

Turkey's "Chess Party" in the South Caucasus

Vepkhvia CHALABASHVILI¹

Abstract

States, as political actors, always maintain a certain urgency in their geopolitical environment. There are times when they are big and influential actors, and their roles may be relatively small at some point in history. Such an actor is Turkey, which due to its geographical location has many advantages, in addition to which Turkey borders the three newly formed countries in the region as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (through Nakhichevan land border). If before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey had to pursue a common policy in this region with its strategic partners and NATO, and wasn't following its own national interests, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a result, the emergence of new states in the South Caucasus has given Turkey new opportunities to present itself as a regional leader. The focus of this article is one of the driving forces in modern international politics - the Republic of Turkey is an accountable and trusted player on the South Caucasus chessboard, who enters the region under democratic principles and internationally recognized rules and he becomes a partner of any other global actors that also have interests in the South Caucasus and their interests align with Turkey's interests of the region, and these interactions are creating the climate for the world order.

Keywords: Turkey, Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN, South Caucasus, USA, Chess moves.

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¹ PhD. (C); Georgian Technical University, Faculty of Law and International Relations, Department of International Relations and Politics, Tbilisi, Georgia

E-mail: vchalabashvili@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-0506-4903

INTRODUCTION

The South Caucasus is a transit region for the Caspian Sea's energy resources, and trade corridor from Asia to Europe, allowing Turkey to connect with related nations in Asia, an excellent opportunity to establish economic and cultural relations, and with the expansion of its sphere of influence, Turkey may be given a chance to contribute to global policy-making, especially when its goals are based on solid security, economic and industrial development, and cultural ties. Taking advantage of these opportunities, Turkey has a fair goal to fit the role of regional leader and therefore it combines all these components following its national interests.

Theoretical Background: the article is based on the theories of realism and world order. Realism, as political realism, is a view of international politics that stresses its competitive and conflictual side. In this regard, the theorist Thomas Hobbes, who in his book "Leviathan" explains the similarities between man and state: "The creation of a state, although it gives people a way out of their natural state, it creates a new political problem at the state level. In a word, the natural state is transferred from the personal level to the level of the states and the problem of national and international security arises, which is caused by the anarchy of the international system" (Akobia, 2006). According to Hobbes, by solving one security problem, people (or states) mentally create another problem. That is why the management of the state needs to discuss the existing challenges and problems in many ways, the specific nature and implementation of decisions promptly is crucial to achieving the final result, for these reasons, Turkey's actions in a complex region such as the South Caucasus, where the interests of a global country such as Russia and the United States are represented with their national interests in the region can be compared to a "chess party".

In the context of realism an example given in the article is the foreign policy pursued by Turkey in Azerbaijan, thanks to which its military contingent is now deployed in Karabakh, and in addition Turkey's relation towards Armenia getting relatively soft. The examples I

have given of Turkey's policy towards Russia, the United States and NATO are also fully in line with the foundations of realpolitik.

The present paper is also based on Hadley Bull's theory "Is there order in world politics", according to which order is part of the historical experience of international relations, while modern states have formed and continue to form not only the system of states but also the international community.

Research Method: comparative analysis is a methodology within political science that is often used in the study of political systems, institutions or processes. This can be done across a local, regional, national and international scale (Stafford, 2013). Comparative method helped me to collect sufficient data and get analysis from them, this analysis directed me to develop my thoughts on this topic and answer the questions that has been raised around it. Some of the material is found in the writings of political scientists, sociologists, diplomats, and public figures, as well as in articles and papers by leading experts and government figures on the South Caucasus and the geopolitical situation there.

Turkey's Interests in the South Caucasus - Yesterday and Today

The new reality created after the collapse of the Soviet Union generated a new political environment in the South Caucasus, which turned out new opportunities for Turkey to expand its areas of state interest in the region. When we talk about Turkey and its foreign policy directions, it is necessary to take into account the opinions and assessments of prominent state figures, political scientists, and sociologists.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the leading ideologues of US foreign policy, in his work "The Big Chessboard", lies down an excellent assessment of Turkey's role in the South Caucasus: "Brzezinski urges the US government to be careful not to alienate Turkey" (Brzezinski, 2014). Here, Brzezinski emphasizes Turkey's importance for stability in the South Caucasus region, which is a reality in practice, while urging the United States to have close and high-

quality ties with Turkey, which will give the United States more opportunities to create a stable environment in the region.

