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The year of the Ukraine war: Wider implications

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine and changing world order

Mahammad Mammadov

One year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is hard to overstate how this war has reshaped the power configurations in Europe and further shook the foundations of the so-called rules-based international order. In Europe, the center of gravity of the regional security system is moving eastward, with Eastern European countries coming to play a bigger role in neutralizing the military threat emanating from Russia. Poland and Baltic countries' longstanding warnings about Moscow's imperial ambitions

over the post-Soviet space have been vindicated and now, these countries together with Ukraine stand taller to shape the future of the European order. Sweden and Finland's potential membership in NATO will further solidify the institution's eastern flank, sharpening geopolitical fault lines in Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, Russia's military aggression against Ukraine put the nail in the coffin of Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok or of the 'common European home' as envisaged in the Paris Charter in 1990. After the occupation of Georgian territories in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the ongoing war in Ukraine signifies the boldest attempt on Russia's part to reverse the adverse consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union that saw Russia lose control over vast swathes of territories in its so-called near abroad. The Kremlin's December 17, 2021 draft treaty proposals to NATO and the United States, calling them to recognize its privileged interests in the region,

shed light on Moscow's true intentions with regard to the new power distribution in Europe that was further crystallised by its military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The principle of the indivisibility of security in Europe is no more and its future prospects look dim at best.

On the international level, one can hardly say that the war in Ukraine is a system-transforming event, at least not yet, on a par with key systemic critical junctures in the twentieth century. "The old is dying and the new cannot be born" is the dictum that characterises best the recent changes to the existing world order. China's reaction to the events in Ukraine has been critical in this context, as Beijing's potential economic and military assistance to Russia could lead to further fragmentation of the international system taking into account the Western countries' firm commitment to punish those who support Russia's war efforts. So far, Beijing has wanted to have its cake and eat it too, its Ukraine war policy vacillating between a growing

(asymmetric) military-economic partnership with Russia and attempts to avoid coordinated sanctions from the West. Moscow's challenge to the European security order serves Chinese interests to divert the Western focus on geopolitical developments in the Indo-Pacific and decrease strategic pressure emanating from the "pivot to Asia" policy. On the other hand, China has been one of the main beneficiaries of the U.S-led liberal international system which it would not want to radically unsettle for the sake of growing economic ties with Russia.

Of the many ripple effects of the war in Ukraine, the emergence of Western unity, exemplified by the coordinated measures taken by NATO, the EU, and G7 against Russian aggression, has been the most appreciated in terms of its implications for the fast-changing global balance of power. Most importantly, the United States came to see this unity as a chance to get the Europeans on board for its looming showdown with China. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and destabilisation

of global supply chains hastened Europe's already growing estrangement from China as the hopes for changing Beijing's behaviour through deeper economic ties have all but disappeared. The failure of the so-called *wandel durch handel* (change through trade) policy to achieve democratic changes in Russia and turning it into a responsible stakeholder of the European security system seems to have awakened Europeans to the fact that economic interdependence with China will not change China's geopolitical designs on its immediate neighbourhood and growing dependence on Chinese market could tie European hands in case of a possible Chinese attack on Taiwan.

It should come as no surprise that Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's growing assertiveness in the global arena dubbed as "wolf warrior diplomacy" have pushed once-revisionist "civilian powers" - Germany and Japan - to revise their security posture to adapt it to new realities of

the international system. In a world of increasing geopolitical competition, both Berlin and Tokyo decided to ramp up their military capabilities, breaking away from long-time adherence to the notion that they would not be a military power threatening other countries. Just a few days after Russia launched its war of invasion, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared in his *Zeitenwende* (literally, "turning of the times") speech that Germany would allocate a special one-off fund of €100 billion to beef up the Bundeswehr's capabilities. According to Scholz, it would also help Berlin keep its promise of spending 2% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defence requirements. Similarly, Japan is planning to increase its defence budget to 2% of its GDP by 2027. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Tokyo is eyeing €303 billion for defence spending between 2023 and 2027, a 1.5 times increase in total. What is striking is that governments in both countries have so far been struggling to put forward a clear roadmap on how the increase in defence spending is to be financed,

amid fierce “guns versus butter” debates in domestic politics.

