South caucasus and a 'New Great Game': the communication of competition in securitised international relations

Sadi Sadiyev Saleh , Elman Nasirov Khudam , Khayal Iskandarov Ibrahim & Greg Simons

Published online: 29 Sep 2020.

Submit your article to this journal ⬀

Article views: 1402

View related articles ⬀

View Crossmark data ⬀

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS   Check for updates

South caucasus and a 'New Great Game': the communication of competition in securitised international relations

Sadi Sadiyev Saleh[a,b], Elman Nasirov Khudam[c], Khayal Iskandarov Ibrahim[d] and Greg Simons[e,f]

[a]Science and Adjunct Department of the Azerbaijan Republic War College of the Armed Forces, Baku, Azerbaijan; [b]Humanitarian Institute, Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia; [c]Political Sciences, Institute of Political Studies of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of Azerbaijan, Member of Parliament, Baku, Azerbaijan; [d]War College of the Armed Forces, Baku, Azerbaijan; [e]Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden; [f]Department of Communication Science and Business Technology Institute, Turiba University, Riga, Latvia

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to compare and analyse the historical and contemporary arguments concerning the existence of the brand the 'Great Game' in Central Asia with that of a 'new' Great Game in the South Caucasus, while assessing the validity and problems of using this term. The article analyses the regional state of affairs and possible impacts of the Russian factor in forging close relations between South Caucasus states and NATO. It is argued that Russia's and NATO's vested interests in the region rhetorically contribute to European security system in the context of the security environment after the Georgian-Russian War of 2008 and its repercussions. NATO's presence may be interpreted as counterbalancing the Russian military presence in the region, but there are also clear limits to the alliance's willingness to actively engage in the region, not least the reluctance to antagonize Moscow. The context of geopolitical competition may be interpreted as a 'new' Great Game sharing similarities with nineteenth century competition of great powers, yet a number of clear differences also exist relative to the traditional Great Game.

Introduction

Though the South Caucasus occupies a small area on the world map, the scale of interest in the region is much bigger than its geographical size might suggest.[1] The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 fundamentally altered the geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus as each of the new successor states sought to define their national interests and policy priorities (Markedonov 2017). In terms of its geopolitical and strategic importance the region has always fluctuated as it competed with other agendas of global powers' foreign policies. While the South Caucasus was previously considered to be on the periphery of the international agenda, it became much more important both to its neighbours and influential non-regional actors.[2] Today the South Caucasus is a diverse geopolitical region, which occupies a strategic point in energy transport, with conflicts.

The communication of foreign policy in international relations involves a simplified and symbolic use of rhetoric and language in order to unify public perception and opinion in order to make it seem more fitting to a particular policy. This constructed reality does need to be 'objectively' truthful, but

CONTACT Greg Simons ✉ gregmons@yahoo.com 🖳 Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden IRES Box 514 SE 751 20 Uppsala Sweden

should be understood and accepted (Entman 2004). The crises in the South Caucasus are influenced by the relationship between NATO and Russia. Associated threat perceptions give rise to the shaping of alliance preferences by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (Abbasov and Siroky 2018). The resulting dynamics have been characterised in terms of a 'new Great Game' (Cuthbertson 1994/1995; Edwards 2003; Kurecic 2010). This is a recurring troupe in geopolitical rhetoric with older Great Games being played out in Central Asia and other geographical regions (Morgan 1973; Ingram 1980; Edwards 2003; Becker 2012). The central problem tackled by this paper is sought through tracking the dilemma and contradictions inherent in the act of superimposing a new brand (New Great Game) over an existing brand (Old Great Game). This is where a 'brand' is to be understood as a constructed emotional connection and association with a name (New Great Game) as opposed to the 'cold reality' of interests and aims found in realism.

This paper seeks to engage in an analysis, through literature review, whether a 'New Great Game' currently can be said to exist or not. There can be a tendency to focus on whether there is or not a New Great Game, we rather, systematically try to identify the pros and cons of such a narrative and why it is used in the first place. The invocation of the Great Game creates expectations of geopolitical competition and conflict that has parallels with the events of the 19th century. We seek to explore whether or not this is the case based on a review of academic and popular[3] literature. A definition of the 'Old Great Game' is introduced as a means to understand the substance of the idea of a New Great Game in the current situation. The nature and underlying reasons behind power competition in the South Caucasus is explored, before moving attention to the logic and actions of Russia and NATO.

