

THE INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL MILITARY AND POLITICAL SITUATION¹

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I would like to express my gratitude for inviting me to this event. Organizing such discussions by Noravank Foundation is very important in terms of establishing an analytical foundation for security and defense of our country through combination of strategic research results of this and other think-tanks and relevant inferences of state governance bodies.

Today I shall address the international and regional military/political situation and the most important developments. My analysis is based on a constructive approach to international relations.

It is known that in political philosophy, according to the *realistic approach* to international relations all countries are in an egocentric competition, the most likely outcome of which is war. According to *liberalist approach*, mutual interests and international trade may create a fertile ground to avoid wars and in Immanuel Kant's words, achieve "perpetual peace". In contrary to all of this, the *constructive approach* that we advocate implies a multi-facet comprehension of the existing international realities. By this approach the international reality has to be perceived as is, and the world around us cannot be described in black

¹ Based on the address delivered on November 26, 2013 in Noravank Foundation.

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and white colors only, as the military/political environment is full of not only threats, but also favorable opportunities.

With the collapse of the USSR a unipolar system was established in the world. Some representatives of liberal schools of thought, such as Francis Fukuyama, characterized the resultant world order as “end of history”, concluding that the humankind is no longer prone to large-scale conflicts. Other analysts, such as neorealism supporter Kenneth Waltz, described the unipolar system as an arena that facilitates triggering new wars, since absence of a counterbalance allows one superpower waging war at its discretion. The time proved how realistic this viewpoint was, as conflicts cropped up in Balkans, Afghanistan, Middle East and elsewhere.

However, history shows that for a geopolitical center tide changes sooner or later. After lost geopolitical positions following the collapse of the USSR, Russia has made steady gains since 2000. Foreign policies of Russia have become more purposeful in the recent years, boosted by political clout stemming from exports of natural resources and financial reserves, as well as such influence-spreading mechanisms as CIS, CSTO, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Customs Union, etc.

Though Russia was unable advance its positions with respect to Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011, but obviously, as far as Iran and Syria are concerned, Russia has reached its “*red line*”, beyond which no further concessions are possible. The US strategic analysts classify Russia along with China among the “rising powers” or “growing forces” for a good reason.

Thus, it can be stated that the unipolar world order gradually gives in to a multi-polar one. In that, China has joined the club “first class” superpowers previously comprised of the USA and Russia. In such clas-

sification of “first class” superpowers we first of all consider a state’s military power, economic potential, technology advancements, territory, population number, natural resources and cultural influence.

As for the European Union, we believe in the near future it would not strengthen enough in economic and military terms to emerge as a fourth powerhouse. The global financial and economic crisis uncovered inconsistencies between economic capabilities and governance mechanisms of the EU’s north and south.

At the same time, military strengthening of the EU per se contradicts the concept of NATO and hence, meets hidden opposition from the USA. In this context, instead of considering the EU as a single unified power center, we rather view its member-states, such as Germany, France, UK and Italy, as Class 2 superpowers.

It has to be mentioned that in the recent years the USA has been redirecting its strategic efforts from Europe and Middle East to Asia Pacific, where competition between the USA and China looms and will intensify in future. Hillary Clinton, former US Secretary of State made a good point when she remarked: “The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq”. It has to be noted that shift of the US strategic efforts towards Asia Pacific is also explained by shrinking interest in oil and gas exporting sources caused by discovery of large oil reserves in the USA, as well as development of advanced technologies for its exports. Some analysts contend that by 2020 the USA will become self-sufficient in hydrocarbon resources. Consequently, the prior US enthusiasm has diminished about financing the Southern Gas Corridor and Trans Adriatic Pipeline to transport natural gas from Azerbaijan to Europe.