The major power centers in the West have also had to deal with politico-economic frictions caused by sanctions on Russia and Russia’s counter-measures to increase the cost of Western support to Ukraine. Although Moscow’s weaponization of its gas supplies to the EU did not achieve the European disunity Vladimir Putin had had in mind, it still inflicted remarkable damage by sending the energy prices through the roof and caused certain disagreements with the United States as Brussels accused Washington of higher prices for its LNG supplies to Europe, thus benefiting from the latter’s vulnerability to the energy crisis. Relatedly, the ‘subsidy wars’ revolving around the Biden administration’s Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) that earmarks \$369 billion for the rollout of renewable energy and green technologies in the United States and European answer covering the loosening up of the EU’s strict state aid rules could, in French President

Emmanuel Macron’s words, “fragment the West”. Possible relocation of jobs and business investments from Europe to the U.S. raised alarm bells in European countries, pushing some to question the wisdom of transatlantic partnership. These challenges, if not carefully dealt with, could damage Western unity in the context of the war in Ukraine and open the door for a much looser international order where economic protectionism and a zero-sum game return as a norm.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine showed the peculiarities of weaponized interdependence as the United States used its comparative advantage in technology, financial markets, and the dollar to tame Russian and to a lesser extent Chinese assertiveness in Eastern Europe and the South China Sea, respectively. Therefore, we may see growing economic protectionism in the world economy in the coming years as the major players will strive for decreasing dependence on strategic resources from rival powers. Building alliances with like-minded partners will

be an essential component of this strategy without which it would be remarkably difficult to mobilise resources to meet challenges on the caliber of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Further polarisation of the international system will increase the importance of regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, etc. With the drawing down of the United States' international engagements in certain regions, we may see further regionalization of international politics. What makes this increasing fragmentation of interstate relations more dangerous is that it will make multilateral efforts to meet global challenges such as climate change, poverty, and global health threats difficult to tackle in the short term.



Russia's Ukraine campaign: military aspects

Ayaz Rzayev

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched large-scale military operations aimed at seizing all of Ukraine and overthrowing the government. The operational plan intended to initiate a simultaneous attack on Ukraine from several directions and the rapid capture of Kyiv by Russia and pro-Russian groups in Ukraine. However, this plan had failed, and already from April 2022, the Russian government changed its military strategy, withdrawing troops from other directions and focusing all

its attention on occupying Donbas and southern Ukraine and strengthening the captured territories. Starting from April, the main goal of Russia was to complete the occupation of Donbas. As a result of the spring and summer operations, the Luhansk region was almost completely captured, but Russia was unable to achieve this in Donetsk. In general, the Russian army in Donetsk was able to make very little progress over the past year, and this progress cost the Russians dearly in terms of personnel and military equipment. Thus, Russia concentrated all its forces on operations in Donbas and spent those forces on attacks on echeloned defence fortifications organised by Ukraine over the past 8 years, which gave Ukraine time to mobilise and receive solid military-technical assistance from the West. As a result, although Russia achieved some success in the Donbas in the spring and summer of 2022, it suffered its first major defeat in Kharkiv in the fall as a result of Ukraine's counterattack. The Kharkov operation forced Russia to reconsider its own military strategy. As

a result, Russian forces retreated from Kherson, where they were in danger of being captured by the Ukrainian forces in the south.

At the root of the defeat of the Russian army are two problems - quantity and quality. The Russian army was seriously suffering from the lack of manpower during the spring and summer military operations. In the spring and summer months, the lack of personnel of the Russian army compared to the Ukrainian army was compensated by the ample use of artillery. All this led to the fact that the understaffed Russian army had to use a large number of artillery ammunition to carry out even the smallest offensive operations and capture Ukrainian positions. As a result, the Russian army already faced "ammunition starvation" in the fall which, together with the loss of a large number of military equipment by the Russian army in the last year further reduced its fighting ability and laid the groundwork for the autumn defeats. After the withdrawal from the Kharkiv region, Russia announced partial mobilisation in the country and

managed to solve at least the problem of quantity. Currently, there is a parity in the number of personnel between the Ukrainian and Russian troops. Moreover, after the defeat near Kharkiv and the forced retreat from Kherson, the Russian army, having managed to gather enough manpower, focused on stabilising the reduced front line, digging trenches along the "Surovikin line", creating and strengthening long-term defence-fortification systems. Although Vladimir Putin knows that the initial military strategy has failed and the army is in disarray, he still believes that he can force Ukraine to negotiate on Russia's terms. Putin believes that Russia still has enough resources for this. Russia's current strategy is to degrade the combat capability of the Ukrainian army by launching constant attacks from various directions, preventing it from gathering sufficient forces for new counter-attacks.