Methodology

A review of the current state of the art literature is sometimes needed in order to try and understand the larger processes and trends at play. This includes the interplay between academic definitional characterisation of key concepts and the popular impact upon foreign and security policy practice. There is a risk of a brand creating an oversimplification and false parallels of the present, which ignores the differences. This article seeks to critically engage in the popular and academic debates, past and present, on the existence of a Great Game. As such, the goal is to examine the what, how and why rhetoric of the geopolitical troupes in these texts and the interaction and any influence between academic and popular sources.

Academic articles on the theme of the Great Game were sought using Google and Google Scholar. The keywords used were 'Great Game' and 'New Great Game + South Caucasus' to find the sample of articles, which were manually inspected for relevance. The initial search using only 'New Great Game' was found to produce too many irrelevant hits owing to the fact that the brand name Great Game has been applied to other geographical areas as well – in Asia (Fromkin 1979), Central Asia (Kurecic 2010), Caspian (O'Hara 2004), India and China (Scott 2008). The fact the Great Game is used in various different regions implies that the value is not found in a clear explanatory value, but rather in politically symbolic value that influences perceptions and expectations.

The texts were then analysed. The approaches to textual analysis include content analysis (quantifications of different elements in text), argumentation analysis (the structure of argumentation used), and the qualitative analysis of ideas in the content (with a focus on comparisons between Old and New Great Game) (Boréus and Bergström 2017, 7–9). The combination of these approaches is expected to yield results on the ontology (what exists) and epistemology (knowledge and how we 'know' things) of reactions to mediated textual depictions of the New Great Game event within the context of the Old Great Game. The objects of study include influence, institutions, policy, interests and threats, effects and predictions.

Securitisation and international relations: words and politics

In the wake of the Cold War there was a debate concerning the expanding and widening security agenda (among the traditionalist, widening and critical schools) that diverged from the traditional focus on military based threats. This rethinking of approaches to security, which traditionalists argued that the widening of the concept was making the issue incoherent, Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998) proposed a constructivist method for security analysis as a means to confine the application of security and create some potential to reintegrate it. This means that security is not understood as the content of a particular sector, but rather a type of politics that is defined by reference to threats and calls for urgent action to meet those threats. Others have argued for an even wider understanding and application of security, which goes beyond the 'confines' of the Copenhagen School to 'allow a scholar to study "real-world" securitisations' (Stritzel 2007, 377). A motivating factor being that a speech act at a point in time rarely explain the entire social (and/or political) process, rather there is a process of articulations that interact to accumulate the image and understanding of threat.

Waever (2011, 476–477) proposed to analyse and understand the securitisation process by looking at: who is doing security (actors, acts, politics and preconditions); the moment of securitisation (for example, the media and academic engagement with the semiotics of securitisation); the effects of securitisation (the difference of securitised or not lies in the causal mechanisms). A variation of this breakdown is proposed by Baele and Thomson (2017, 651; Floyd 2016): acts (the securitising move); agents (interaction between actor and audience); and context (where and when the process takes place). The physical and psychological environments influence the nature and quality of the securitisation process. In terms of the dynamics of the constructive mobilisation of security theory, the argument must satisfy a number of critical points in order to increase the likelihood of success by establishing that: there is a threat; the threat is potentially existential; the possibility and relative advantages of a securitised versus non-securitised management of the identified threat (Waever 2011, 473). Stritzel (2007, 377) also proposed a three stage layer for understanding and analysing the securitisation process: performative force of an articulated threat text; embeddedness in existing discourses; and the positional power of securitising actors.

Securitisation is a social practice that takes place within the political system, where 'security' takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue as a special kind of politics or above politics. 'In addition to elements of segmentation (into states and nations) and stratification (hegemons, empires, regional powers, etc.), which have been the traditional focus security, an increasing reference to securitisations as forms of political communication to the environment, the economy, "societal" factors, etc.' (Albert and Buzan 2011, 423). This logic forms the basis to move away from understanding and analysing securitisation from a rigid framework and definition by sectors. One of the strengths of securitisation has been its ability to synthesize the common themes in social-constructivism with elements of realism, which allows for the interaction and engagement of different theoretical lenses for additional explanatory power (Williams 2003).

