peacefully rise through the international system without leveraging the power and control that comes with being the hegemonic nation.ⁱⁱ

Russia –as the descendant of the Soviet Union – and China are believed to have similar ideologies. But after the rise of China and in the context of the large-scale competition that has already been launched in Asia, it is now questionable if Russia and China can maintain good relations and form a lasting strategic alliance. China and Russia have a relationship with a long history of mutual distrust.ⁱⁱⁱ Besides, the two countries have fundamentally different views about the trajectory of the global economy, since China - unlike Russia - has embraced globalization with enthusiasm. A strong competition and rivalry between China, the US and Russia is, hence, unavoidable in Eurasia, with the US being at present the predominant global power, Russia being a regional economic power and a global military power, and China – a rising one. The main areas of strategic competition of the trio will be Central Asia, West Asia and Eastern Europe.

Each of the three competing powers has its own engagement approach for Central Asia. Russia has used multilateral structures as a tool to generate leverage and access in Central Asia by creating organizations such as the CICA and the SCO; the Collective Security

Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). As a result of the strategic planning of the USSR that excluded the strategy of enforced boundary-setting and population relocations, there are still millions of ethnic Russians living in pretext for intervention quite characteristic for the region. Washington made of support for independence and state sovereignty its primary focus in Central Asia. The US worked to establish economic transit routes that bypassed Moscow to the maximum extent possible, but without any significant success.^{iv} Through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Washington has also supported the Asian Development Bank (ADB).^v US economic and military assistance to Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, totaled \$6.8 billion and peaked in 2010 at \$649 million during the Obama administration. In 2014 US assistance amounted to \$148 million.^{vi}

China's main goal for Central Asia is to get access to reliable and secure energy resources as well as secure transit routes across the eastern hemisphere. The Chinese engagement approach operates mainly through improving standards of living for the peoples of Central Asian countries by building better facilities and improving the existing infrastructures. Three entities serve China's goal of bringing form Central Asia, making risks of separatism and Russia's use of the "Responsibility to Protect" as a to its Central Asian engagement strategy: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) that is designed to "promote peace, security, and stability in Asia"^{vii}; and the BRI coupled with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China has also utilized its bilateral and multilateral engagement opportunities to cultivate the defense component of its newfound presence in the region. The Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent was established in 2002. In 2014 China provided Kyrgyzstan with \$16 million in military aid.^{viii} Arguably most important, in 2015 there were reports of both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan acquiring Chinese HQ-9 air defense systems.^{ix} So far, the Chinese

development model has worked most efficiently for Central Asia, and China's first steps in seizing economic and strategic control in Central Asia have been much of a success.

Unlike Central Asia that must fully rely on bigger states and among which there are no regional powers, West Asia offers a hugely different image. If the background of the political developments in West Asia were to be summarized, one could view them as a huge collision of five different civilizations – the two Mediterranean European civilizations presented by the Armenians and Greeks, the Iranian civilization, the Arab civilization, the Jewish civilization and the Turkish one – coupled with strong religious conflicts. Historically, West Asia also saw hostilities between Turkish and Arab, Turkish and Greek, and Turkish and Armenian entities. Some of the Arab states and Greece seem to have let go of these complex historical conflicts and have been improving their relations with Turkey. Yet, for other states and peoples - i.e. the two Armenian states and the Republic of Cyprus - unresolved historical conflicts with the Turkish states in the region - i.e. Turkey, the Turkish republic of Northern Cyprus and Azerbaijan - are still the main component of their relations with these Turkish states. The conflict between the Jews and Arabs and the political, economic and military competition taking place between the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (its member states are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) and Iran are some of the main factors shaping the security environment in West Asia. The Kurdish issue – that is crucial for both Turkey and Iran and is so far the only sphere of cooperation of Turkey and Iran – is also amongst the main factors that shape the security environment of the region. Other ethnic and religion minorities are also present in the West Asia, but so far without any political ambitions.