Turkey's direct competitors in the South Caucasus are Russia and the United States, which makes competition in the region even more complex. Turkey's actions in the South Caucasus are similar to the "Chess Party" in terms of its complexity and versatility. It seeks not to upset the balance with global players such as Russia and the United States, while at the same time strengthening its sphere of influence concerning all three countries in the South Caucasus. Turkey's support is visible in many respects, especially in the fields of economy and security, both bilaterally and trilaterally with neighboring Azerbaijan, be it the transfer of new transport equipment or equipment for rescue services or the armed forces. Turkey has repeatedly stated its support for Georgia's European integration, territorial integrity, and NATO membership, which is a vital support for Georgia, especially under the occupation and constant pressure from the Russian federation. Turkey's support is Trilateral relations are also common, for example, the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia Trilateral Defense Ministerial was held in Georgia on October 5-6, 2021. The main goal of the Ministerial was regional security, defense cooperation, and discussion of plans: "We discussed current and future cooperation plans in the field of defense and security, as well as in other areas. From the perspective of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, we discussed what we can do for the prosperity and stability of the region"(Ministry of Defence of Georgia, News, 2021) - After the Ministerial, said the Turkish Defense Minister, thus reiterating Turkey's role in the security and economic development of the South Caucasus.

Turkey's goal to be a leader in the region even summed up the results of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's meeting with Aliyev in Turkey after the end of the Karabakh conflict: "That would be good cooperation for the development of the region" (Interpressnews, 2020). Turkey understands very well that economic and political cooperation without security and trust cannot be the formula for the success of the region, so Turkey does not spare any effort to increase its positive role in the development of the region. The continuation of this topic is

an attempt to establish a 3 + 3 platform, which has recently been very relevant in the South Caucasus. This platform has gained relevance since Ankara, Tehran, and Moscow became more active in the region. This platform reads the desire to expel the West from the region and this is another example of how things are developing on the global stage in terms of world order: "This initiative is also an attempt to establish a new order in the South Caucasus, where Russia, Turkey, and Iran will try to create a kind of hierarchical order, where Russian hegemony will be inevitable, and Turkey and Iran will try to increase their influence as much as possible: "The 3 + 3 initiative is also a kind of anti-Western set-up based on anti-liberal ideas"(Avdalian, 2021).

Turkey has the most difficult and tense situation with Armenia among the countries of the South Caucasus, from the past to the recent Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, in which Turkey is an ally and supporter of its brother Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, several efforts were made by Turkey to the Armenian side to begin the restoration of relations. At the same time, Turkey is the closest strategic partner and ally of the region to Azerbaijan, this relationship further strengthens Turkey's influence in the region and thus contributes to the growth of Turkey's influence. Even in the recent events in Karabakh, Turkey has openly supported Azerbaijan, which has made a great contribution to ending the conflict in the way we have today. However, this support was not so large that it caused obvious dissatisfaction in any country, even Russia. Turkey-Russia Joint Center Opens in Aghdam after conflict "A Turkish contingent participating in the Turkish-Russian Joint Monitoring Center is already in Azerbaijan" (Dargiakhli, 2021). The fact that the Turkish military contingent, even in small numbers, was officially deployed in the South Caucasus is a historic event and a statement by Turkey that it has interests in the region. Nevertheless, the deployment of the Russian-Turkish contingent does not mean the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the future of this region is still clouded. That is why Turkey considers it important for Turkey to have a military presence in the region, so that large and fundamental changes are not possible without it, which will leave it out of the game in the event of a possible redistribution of