Competition for power and influence in the 'Old' Great Game

Scott (2008, 2) notes that 'the "Great Game" was originally coined in the 19th century to describe the geopolitical rivalry between the Russian and British Empires.' Both the British and Russian Empires thought of their actions and intentions in the old Great Game as being 'defensive' in nature. Britain sought to contain the Russian territorial advance, and Russia viewed the British threat as being equally real in nature. It was a complex game of intrigues and games that sought to deny the opposing side the ability to gain new territories and influence. Queen Victoria was said to have remarked 'it is a question of Russian or British supremacy in the world' (Fromkin 1979, 950). The primary geographical area of the Old Great Game was found in Central Asia and India, where colonial possessions and trade were of concern.

The Great Game has been applied to different geographical regions, one of the original sites of the Great Game was in Central Asia (such as Afghanistan). As such, can it be considered as being accurate and warranted to apply the brand in the South Caucasus? However, the contemporary analogies of the Great Game term can be overused and even are in some instances misleading. A potential subjective cognitive value by applying the brand to the South Caucasus is the assigning by association of the roles played by the competing actors. This could include, who is to blame, perceived legitimacy for policy and actions among the key stakeholders, an attempt at creating unity in face of a foreign 'threat'.

The original 19th century Great Game concerned classic imperialism and territorial annexation. Whereas there is a significant difference in the practice of the New Great Game, which has become 'shorthand' for competition in influence, profit, power and hegemony (Edwards 2003). In order to investigate and interrogate whether a New Great Game exists, it is necessary to begin looking at the specifics of the South Caucasus.

New 'Great Game in the South Caucasus

As early as 1994–1995, there were some scholars that had begun to suggest that a New Great Game had begun. The logic of this New Great Game was brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union resulting in a security and influence vacuum, which meant that a lot of 'new' territory was opened up to possible external actors (among the various former Soviet republics and not specifically the South Caucasus). However, there was some caution in applying an absolute blanket use of the analogy to the whole picture as there were regional variations and differences appearing in the CIS. One of the differences noted was in the original Great Game there was less attention paid to the local elites, beyond using them as figureheads and proxies in the rivalry. The New Great Game continues to try and manipulate the local elites, however, the local populations have a much more pronounced sense of self-identity (even if it is not a coherent national one) (Cuthbertson 1994/1995, 31). Therefore local governments and elites are not passive actors accepting the dictates of powerful external actors, but actively seek to create diplomatic space to pursue their interests while retaining independence (Van Gils 2018). Cooley (2012) examines this competition and concludes that the great power games are constrained and exploited by the local rules of the political elite via a multi-vector foreign policy. In the Old Great Game there was little latitude for local states to bargain and in cases, even retain their independence.

There have been different academic arguments both for and against the proposition that there is currently a New Great Game underway in the South Caucasus. This is driven by the argument by some that a realist game of security or energy interests through the competitive pursuit of power and influence is taking place in this region. Abushov (2009) points to a contradictory approach to Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. On the one hand, Russia is engaged in peacekeeping and mediation in the region, for the stated purpose of stability. But on the hand, Russia is supporting various breakaway regions, such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He concludes that Russia is attempting 'coercive hegemony' in the region through a policy of controlled instability. Others see more benevolent motives in Russia's policy and actions. Trenin (2009a, 154) states that Russia's North and South Caucasus policy centred upon the goal of suppressing the insurgency in Chechnya, which was considered as being largely fulfilled in 2004. All other issues were treated as being of secondary or tertiary importance. There was a shift in goals after Chechnya was largely pacified, which centred on resisting the spread of Western and US influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States. 'From this perspective, Armenia featured as Russia's regional bulwark and security base; Georgia, a pro-US implantation within Russia's sphere; and Azerbaijan, a nominally neutral battleground in Russian-US competition' Trenin (2009a, 154). Kazantsev (2008) defines the priorities during President Putin's first two terms (2000–2008) as: 1) resolving the contradictory character of Russia foreign policy through bringing order and clear direction; 2) develop pro-Russian integration projects within the CIS; 3) defining modalities of cooperation with extra-territorial powers in the region; 4) seeking to

secure stability in the region as a means of gaining further security for Russia (especially transnational crime and terrorism);) seeking to retain Russian control over transport routes for oil and gas. This situation sets the scene for continued competition for influence in the region based especially on energy issues and geopolitical spheres. The Old Great Game involved the attempt to limit the territorial expansion and influence of one Empire, which was seen as a direct threat to the other Empire.