The role played by such countries as Turkey and Iran, who strive to achieve the status of regional power, will also gradually increase. In addi-

tion to having a dynamically growing economy and formidable military force, Turkey is an acceptable partner for the West due to secularity and moderate Islam and its chances to become a Class 2 superpower are further enhanced by the fact of being a West-East transport corridor. The above said is demonstrated by the recently opened Marmara tunnel.

Iran's role in the Middle East will continue to increase. This trend is supported not only by rich oil and gas reserves, dynamic population growth, high reputation among Shia Muslims, support from Russia and China, but also, as strange as it might seem, the Iranian nuclear program. Despite sanctions imposed by the West, Iran remains resolute in exercising its right to "use of nuclear energy in peaceful purposes". Under such circumstances the West faces three options: 1. Allow Iran become a nuclear nation (i.e. do nothing); 2. Carry out preventive strikes, and 3. Combine sanctions with diplomacy, and carry out "carrot and stick" policies. It may appear odd, but the analytical community of the USA does not completely rule out the option 1, i.e. allowing Iran to develop nuclear weaponry. Advocates of this perspective argue that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weaponry would contribute to stability in the Middle East, since Israel's monopoly would be eliminated. Option 2 implies aircraft and missile attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. However, military experts maintain that these nuclear facilities are well protected and the likelihood to hit the target is not high, whereas after the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns the US war machine is neither ready, nor inclined to launching a land invasion. Apparently the West will continue to rely on option 3, i.e. combination of sanctions and negotiations. It has to be noted that currently there are certain premises upon which Iran-West dialogue can be built, since President Rouhani has set aside the tough stance adopted by his predecessor, and more importantly, has

removed the nuclear research unit from subordination to the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution and has placed it under control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

As for the potential developments of the armed conflict in Syria, most likely it would be possible to avoid direct military involvement of the West and Turkey. The American military, led by Joint Chiefs of Staff speak against the invasion. Thanks to efforts of Iran, China and especially Russia, the problem of Syrian chemical weapons is being resolved and experts have confirmed that infrastructure for chemical weapons production has been dismantled, while the stockpiles will be destroyed in 2014.

With regard to South Caucasus, this region will continue to be a fault line zone of the global power centers' interests and due to unresolved conflicts will remain a tensions-laden area.

One of the characteristic realities in South Caucasus is that the countries there had adopted diametrically opposed security policies and affiliations to power centers.

We have expressed many times our views on association alternatives with Customs Union and European Union. From the viewpoint of the modern constructive approach to international relations, the economic development stems from security, and not the other way around. In this context ensuring the security of our country in the long-term outlook is anchored in the strategic alliance relationship with Russia. These allied relations are equally important for Russia, too. Therefore, such a high level of relations is mutually beneficial for the parties in its very essence. However, choosing the Customs Union should not prevent us from continuing development of cooperation with the EU in economic, science/education, civil society and other areas.

In case of Georgia there is an opposite pattern, as this country aims at closer ties with the European Union. Azerbaijan tries to position itself as an independent actor and prefers a strategic alliance with Turkey. At the same time Azerbaijan manifests formal approach to its commitments toward NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan and European Neighborhood Policy, and attaches more value to the bilateral relations with the USA.

A general review of policies conducted in South Caucasus by the global and regional power centers is provided below.

USA: In order to protect hydrocarbon resources and infrastructures in the Caspian Sea, the USA is interested in providing navy and coastguard systems to Azerbaijan. However, the USA refrains from providing land weaponry to Azerbaijan, because it does not want to break the balance of forces in the Artsakh conflict and to cause Armenia's discontent. At the same the USA openly condemns Aliyev's regime for its anti-Armenian warlike rhetoric.

The USA has some "sympathy" for Armenia. Both countries are united in their wish to establish stability in the Caucasus region. At the same time the USA is concerned by the fact that in case of an escalation of the military situation in the region both Azerbaijan and Armenia would anticipate assistance from Russia, which in turn might diminish Washington's role in the region. Not less disturbing is the fact that any instability would pose a threat to international energy and trade projects in the region.