Although the Russian military command solved the problem of quantity, it remains clueless about the quality issues. The war in Ukraine

showed that the Russian army is seriously lacking in coordination, communication and intelligence, and is far behind Ukraine, which receives support from the West in these matters. The mobilisation carried out in the fall made these problems in the army even more acute. Thus, until the fall, it lost most of its professional personnel in fierce battles. The fighting capacity of the Russian army decreased even more after mobilisation.

Since the beginning of January, Russia has launched several attacks on Ukrainian positions in Donbas. However, these attacks were organised not in the form of a one unified offensive operation along the entire front, but rather like independent operations aimed at weakening the combat capability of the Ukrainian army. Although this tactic has caused some problems for the Ukrainians, it is difficult to say to what extent it has hindered its planned spring offensive operations or how much it has weakened the combat potential of the Ukrainian army. Although Ukraine was expected to launch a counterattack in

the winter, this attack did not materialise. At the same time, Yevgeny Prigozhin's "Wagner" detachments created serious problems for the Ukrainian army in the direction of Bakhmut. It seems that both sides are experiencing serious logistical and supply problems. In addition, both sides have suffered significant manpower losses over the past year. It is believed that Ukraine will solve these military-technical problems due to the military assistance from the West and will be able to gather enough trained manpower and military equipment and ammunition for a major offensive in April-May.



Russia after a year of its war in Ukraine

Murad Muradov

One year after it had initiated its deadly invasion into Ukraine, Russia's standing and position in the international system has changed dramatically. Perception on several aspects fundamental to Russia's role as a global power has profoundly, and maybe irreversibly, changed. Let's look at these aspects one by one.

First of all, the broad failure of the “special military operation” to gain any significant battlefield success has had tremendous implications for Russia's reputation as a military power, “the

second army in the world”, as Russian analysts would invariably emphasise. Its much-dreaded military machine has exposed fundamental deficiencies on all levels, from technical proficiency to logistics and management. The stark failure of the initial offensive aimed at Kyiv demonstrated the inadequacy of military planning that had been probably leaning more on President Putin's wishful thinking rather than the realities on the ground. While the military aspects of the war are discussed in more detail in a separate section, it is enough to underline that for the country whose great-power status has been primarily standing on its military might, this new reality may bear long-term negative consequences as to its perception and status.

Politically, Moscow now also looks less threatening than before. Despite multiple warnings issued by President Putin and some people from his close government circle, this threat now looks less plausible than at the start of the war. Although initially these red lines were believed to include any

attack on the territory of Russia proper, multiple cases of shelling and mysterious explosions at the military and industrial facilities in the areas of Russia close to the border of Ukraine, did not entail any particular escalation. Neither did the restoration of Ukrainian control over some of the previously occupied lands in the south of the country that according to the September 2022 referendum had been “incorporated” into Russia. In general, the pompous declaration of “reintegration” of the four Ukrainian oblasts that was supposed to be a prelude to the restoration of “big Russia” but in fact was soon followed by the evacuation of Kherson, did also strike a blow to Moscow’s prestige. Moscow has never seriously attempted to hinder the transportation of the military aid from Poland, nor has it reacted, contrary to all the threats and hints, to the provision of Kyiv with increasingly more modern and deadly weapons. In fact, the only asymmetrical Russian strategy aimed at breaking the resistance capacity of the Ukrainian state and people in general, was the

practice of bombing the critical infrastructure of Ukrainian cities (primarily electricity) adopted in October last year with the aim of creating a humanitarian catastrophe—which hasn’t paid off either.