We also observed other differences and nuances, such as the original Great Game not only involved armies, but also European adventurers, seeking to penetrate and control previously unexplored territory. In addition, the process was not only driven by aspirations for territorial expansion and military advantage, but a strong desire to open up new trade and markets. The Old Great Game involved two rival powers with a parallel but non-contiguous border expanding towards each other over what was considered as being no-man's land. The New Great Game involves Russia seeking to maintain influence against Western powers in order to retain a buffer zone (Cuthbertson 1994/1995, 31–32). According to some observers, the United States tendency to disengage from the South Caucasus region in the last 10 years has created a vacuum filled by other powers, where US allies such as Turkey are, at times, cooperating with Russia (Valiyev 2018). These two academic assessments are approximately two decades apart, their conclusions of zero sum game and power vacuum are seemingly incompatible. However, these are two very different periods in terms of geopolitics and international relations. Cuthbertson's assessment comes in the chaos that marked the Soviet collapse in 1991, when Russia was very weak politically and militarily, undergoing massive changes in politics and society during the period of democratisation and Westernisation. Valiyev's assessment is made in the era of President Donald Trump's 'America First' policy[4] that was shaped by war wariness from a constant state of being at war since 11 September 2001. This was accompanied by a stated desire through political rhetoric to reduce its global footprint in selected areas, and what seemed to some to be a step back from the US's previous global commitments. Furthermore, Russia was more motivated and capable of pursuing an independent foreign policy with the rise of Vladimir Putin, which has included challenging what it sees as a weakening Western global hegemony (Simons 2019).

These observations reveal some distinct subtleties that exist between the Old and New Great Game, and how the power rivalry was conceived and waged. Cuthbertson does make the additional observation that concerns the variation of how the New Great Game is managed. 'If Moscow's policies in the Baltic States reveal Russian behaviour at its most subtle, Russian power is at its most naked and abusive in the Transcaucasus. Here Russia plays the new Great Game with all the panache, flair, and ruthlessness that it displayed in acquiring its empire in the 19th century' (Cuthbertson 1994/1995, 35). Commentary from the mid-1990s exaggerated a lot of the region's characteristics and sought to draw parallels from elsewhere in order to 'contextualise' the situation in order to make it more understandable. Other scholars have made observations that in part coincide with Cuthbertson. There are a number of constraints and restraints on the states of the South Caucasus, both historical and contemporary, which limit their freedom of action. Anderson notes that the region has become a classic buffer zone, with some parallels to the original Great Game where powerful states have delimited the region for their own purposes. 'Thus, as a buffer zone, there is an ever-present danger of fragmentation and either collaboration with or more likely subservience to a regional or outside power' (Anderson 2000, 130). Some other scholars and commentators see the analogy as being overblown.

Anatol Lieven downplays the Great Game analogy because 'the importance of the Caspian region to American foreign policy is grossly exaggerated' (1999/2000, 69). It was only the demise of the Soviet Union that permitted the occasion to become engaged in the region. A number of factors in the mid-1990s influenced a change in the US approach, such as the oil and gas reserves in the region, deterioration in relations between the US and Russia, a growing instability in Russia, and strengthening ties between the US and Turkey. The result of these factors 'was an ambitious strategy of attempting to "roll back" Russian influence in the region and to replace it with a new, more benign

American hegemony' (Lieven 1999/2000, 69). Other scholars have also noted that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 also permitted the possibility of the US and Western Europe to gain access to energy reserves, which had been forecast as being enormous (O'Hara 2004, 146–147; Kurecic 2010, 30–31). What Lieven saw was not a clash of armies and diplomats to divide and occupy territory for economic and military advantage, but rather an attempt to 'conquer' countries through imparting norms and values to make them more like the US and thereby gain geopolitical and geo-economic advantage through influence.