influence. This calculation is also part of the move of Turkey's chess party. Despite all this, Turkey continues to gain a closer foothold in Karabakh, along with Azerbaijan, even in the post-conflict period. A clear example of this is Recep Tayyip Erdogan, et al. Aliyev inaugurated the construction of the Zangezur Corridor in October 2021, which involves connecting Azerbaijan by land with Nakhichevan, which was cut off from it, via the Syunik region of Armenia, which automatically means connecting by land with Turkey: "The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN, laid the foundation for the construction of the Zangezur Corridor. The groundbreaking ceremony for part of the Jebrail-Zangilan-Aghbandi transport route, part of the Zangezur corridor, was held on October 26"(Tabula, 26, 10, 2021). With the launch of this corridor, Turkey will have a direct connection to Azerbaijan by land, which even a few years ago would most likely have been unthinkable even for any political analyst. This is one of the consequences of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's chess moves, however, is that there are even bigger and more far-reaching goals after these moves.

The interdependence of Georgia and Turkey contains only positive aspects. Due to the demarcation of the border during the Soviet Union, the legitimacy of the border in Turkish-Georgian relations is very high, so there are no questions about the disputed territories, which played one of the crucial roles in creating a positive atmosphere in the very first stage of the post-Soviet period. In addition, Georgia's Western course and aspiration to join the North Atlantic Alliance further strengthen relations between the two neighbors, which has a positive impact on relations between the two countries.

As I already mentioned, Iran is also one of the important players in the South Caucasus region, Iran's area of interest is the supply of gas and oil on the territory of Azerbaijan in the Caspian Sea. Also of interest to Iran are Georgian ports on the Black Sea, which allow export-import to the Western market, especially in the face of US and EU sanctions.

Iran has a lot in common with Armenia, they share a common border and both countries have friendly relations with Russia. That is why Turkey has to calculate not only the moves on the South Caucasus chessboard, but also abroad, with the states with which the interests intersect in the South Caucasus region: "There is a lot of talks that the Republic of Turkey, created by Atatürk, was based entirely on the European cadre, but it is worth noting the balance between Europe and the East. The country has maintained and improved relations with countries like Iran and Afghanistan" (Tektumanidze, 2021). For example, in the wake of the unresolved Karabakh events, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is ready to restore relations with Armenia: "Turkey is ready to gradually restore relations with Armenia, but for that, according to Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN, it is necessary to develop relations based on the principles of respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty" (Menagharishvili, 2021).

It will not be a surprise for anyone to see the South Caucasus region in the sphere of interest of a country like China. There is nothing new or unexpected in this: "Beijing's interest in the South Caucasus as a strategic region worthy of real attention is a recent development, prompted by Beijing's ambitious multibillion-dollar 'bet, which was built on the New Silk Road and where Georgia and the South Caucasus as a whole play a crucial role"(Chechire, 2015). So, for example, China is investing in infrastructure, energy, agriculture, logistics, and many other areas. "Investments from China to Georgia were first made in 2002. Since then, a total of 705.09 million has been implemented. USD investment as of 2020, a total of 204 companies with active participation with Chinese capital are registered in Georgia"(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Chinese Investments in Georgia, 2021).

There are cases when Turkey uses political, military-political, or economic moves with actors outside the region to establish a favorable position on the chessboard of the South Caucasus, which allows it to be a more accountable figure in the region. So, for example, we should not ignore the course of Turkey's foreign policy towards Afghanistan, especially in light of recent developments. Even though Turkey is fulfilling its obligations to the allies and also adhering to international norms, it is still pursuing an active foreign policy in the light of the crisis in

Afghanistan and is trying to pursue a policy in line with its national interests in this regard. Turkey has opted for a **"tit for tat"** policy against the Taliban in Afghanistan, which means: "If the Taliban take positive steps towards Turkey, then Turkey is ready to improve its relations with the Taliban"(Athamani, 2021).