Looking at West Asia through the prism of the Russia-US competition, the US is in lead - with Turkey being a member of NATO, Israel being a major US ally and Saudi Arabia formerly being within the sphere of direct US influence. Iran, unlike the other two West

Asian regional powers, has maintained a more independent position.

The West Asian regional powers are interested in cooperating with China within the BRI to different degrees. Now that China is becoming the largest trading partner of most U.S. allies in Asia, many countries in West Asia believe they would benefit from a heightened Chinese role in the region. While close U.S. allies – such as Turkey – are deeply resistant to the notion that they would have to “choose” between China and the United States. As a result of the recent decline of US influence in West Asia, Turkey seems to be aiming to create new strategic partnerships, predominantly with Russia. The possibly forming Turkish-Russian alliance can be paralleled with another Turkish-Russian alliance that was formed in the beginning of the 20th century between Kemalist Turkey and Bolshevik Russia. This alliance, despite actively shaping the security environment in West Asia and Eastern Europe that has mostly remained unchanged since, lasted for a very short time. Turkey eventually cut off ties with the newly formed USSR, considered an alliance with the Nazi during WWII and eventually joined the NATO after WWII. And this was no accident. Turkey and Russia are natural geopolitical opponents and if a strategic alliance between Turkey and Russia was to be formed on the background of a decline of US' power, it wouldn't be a long-lasting one. Turkey – now in quest of maneuvering room again – seeks a temporary partnership with another regional power, and once again its choice seems to have fallen on Russia (and not China). Furthermore, the fact that Turkey shows direct support to the Turkic fundamentalist movements in China's Xiang Jiang makes a strategic alliance between Turkey and China practically impossible.

China's growing reliance on Middle Eastern energy and its growing ties to the region persuade 'frozen' West Asian states like Iran that China is the rising power and the United States is the diminishing one. Like China, Iran is now seeking to revive history. An impressive network of road and rail links is tying the country into the global trading patterns, and Iran is struggling to add more than 200km of railway each year to complete

the network. This immense, strategically important project is regarded to as Iran's Railway Revolution. India, Italy, and Russia have already stepped up to invest. And yet, no country has been more eager to help Iran than China.^x But given that India's strong interest in Iran's Railway Revolution suggests a conflict with its strategic rival – China, and since the rivalry between Iran, Turkey and the GCC states in the Persian Gulf have a heavy impact on the equilibrium in West Asia, the possibility of a lasting Sino-Iranian strategic cooperation may take a different look. Due to rivalries between China and India, India and Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, Iran and Israel and Iran and the GSS states, as well as the plausibility of a conflict of interests between China and Iran make it almost impossible to suggest that a Sino-Iranian partnership within the BRI can last.

Thus, the regional powers in West Asia either don't benefit from the rise of China at all or may only be interested in a temporary partnership. Given that cooperation with West Asian regional powers doesn't seem very reliable in a strategic sense, more attention should be given to a comparatively small region at the conjunction of Europe and Asia that has immense geopolitical importance for equilibrium in both West Asia and Eastern Europe - the South Caucasus.

The region today known as the South Caucasus and its historical and political backgrounds are among the most complex in Eurasia. Despite consisting of only 3 states – Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan – the South Caucasus is exposed to a big number of security threats. The region is politically considered as part of Eastern Europe but it is highly evolved in West Asian affairs and can potentially be involved in Central Asian affairs, as well. On the one hand, the South Caucasus is exposed to the fragilities and risks typical for the Post-Soviet space such as repressed economies, a monopoly of power, presence of grey zones etc. On the other hand, despite often being viewed as one whole, the three South-Caucasian states are highly different from each other, and the backgrounds of each one of them bring a handful of specific issues to the region.