Unlike the US/EU approach of trying to change the values and norms of the region, which is potentially a threat to the political and economic elites of the region, Russia applies a regime stability approach. The result is the more the West attempts to 'democratise' the region, the more likely the regimes in the region will pivot to powers such as Russia and China driven by the instinct of regime survival (Kurecic 2010, 44). 'In this Great Power rivalry, Russia has at present tactically outmanoeuvred NATO in the Caucasus and made it virtually untenable for the alliance to maintain a permanent presence in the region, despite strong efforts by the US and Turkey' (Antonopoulos, Velez, and Cottle 2017, 376). Markedonov (2017, 148) notes that the rising tensions between the US-led West and Russia globally are mirrored in the South Caucasus where there is the risk of more disagreements and that even a possibility of a conflict cannot be completely ruled out. As Toal (2017) notes, Russia is very much driven and motivated by historical and geographical dynamics, rather than by expressing some form of moral or ethical dichotomies.

The South Caucasus: a venue for conflicting interests

The paths of the three South Caucasus republics have been different in terms of their geo-political orientations, with Armenia being a CSTO member, very dependent on Russia and having the least engaged relations among the South Caucasian states with NATO, Azerbaijan pursuing an independent policy regarding global powers, and Georgia demonstrating a pro-NATO position. Nevertheless, the way common interests might be translated into joint opportunities depends not only on Russia's policy towards the South Caucasus, but also on how Russia-NATO relations evolve. That's why the national security interests and foreign policy goals of these states have to be part of the bargaining process, despite their position regarding Russia and NATO.[5] Some commentators remark that the future of the South Caucasus depends upon its ability to overcome the geopolitical rivalry of the foreign actors with influence in the region, and to establish a functional working relationship with those key actors (Kremer 2010).

Prior to the Georgian-Russian War of 2008 at the Bucharest NATO Summit, the promise of the US-led drive for NATO membership to Georgia caused France and Germany to veto the proposal in order to not provoke increased tensions with Russia (Priego 2008) and prompted Putin to draw the red lines of NATO membership (namely Georgia and Ukraine) (Toal 2017, 94).[6] The furthest extent of the penetration of the influence of Western institutions was assessed as being in Georgia, up to the point of the 2008 War when Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili attempted to retake South Ossetia by military force. This prompted Russia's strong and decisive reaction aimed at that putting the geopolitical trend in check (van der Pijl 2009). Georgia had unanimously articulated that it was pursuing NATO membership since 2003 when Saakashvili came to power until August 2008 when the war broke out. As a corollary to that war Georgia has become more prudent in its relations with Russia. Russia demonstrated its continued presence in the region through its military actions in Georgia. NATO at the same time demonstrated to all the South Caucasus countries that it was not willing to fight Russia for the sake of Georgia's territorial integrity, doesn't matter how aspired it was to NATO membership. This signal was immediately and accurately read by a careful Azerbaijan, which thereafter strengthened the multi-vector nature of its foreign policy amidst the region's geopolitical rivalries and joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 2011.[7] By joining NAM Azerbaijan has declared that it is not seeking membership of either NATO or CSTO at the moment.

Russia's role in the South Caucasus

From the 18th century began Russia's engagement in the region, and from the end of the Russian Civil War until the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was the dominant power in the region. This region constituted Russia's and later the Soviet Union's southern border and was considered to be part of its 'strategic backyard' or 'zone of privileged interest' as the then President Dmitry Medvedev referred to it. The collapse of the Soviet Union also permitted other powers to vie for influence in the former Soviet republics, previously dominated by the strong hegemonic power of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union (O'Hara 2004). In terms of politics, economics and security, it is simply not feasible to separate the links and effects between Russia (especially the Northern Caucasus) and the South Caucasus (German 2012, 83–107). In the mid-2000s there was the term 'spheres of privileged interests' (used by President Putin), which was intended to signify a move away from 'influence' as it was much more specific and identifiable. In addition, policy moved away from an ideologically guided course to one that used pervasive pragmatism (Trenin 2009). Russia currently faces a number of different foreign actors and organisations seeking to expand their influence in the region, such as Turkey, Iran and the European Union.