It is worth mentioning once again Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN's successful foreign policy moves outside the South Caucasus "chessboard" reinforce his position within the board and put him at an advantage over other players. When its allies closed embassies in Kabul after Afghan rule fell to the Taliban, the Turkish embassy continues to function, and Turkey cooperates with the Taliban to a certain extent, without leaving any Western friends dissatisfied. Finally, Turkey has once again demonstrated its foreign policy capabilities and flexibility in the wake of the Afghanistan crisis, manifested in balanced and consistent foreign policy steps towards Afghanistan while maintaining international parameters in terms of regional balance. Which makes the Turkish "Chess Party" even more complex and diverse in its foreign policy. It is noteworthy that during the past twenty years that the United States and NATO member states have been represented in Afghanistan with their military forces, one of the largest logistics lines of these forces has passed through the South Caucasus, through the Black Sea and Georgian airspace. Nowadays the world order system is undergoing transformation, and as Ernst-Otto Czempel explains in his book (Czempel, 2003), although the political impact of the Cold War was far greater and more global on the world than even World War II. The end of the Cold War paved the way for global change if the West and the East had previously competed with each other in armaments and the political, economic and other components had been relegated to the background, now leading countries are competing with the technology, economy, industry, cyber and other modern directions.

The above facts show that the interests of several countries in the South Caucasus region are obvious, which is a kind of chessboard for Turkey, where the "chess moves" made by Turkey so far are not so unsuccessful from today's point of view.

Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN and NATO in International Politics

There are constant geopolitical changes in the world, for example during the Soviet Union, when there was a mainly bipolar system, the two strongest states (I mean the US and the USSR) balanced relations and a more predictable political environment, while the collapse of the Soviet Union and various changes, where several powerful states are already involved in large-scale geopolitical issues, forecasting is accordingly complicated. The goals of powerful countries or alliances are changing. So for example, the focus of the North Atlantic Alliance on China has increased significantly, at this time it is vital for the Alliance to fully and unconditionally support and stand by Turkey as one of its strongest allies. Turkey, as a member of NATO fully supports NATO's policy, however, there are topics on which member states need to discuss before Alliance makes the final decision. There were some topics where Turkey had a slightly different vision, but always was supporting Alliance and have been a trusted and reliable partner.

Turkey has some different viewpoints when it comes to its defense and security than the United States, the most powerful member of the alliance. The refusal to extradite Fethullah Gulen, who is still accused of plotting a military coup in 2016 in Turkey, over the refusal to extradite him to Turkey, Then there was the purchase of Russian S-400 air defense systems by the Turks in 2019, which caused obvious dissatisfaction with the USA and an open message from the US stated: "This move is outrageous for the US, and that Turkey will not be able to have S-400 anti-aircraft defense systems together with American F-35 fighter jets" (Marcus, 2019). Following this fact, the US Secretary of Defense personally spoke to his Turkish counterpart and explained that it is unacceptable for the US member state to have Russian air defense systems and at the same time US F-35 fighter jets, as this poses a danger that Russian special services will gain access to F-35 systems. At the same time, these

assessments were coming from the Pentagon. To which the Turkish Defense Minister responded in an open statement: "The purchase of the S-400 missile system does not mean a change in Turkey's strategic orientation" (Marcus, 2019). Then there was a relative calming of the situation and there was an attempt by NATO member states to further strengthen relations with Turkey. Poland and Albania signed individual contracts in 2021 for the purchase of Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles "Bayraktar", while Poland itself produces high-end unmanned aerial vehicles (WB Group). Latvia is also in active negotiations with Turkey to acquire the Bayraktars. In my view, these moves by NATO member states were a good attempt to strengthen relations with Turkey individually and increase the degree of trust to fill the gaps between Turkey and the Alliance. Turkey's contribution to NATO and European security is tremendous.

In September 2021, Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN met with PUTIN again in Sochi, and according to news sources, the Turkish side may purchase additional Russian S-400s. The United States responded immediately to this fact, saying: "Further acquisition of Russian S-400s will lead to sanctions. The situation shows that Washington has its hands tied. This is not a good policy, but America will still do it because it has no alternative" (Friedlander, 2021).