On the other hand, economic effects of the war and grave Western sanctions introduced in response, had turned out to be much milder than expected. While many models forecasted an annual GDP decline of up to 10% by the end-2022, the real figure constituted a meagre -1.5% (though the transparency of Russian statistics now is under certain doubt). However, the fact that the value of Russian ruble hasn’t fallen spectacularly, consumer market, though shrinking, has not crashed and the state has been able to pay rather high sums to the recruits and particularly the families of the killed soldiers. Moreover, it seems that Russian monetary authorities managed to outsmart European counterparts on the asset freezing issue. Although the ECB announced a freeze of about \$300 billion of Russian assets, failed to locate

this amount- Moscow had probably managed to move them to safe havens. In general, the limits of the economic sanctions' efficiency have been tested and we can now conclude that the West is still economically dominant but not as absolutely as it would have hoped for. For example, the energy sanctions turned out to be a double-edged sword: while oil import from Russia in 2022 decreased, the significant price rise which mostly resulted from the shock of the war and concomitant economic disruptions offset these losses. When it comes to gas, Moscow's deliberate policy of cutting supplies was among the major reasons for tightening of the sanctions in late 2022. Though economists expect a decline in Russia's hydrocarbon profits this year, the fact that Asian consumers, primarily China and India, continue to buy Russian fuel in copious amounts helps Moscow to balance its budget.

Another important outcome of the last year for Russia has been the non-occurrence of political turmoil of any kind, be it a coup d'état or mass

protests- contrary to widespread expectations among the experts, particularly those critical of Moscow and Putin personally. Most scenarios of a potential regime crisis envisaged an internal uprising of oligarchs frustrated with the loss of access to Western assets and businesses, intra-elite strife between "moderates" and hard-liners or a wave of protests against mobilisation and war in general spiralling out of control, especially in ethnic-minority regions. Neither of these scenarios has held true, however, and this tells volumes about the nature of the contemporary Russian regime and society in general. While there is clearly an active minority of liberal-minded Russians who are strongly anti-war and who tried to trigger mass demonstrations in the first weeks of the war, the government was able to put them down spectacularly quickly. On the other hand, they were mostly left free to leave the country, and indeed hundreds of thousands have selected this option, which has made the public opinion significantly more "patriotic". On the other hand, the so-called "silent

majority” of loyalists have lived up to their reputation and remained spectacularly content with the new reality when they can end up at the frontline, badly equipped and prepared and become an easy target for Ukrainian troops. While active support of the war remains not that high, the willingness to passively cooperate makes it easy for Moscow to recruit people and manage the situation quite easily.

When it comes to the global dimension of the war, the outcomes for Russia have mostly been negative but not to an extent many commentators describe it. Indeed, Moscow grossly underestimated the capacity of the West to take a common stance on Ukraine and introduce more-than-symbolic sanctions which would also hurt them to an extent, especially certain European countries. As the confrontation pattern was crystallising during the last year, it became less and less plausible for separate Western countries to back down and dissent, as Germany’s example has demonstrated very well. Gradual hardening in the

German, French and Italian stances on Russia is clearly something Moscow wasn’t expecting- and this considerably shattered the Kremlin strategists’ reputation for long-term vision. Chinese approach to the war has been disappointing for the Kremlin as well: while Chairman Xi probably expressed a tacit support to Putin’s plan at their meeting in Beijing shortly before the war, he must have envisioned a quick Russian victory; supporting the prolonged bloodshed economic repercussions of which hurt China’s economy as well, doesn’t fit its interests. This far, Beijing has been consistently refusing to take sides, and supply Russia with munitions of any kind, instead it has spoken several times in favour of establishing peace as soon as possible, the latest proposal having been announced on 24 February this year. Moreover, Russia’s inability to lead the campaign in any efficient way and the numerous military and administrative drawbacks exposed throughout this year has considerably weighed down its reputation as a precious partner (and potentially

strategic ally) for China. Weak Russia that enables the consolidation of the West and its growing assertiveness is a very bad scenario for Beijing which it is trying and will continue to try to revert by all means.