Russia: Influence of Russia tends to grow in South Caucasus. This is evidenced by effective collaboration with Iran, strategic alliance with Armenia, regional nature of the CSTO, Russia's endeavor to play a key role in providing armaments to Azerbaijan and the trend of improving

relations with Georgia. As opposed to Central Asia-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey-Europe direction of the East-West communications projects, Russia supports North-South transport corridor project through Persian Gulf – Iran – Armenia – Black Sea – Europe.

Turkey. Attempts to carry out independent policies will be continued by Turkey. Ankara will not weaken its support to Azerbaijan and in this context will continue exert pressure on Armenia by closed borders. In parallel Turkey will continue tempting Georgia by various economic projects. However, it is clear that Turkish ambitions to conduct the most independent policies in the region will cause concerns of the US administration.

Iran. In the South Caucasus Iran's influence will continue to fluctuate directly proportional to that of Russia and inversely proportional to that of the USA. With an impartial attitude to the Artsakh conflict, Iran will maintain neighborly relations with Armenia, above all to materialize North-South projects. At the same time, Iran will perceive the US and especially Israeli policies of rapprochement with Azerbaijan as a threat, first of all from the perspective of inducing separatism among the Turkic speaking population of Iranian Atropatene.

In summary, the following conclusions can be made.

The regional military/political situation is characterized by steady threats posed to Armenia, which is caused by aggressive and unconstructive political lines of the potential adversaries – Azerbaijan and Turkey. However, it has to be emphasized that as noted above, the likelihood of the West using force against Iran is assessed as low, which is quite reassuring from the perspective of maintaining stability at Armenia's southern borders.

After the presidential elections in Georgia there are hopes that former Prime Minister Ivanishvili's political line to maintain balanced relations with the West and Russia will continue to hold, which is in Armenia's interests. Although the Georgian government is resolute in its political preference for integrating with Euro-Atlantic structures, there is also a clear intention to improve relations with Russia and ease the tensions. As for Armenian-Georgian relations, a more balanced foreign policy of Georgia will certainly contribute to their development. It has to be mentioned that cooperation and mutual trust in the military sphere between the two countries are strengthening, as demonstrated by the recent reciprocal visits of the ministers of defense.

The conflict caused by Azerbaijan's unsubstantiated claims to the territory of Artsakh remains the main challenge to the national security of Armenia. In the negotiations process Azerbaijan conducts a discernibly unconstructive policy, and by unprovoked and aggressive intentional actions disrupts the agreements aimed at easing the tensions on the line of contact and developing trust between the parties.

Are there any promising opportunities that can thwart the mentioned threats? We believe the following are among such good opportunities:

1. Continuous rapprochement between Armenia and Russia within the frameworks of bilateral military cooperation, development of CSTO military component, and the Customs Union.
2. Diminishing importance of Azerbaijan for the USA due to discovery of local hydrocarbon reserves, decreased probability of military actions against Iran, as well as dramatic reduction of US involvement in Afghanistan after 2014.

3. Gradual transformation of Azerbaijan into a “Gulf autocracy” – as the experience shows, such regimes are less inclined toward unleashing wars, for the fear of losing their grip on power.

The mentioned three opportunities do not imply at all, that Azerbaijani military threat to the Republic of Armenia and Artsakh has declined. Quite the opposite, Baku authorities continue to crave for conquest of Artsakh, driven by expansionist ambitions. It has to be considered that riches of hydrocarbon resources have made Azerbaijani leadership believe in their impunity and all-permissiveness, while the stock-piled weaponry may even create an illusion of predestined victory. Consequently, it is quite possible that these two circumstances may create a temptation for the Azerbaijani government to unleash a “blitzkrieg” against us.

Thus, it is obvious that in the near future the military and political environment around Armenia is not getting any safer. Hence, Armenia shall consistently continue ramping up its capability to enforce peace.