The importance of Turkey's role in the region is becoming increasingly apparent amid Turkey's growing role in world politics. Recently, there was a misunderstanding between Turkey and the Alliance and the President of Turkey is sending a message to all allies to be more careful in their relations with Turkey and not to interfere in Turkey's affairs. One such clear example is the recent statement made by R. ERDOĞAN about the declaration of ten European ambassadors from Turkey as Persona Nongrata, when the ambassadors met with Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN was called upon to immediately release from prison his opponent Osman Kabala, who was declared by Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN an agent of George Soros and who has been imprisoned in Turkey since 2017. According to ERDOĞAN: "Turkey

should declare the ambassadors of 10 Western countries, including the United States, France, and Germany, persona non grata after they issued a joint statement for the release of jailed activist and businessman Osman Kavala" (Hurriyetdailynews, President ERDOĞAN Orders..., 2021). This event was taken very seriously by the members of the alliance, active involvement was observed by all allies to prevent Turkey from fulfilling this statement, as it would already be followed by an appropriate response from Western countries, which would inevitably lead to a deep political crisis. Two days after this announcement the disagreement was over: "The statement issued by the ambassadors of these countries on October 25 that they do not interfere in Turkey's internal affairs was assessed by President Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN and he hoped that from now on the ambassadors will be more careful in their statements on Turkey's sovereign rights" (Radio Liberty, The President of Turkey has Reconsidered the Expulsion of Ambassadors, 2021).

Against the background of such a large-scale international policy, in the South Caucasus, as in its immediate neighborhood, Turkey is further increasing its political and economic influence, so that this influence must be in a positive context and further increase the confidence factor, allowing it to develop additional leverage in the region. Firmly establish itself and become one of the guarantors of security in the region.

This is evidenced by the Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia Tripartite Defense Ministerial held in Georgia on October 5, 2021, where the Turkish Defense Minister said: "In other parts of the world. For this reason, peace and stability in this region are important not only for us but for all countries in the region" (Eight Georgian-Turkey-Azerbaijan Defence Ministers Meeting, 2021).

All of the above is in line with Hadley Bull's theory of "is there order in world politics", according to which order is part of the historical experience of international relations, while modern states have formed and continue to form not only the system of states but also the international community.

Thus, Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN's Turkish Chess Party is part of a kind of endgame, which means that strengthening Turkey's multilateral foreign policy while maintaining balance in the international arena brings relevant dividends to Turkey's role as a regional actor and guarantor of economic stability in international politics. Which will inevitably affect Turkey's growing influence in the South Caucasus, including its economic and security levers, and will enable it to more firmly establish itself as a loyal and trustworthy leader and partner in its neighborhood: "The main aspects of Turkey's South Caucasus policy are to strengthen the independence and sovereignty of the countries of the region and to support their efforts to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures, as well as to maintain and strengthen regional cooperation and political and economic stability: Turkey has deep roots in historical and cultural ties with the South Caucasus, which is the bridge that connects Turkey with Central Asia" (Turkey's Relations with Southern Caucasus Countries,2021). This clearly shows Turkey's foreign policy vision towards the South Caucasus, which is why Turkey has always openly supported Georgia's territorial integrity and its aspirations in NATO and the EU. It is also one of the largest investors in Georgia, the closest economic and transit partner, one of the guarantors of stability and security in the region.

CONCLUSION

Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN's "Chess Party" in the South Caucasus aims to provide the reader with a brief overview of the foreign policy pursued by Turkey in the South Caucasus during the post-Soviet period. In this particular article, the President and Turkey are referred to in the same context, because the individual is identified with the state and is fully in line with the principles of the theory of realism. The South Caucasus is a vitally important region for Turkey and vice versa, through which the Caspian Sea transports energy resources, the South Caucasus is also the largest trade corridor from Asia to Europe, and by controlling this region, Turkey's weight in the international arena doubles.

To the extent that many states, which are more powerful and ambitious than Turkey, have similar goals. Turkey has to make complex and at the same time witty moves while adhering to internationally recognized rules, which require a great deal of effort and prudent foreign policy. That is why Turkey makes decisions step by step, based on the situation and the existing reality so that its decisions will create a favorable atmosphere for Turkey around its geopolitical area.

Turkey has to pursue this policy against the background of competition from other powerful countries in the world, which is why the accuracy and complexity of the policy written by Erdogan are important. The President is doing all this in a positive context to ensure that Turkey is a guarantor of security for regional actors, as well as an economic partner and a long-term political ally.

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