On the other hand, the Russian narrative of its Ukraine war as an existential struggle against “Western neo-colonialism” has been received with certain understanding in many parts of the world. Some countries in the Arab world, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America etc. which have had deep-lying contradictions with the West in general or some Western states, have taken an emphatically neutral stance and emphasised their determination not to curtail their cooperation with Russia. Large Gulf oil producers, primarily Saudi Arabia and UAE, last year decided, in coordination with Moscow, not to raise oil output which helped to keep prices high and caused a lot of frustration in Washington. Some West African countries, such as Mali’s new government, have been openly pro-Russian in defiance of the French

influence traditionally dominant in the region. However, these attitudes are still mostly anti-Western- not always in the radical sense, but rather as a means to balance the Western influence and increase their own capacities as international actors, - than pro-Russian, which is often dismissed in Moscow. At the same time, the accumulation of sanction effects and colossal expenditures on the war effort is already limiting Russia’s financial capacity for playing a global game and will probably restrict it even more in future. Moreover, if the Ukraine campaign will continue to progress in the same way it did throughout the last year, sooner or later the yawning gap between Russia’s ambitions and real capacities will make its narrative more and more difficult to sustain.



Russia's invasion of Ukraine and changing power realities in the Middle East

Javidan Ahmadkhanli

The morning of February 24, 2022, promised two tectonic changes for the Middle Eastern geopolitics: firstly, decades later, the epicentre of global geopolitics was moving away from the region and towards Eastern Europe and East Asia; secondly, Russia's open challenge to the US-dominated unipolar world order with its invasion of Ukraine was clearly aimed at forging a multipolar world that had been expected for some time.

Of course, the shift of the major powers' focus on the Ukrainian war meant a

decrease in tension over the Middle East, which has been at the centre of most conflicts since the First Gulf War. On the other hand, the region, dominated by the United States for more than 30 years, had to adapt to new foreign policy realities after the uprising of Russia and China against the unipolar world order. We can say that the outcome of the both movements was the emergence of numerous maneuvering opportunities for the countries of the Middle East. The increased flexibility of regional actors could undoubtedly shift the balance of force in the region which has long been under the strong influence of the great powers.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the richest and most influential monarchies of the Gulf, evaluated Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a transition from a unipolar system to a multipolar system and wanted to show that they are ready for this process with a flexible foreign policy. This change was clearly felt in Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's relations with Washington. The spring and summer of 2022 featured continuous

tensions between the Biden Administration and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The failure of Joe Biden's visit to Riyadh in July to have a serious impact on the course of the Saudi-US relations, and the fact that the regional duo agreed with Russia to reduce oil production within the framework of OPEC+ in October, could be considered as an open challenge of the Gulf to the United States.

Iran, one of the important players in the region, was of the same opinion as its Gulf neighbours in evaluating "multipolarity". However, Iran has taken this game forward and decided to support Russia militarily. It is clear that Tehran's calculations included the weakening of the US hegemony, compared to Russia as well as diverting US attention from the Middle East as much as possible. The gradual withdrawal of major powers from the region was more beneficial to regional players that were superior in terms of scale and resources, such as Iran.

Israel, on the contrary, has not been happy with the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This can be explained by several reasons. Firstly, the status quo in the Middle East benefits Israel, and any process with the potential for changing it would pose serious threats to Tel Aviv. Second, Israel is worried about the possibility of its closest ally, the US, leaving the region. Thirdly, the Ukraine war forces many countries to choose between the West and Russia, but Israel, due to its very close ties with Russia, does not want to be a party to the US-Russia conflict. Based on the agreement reached between Israel and Russia in Syria, Israeli fighter jets can conduct unimpeded air operations against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria. That is, Russia is Israel's "de facto" neighbour, and Israel did not want to be squeezed between Russia and Iran in the region. These considerations, against the backdrop of Iran being a party to the conflict and sending weapons to Russia, led Israel to exhibit a balanced position.

Considering that Russia's occupation of Ukraine raises the manoeuvrability of

regional powers in the Middle East, it is possible to see Turkey as the winner of this process. Turkey's liminal position in the region makes it an indispensable actor in the changing regional order, and Ankara has been strongly willing to capitalise on this opportunity. On the one hand, it didn't join the Western sanctions imposed on Russia, reaping the benefits of being one of the few remaining channels for Moscow to reach the global market; on the other hand, it has been a significant arms supplier to Ukraine, also actively contributing to the joint NATO effort to back Kyiv. Since the early days of the war, Turkish leadership has also actively promoted itself as the best available mediator between Moscow and Kyiv, emphasising its commitment to both Ukraine's sovereignty and regional peace at large. This strategy was best manifested in the Erdogan government's decisive role in bringing together the warring sides to reach a grain export deal that has strongly helped to support the war-torn Ukrainian economy and to ameliorate the repercussions of the war for food

security in the Global South. Ankara sees the shift of the Russia-US conflict to the Ukrainian front as an opportunity to make progress on the issue of Syria, one of its main problems. The Turkish government tried to neutralise the threat of terrorism on the southern borders by using the question of Sweden and Finland's membership to the NATO, which came up after the Ukraine conflict, as a lever to force Washington to make concessions in Syria.