Thus, if Georgian people, being an Iberian ethnicity, expose the region to the risks from the Black Sea-Caspian region, then Azerbaijan, mainly dominated by Azerbaijani Turks, suggest strong ties between Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as the Turkic nations of Central Asia. Coupled with the presence of comparatively repressed Iranian ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan, this exposes the South Caucasus to the Turkic-Iranian ethnic tensions in Central Asia, as well. Besides, since a large part of Azerbaijanis are following Shiite Islam, Iran, too, – as a Shiite regional power – might wish to participate in Azerbaijani politics just like it does in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Armenia – that had a rapid decline in the last 150 years as a result of Turkish-Armenian hostilities and the Soviet conquest of the country and is currently involved in a conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan – still has a number of unresolved issues with Turkey, thus exposing the South Caucasus to a handful of West Asian security threats.

Since by no means can any of the three South-Caucasian states be considered regional powers as all three highly rely on bigger states, the South Caucasus, despite its complex strategic fragmentation, possesses huge geopolitical importance, but doesn't suggest a conflict of interests with China due to an obvious disparity of power and status, making the possibility for a strategic alliance bigger. If China was to pick a strategic ally in West Asia to guarantee a lasting partnership and a successful realization of the BRI, then the South Caucasus is much more promising in this sense than West Asian regional powers. Assuming that having a strategic ally in the South Caucasus can be the key to China's success in realizing the BRI, deciding which one of the three South-Caucasian states to pick as such becomes the ultimate question.

Among all Post-Soviet states, Georgia was the first to attempt a shift from Russia's sphere of influence to that of the West. Russian-Georgian relations have largely been reported as tense after the Rose Revolution in Georgia in November 2003 brought the pro-Western reformist leader Mikhail Saakashvili to power.^{xi} In 2008, the Russo-Georgian war broke out with the ethnic tensions between

Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian ethnic groups being used as a reason for Russia's intervention. The roots of this conflict go back to Abkhazia and Ossetia getting annexed to Georgia by the Soviet government in the early 1920s. In June 2012, the EU and Georgia began a visa liberalization dialogue to allow for visa-free travel of Georgian citizens to the European Union. After the shift from the sphere of Russia's influence to that of NATO and the EU, Georgia is now increasingly falling under the influence of the West. Given the US-China competition in Central and West Asia, it is unlikely that the West approve of Georgia - NATO's first significant win in the Post-Soviet space and one of the brightest examples of US-Russia rivalry in Europe - now becoming China's strategic ally within the OBOR framework, neither is it likely that Georgia be interested in bringing in strong China-US strategic competition to its boundaries, either.

Out of all the three South-Caucasian states, Azerbaijan is the one with the shortest history of presence in the region. Azerbaijan as an independent state and/or political actor only appeared after WWI due to massive investments from Kemalist Turkey and Bolshevik Russia. Up until now, an Azerbaijani nation as such hasn't fully formed yet, consisting of Turkish, Iranian, Kurdish peoples and some elements of the autochthonous peoples of historical Caucasian Albania. Just like in the case with Central Asia, the processes of nation-building in Azerbaijan started mostly during the Soviet period, suggesting close ties with Russia, while empowering the Turkic ethnicities living in what is today known as Azerbaijan at the price of territorial losses for Armenia and Iran was proceeded in order to create a regional strategic platform for both Turkey and Russia. Signs of Turkish-Azerbaijani and Russian-Azerbaijani strategic cooperation against Armenia were seen in the first Artsakh (Karabakh) war and the in recent escalation in Artsakh in April 2016. Azerbaijan is also a strategic platform that can be used both against the Black Sea-Caspian region, and against Iran if necessary. The latter, as a geopolitical rival for both Russia and Turkey, is also one of Israel's main strategic

opponents. The enhanced partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan then must be viewed through the prism of anti-Iranian developments in the region, and in this case Azerbaijan is a potential strategic platform against Iran for Israel, Turkey and Russia. Thus, it can be concluded that as a strategic unit in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan is highly if not fully dominated by its strategic allies - Turkey, Israel and Russia two of which are regional powers that China is not likely to cooperate with, and the bare fact that Azerbaijan is a tool of bringing instability to the region as a major Anti-Armenian and Anti-Iranian power, it becomes clear that Azerbaijan is least likely to become China's strategic ally in the South Caucasus within the BRI framework.