The picture that emerged after a year that we have left behind shows that the strategies followed by the major powers of the Middle East region at the initial stages of the Russia-Ukraine conflict are not very compatible with the current events. In particular, it is possible to argue that the countries that value the process as a transition to a multipolar order are in a hurry. The military performance of Russia has been far below expectations and the prolongation of the war amid the strong resistance of Ukraine forced the Middle Eastern countries to change their strategy. It is possible to read the

softening of relations between the Gulf countries and the United States in recent weeks in this context. Although Russia's achievements in Ukraine clearly don't match Iran's expectations, Tehran continues its strategy of military support for Russia. Against the background of Iran's strategy, bilateral relations, such as being able to transfer military technology from Russia, which is becoming more and more dependent on these supplies, are also important. Facing a large-scale earthquake disaster and preparing for a noisy election marathon, Turkey's reaction to the course of the conflict has weakened.

It is becoming more and more difficult to predict the direction of events in the new phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In such a situation of uncertainty and disorder, it is possible to claim that the major power centers in the Middle East will follow a more restrained and multilateral foreign policy regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict.



Ukraine war and geopolitics of the South Caucasus

Simona Scotti & Nigar Muzaffar

The ongoing invasion of Ukraine has proved to have far-reaching consequences in the regions where Russia has traditionally projected its influence. In this regard, the war has exerted a significant impact on the security challenges and the geopolitical developments of the South Caucasus. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia found themselves having to adapt to these new realities, and their reactions have been determined by the peculiar relations that each of these countries has with Russia on the one hand and with the role they play in the

regional geopolitical arena on the other. Furthermore, the peace negotiation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan has itself been influenced by the changing dynamics.

Since the beginning of the war, the position of the Georgian government has been delusional as opposed to the expectations of many, since Georgia was considered the closest ally of the West in the region. Its ambivalent position in the Ukraine war first came into being approximately a month before the invasion, on 26th January, when the Georgian parliament adopted the “pro-Ukraine” resolution. The resolution was criticized by the West for not mentioning Russia. However, this stance hasn’t impeded Tbilisi’s voting in favour of the suspension of Russian membership of the Human Rights Council at the UN General Assembly.

While being accused of bandwagoning, Georgia became a natural conduit between Russia and the West to smuggle goods and products legally abolished from being exported to Russia. Taking into account the

Georgian government's ambivalence, businesses are less likely to resist good business opportunities despite having ideological controversies.

The Georgian economy has been heavily impacted by the war in Ukraine, and here are several facts to support this argument. First things first, the number of Russian passport holders who entered the country increased by five times in 2022 compared to the previous year. This indicator has a direct impact on remittances and deposits, which have also increased five and four times, respectively. Overall, the Georgian economy has not suffered from the war as expected; on the contrary, exports saw a 7% increase, while imports leaped by 79% in 2022. In January 2023, Russia was the top trade partner of Georgia above the others for the number of exports and imports.

Despite the opportunity to deepen its stance on the strategic chessboard via integrating into the Euro-Atlantic space, the Georgian government seems to turn a blind eye to what is proposed

against the background of polarization and anti-NGO activities on the rise.

The policy adopted by Azerbaijan has remained equidistant and balanced, as per tradition. While Baku has not imposed sanctions on Russia, nor have there been official condemnations from the government, on the other hand Azerbaijan has offered substantial aid to Ukraine, providing oil for ambulances and humanitarian aid. After all, Azerbaijan and Ukraine have been sharing corresponding struggles for the maintenance of their territorial sovereignty, and hence demonstrations of solidarity towards Kyiv did not come out of the blue.