China has already become Armenia's second biggest trade partner in 2012^{xii}, but apart from trade cooperation, Armenia - the smallest and the only landlocked state in the South Caucasus - also possesses exceptional strategic and geopolitical importance for the South Caucasus and beyond. The part of the world today known as the South Caucasus has, in fact, been referred to as such for less than a century only. Geographically and historically, the area located between Asia Minor, the Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia is known as the Armenian Highlands or the Armenian Plateau. After the majority of the Armenian population of the Armenian Highlands were annihilated or forcibly relocated by the Turkish government during the Hamidian massacres of 1894–1896 and the Armenian Genocide of 1914-1923 and a significant part of the Armenian population were killed in WWI and the Turkish-Armenian war in 1920, the number of Armenians living in the region decreased greatly. As a result of the Turkish-Armenian hostilities followed by the Soviet conquest of the country, Armenia only held control over 10% of the Armenian Plateau, and the Northeastern parts of the Armenian Highland became known as Transcaucasia (translated from Russian *Zakavkaz'ye*, literally meaning Behind/Outside the Caucasus), now referred to as part of the South Caucasus.

After the Artsakh war of 1988-1994, with the victory of Armenia, Armenian sovereignty

was reestablished in Artsakh which is now an unrecognized Armenian republic. The Artsakh issue, nonetheless, still remains unresolved. If the conflicts in Georgia are merely a consequence of the Soviet and later Russian strategic approaches, then the Artsakh conflict is more complex in that sense. The Israeli-Azerbaijani strategic partnership as a part of this conflict obviously has Anti-Iranian goals and pursues the aim of possibly expanding the Artsakh conflict zone to Iran or using this conflict to destabilize Iran in more indirect ways, thus tying the Artsakh issue to the Iranian-Israeli hostilities via Azerbaijan. The conflict in Artsakh is also directly linked to bigger Armenian-Turkish hostilities. Armenia is thus exposed to the threat of Turkey's direct involvement in the conflict, making it not only a typical grey-zone conflict in the Post-Soviet space, but also a major West Asian issue.

It's important to note that Armenia is Russia's only remaining ally in the South Caucasus, but Russia's recent policy of selling large amounts of offensive weaponry to Azerbaijan has changed the military balance in the region and led to increasingly heavy tensions in the relations of Armenia and Russia. Armenia is now in need of new strategic alliances that would pursue regional stability in the first place, and the Asian regional powers that Armenia may seek cooperation with are Iran

and China. As mentioned, China is seeking massive economic and trade cooperation, first of all, with Iran, but is not likely to establish a lasting strategic partnership with it. In a geopolitical and strategic sense Armenia and Iran are naturally inclined to cooperate against Turkey and/or Azerbaijan if its strategic partnership with Israel expands further. If Armenia was to become China's strategic ally within BRI, it wouldn't be a threat for the Sino-Iranian trade partnership. Furthermore, Armenia is not exposed to Islamic, Turkic and Iranian fundamentalist movements from Central Asia and the Middle East (unlike Azerbaijan), neither is it vulnerable against North-Caucasian nationalist movements like Georgia. This ultimately makes Armenia the safest spot in the region in sense of security against fundamentalism and is one of the most important frontiers against these movements. Furthermore, a framework in which Iran is China's biggest trade partner in West Asia and Armenia is its strategic ally in the South Caucasus can bring stability to both regions by counterweighing Turkey and Russia, as well as the possible alliance between them, thus contributing to bringing stability to the Middle East, the Armenian Highlands and Eurasia as a whole, making Armenia the most competent long-term BRI strategic ally for China in West Asia.

ⁱ **President Xi Jinping**, "Belt and Road" Forum, May 9, 2017.

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