One of the most notable consequences of the changing dynamics triggered by the invasion of Ukraine is the strengthening of Azerbaijan's position as an energy hub. Following the invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan's importance for European energy security hit the headlines. Europe has been compelled to seek new partners who can guarantee stability in the process of energy diversification

underway since the outbreak of the war, and Azerbaijan has been considered a reliable partner in this sense. In this context, the visit of the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen to Baku in July 2022 to sign a memorandum of understanding on strategic cooperation in the field of energy with President Aliyev opened a new chapter in the EU-Azerbaijan relations, confirming the latter's significance for the European energy security. According to the gas deal, Azerbaijan will double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor to deliver at least 20 bcm of gas to the EU by 2027.

Moreover, Azerbaijan turned into a crucial transit hub for trade between China and Europe. In fact, given the barriers in crossing Russia for cargo carrying goods from East to West, shipping companies have looked for alternative routes, and the Middle Corridor, of which Azerbaijan is an obligatory and fundamental stop, seems to be the most favourable route. At the same time, Baku has also gained prominence as the crucial part of the North-South Corridor, which connects

Russia to India. Having to look for alternative outlets for trade due to the sanctions imposed by the West, Moscow is exploring new possibilities and it seems that trade with the countries crossed by this route is bound to expand.

On the other hand, Yerevan posed as an ally at the beginning of the war, by abstaining from voting when Ukraine called an urgent debate at the UNHRC, as well as voting against the Council of Europe's decision to suspend Russia from the organization. Throughout decades, it has been a member of a number of Moscow-led alliances, most importantly the Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization. Armenia's "beyond dependency" on Russia has surpassed military and security issues, as in 2022 trade turnover between the two countries exceeded USD 5 bln. for the first time.

However, despite Russia's efforts, Armenia seems to lean toward the West, especially after the failure posed by the Kremlin in attempts to involve

CSTO in Armenia's security issues. Mr. Pashinyan stated that Armenia will not host CSTO's annual peacekeeping training in Armenia at least for a year, despite an earlier announcement by the Russian Ministry of Defence. Nevertheless, remarks made by Belarus's president show how tightly it is attached to Russia in terms of Armenia's involvement in the Kremlin's agenda: "Armenia can't escape it. Do you think anyone needs them? They have already seen it".

Despite all these, Pashinyan's efforts to align with the West worked like a charm – for now. EU's monitoring mission in Armenia is another triggering element that stretched the nerves in Moscow: "Regrettably, this is not the first time when we see that the European Union is sparing no effort to win a foothold in our allied Armenia" – Russian FM spokesperson Zakharova commented on a two-year civilian monitoring mission in Armenia.

In this sense, one of the most relevant implications of the war in Ukraine is the impact it has had on the negotiations

between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The region has always been considered Russia's domain, and although the Minsk Group was set up under the aegis of the OSCE to facilitate the resolution of the conflict in Karabakh, its failure in achieving any substantial objective contributed to increasingly alienating the South Caucasus from the European orbit. Although Russian military interest naturally transitioned to the ongoing theatre of war, it is incorrect to speak of Russian disengagement from the South Caucasus. Indeed, Russia continues to be the most influential actor and has demonstrated its undisputed presence on various occasions. The most striking was certainly the appointment of Ruben Vardanyan, an oligarch close to Putin, as "State Minister of Artsakh"- an appointment later revoked on 23 February. Additionally, Russian peacekeeping forces continue to be deployed in the region, as well as a number of military personnel at the Turkish-Russian Joint Monitoring Center in Agdam. One can therefore speak of a partial shift in Russian

attention to more imminent issues, but the Caucasus still remains a priority on Moscow's agenda.

the relative recession of Russian power in the region.

However, the changing dynamics on the ground have prompted the European Union to attempt to reconnect with the region. Several meetings between Mr. Aliyev and Mr. Pashinyan took place in Brussels, and the EU deployed the aforementioned monitoring mission in Armenia to observe the situation on the border between the two countries. The United States also showed some renewed interest when Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, visited Armenia last September, sparking a harsh critical reaction from Azerbaijan.

Russia maintained leverage points and bargaining chips in the region via frozen conflicts and economic dependency for too long, but at this point, it is no guarantor for the security of any country. One would fail to presume how dominoes will fall on the South Caucasus front after the end of the war in Ukraine, but one certainty is



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