Russia has been concentrating on expanding strategic ties with its CIS neighbours, which is needed in order to re-emerge as a great power. 'The South Caucasus is hence a region of critical national interest to Russia, which cannot simply shirk engagement there.'[8] Some potential factors that enable Russia to be a more effective regional actor is the historical ties, institutional and demographic advantages and the fact that the country is physically located bordering the South Caucasus (Celikpala 2010, 296). In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse in late 1991, a number of institutions were gradually established and sought in some ways to substitute the former mega-entity in some aspects. These institutions, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Eurasian Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which were based on the premise and assumption of the existence of a common history and common interests. However, not all of the newly independent states welcomed membership owing to the perception of these institutions being Russian-led and influenced, and that Russia was seen as the former colonial power (Molchanov 2015, 23–47). Abushov (2009) argues that Russia's policies toward the South Caucasus constitute neo-imperialism. This occurs when independence is granted to another country, but it is still dominated through control of markets for goods and raw materials. The logic stated is that Russia had ruled the geographic space for some 200 years and is not ready to release it from its influence. However, as is already stated, Russia is not alone in vying for influence in the South Caucasus. This logic seems to fit with Russia's 'regions of privileged interests' statement, but does not take into account the fact of an increasing number of foreign actors becoming engaged in the South Caucasus. Therefore, the level of actual (as opposed to perceived) level of Russian control in the region is exaggerated.

Another entity seeking influence was NATO, which is an institutional vehicle for the US-led West to attract former Eastern Bloc and Soviet entities under the banner of Euro-Atlantic integration and the promise to secure them from Russia's geopolitical orbit. Russia viewed NATO as an unwanted intrusion into 'their' space and took the approach of trying to prove those countries to be 'unsuitable' and 'unreliable' partners (Obydenkova and Libman 2015). One author goes as far as to state 'it could be argued that NATO's very presence in the South Caucasus and its relationship with the three states led indirectly to conflict in 2008 between Georgia and Russia and therefore has undermined efforts to initiate regional cooperation, by further dividing an already divided region' (German 2012, 152).

On the one hand, there is Russia as a conflict-mediator, which brokers ceasefire for the Karabakh conflict via its mandate of a co-chair of OSCE Minsk Group. On the other hand, there is Russia that is seen by some as a provoker. Mutual provocations leading up to the war with Georgia in 2008, Russia recognized two of the Georgia's breakaway regions as independent states and is still militarily present in these territories.[9] A certain amount of leverage is used by Russia in maintaining frozen

conflicts and 'controlled instability', such as the continued presence of Russian security forces in the region, serving geo-energy interests and retaining the geopolitical status quo (Abushov 2009, 209; Peña-Ramos 2017). Nuriyev notes that 'Moscow clearly continues to influence the South Caucasus nations in various, subtle ways so as to orchestrate a conflict scenario settlement that will not only serve Russian strategic interests but also in the end gratify Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Such a regional perspective best illustrates Russia's broad interests, of which Putin's Eurasian Union is but one important part.'[10] Therefore, in practical terms, it becomes a contest of trying to exclude another actor from the region while maximising self-opportunity.

The logic of Russia's policy and actions in the South Caucasus is aimed at preventing or limiting of other foreign actors' influence in the region, which is viewed as being contrary to Russia's security and economic interests (Markedonov 2017). Today Russia accuses NATO of destabilizing the Caucasus region with the joint exercises in Georgia, whilst maintaining permanent military bases in Armenia, as well as separatist regions – South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Emboldened by Russian support Armenia still keeps Nagorno-Karabakh under its influence. However the West does not have an effective political or military tool to balance Russia's military in Armenia. The unbalanced and overwhelming Russian military presence in Armenia creates a threat to planned Western oil and gas infrastructures and pipelines.[11] Yet, Russia has been using its role as a mediator for advancing its own interests rather than the actual conflict resolution. As long as the three South Caucasus states are divided, Russia can influence them. It is apparent that the South Caucasus conflicts serve Russia as political leverage over Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Indeed, the current status quo is clearly beneficial to Russia's interests, preserving an economic and military sphere of influence while preventing any of the South Caucasian states from looking to NATO.

The rationale and logic of Russia's engagement in the South Caucasus fits well with the process of securitisation. In terms of the proposed approach to understanding it using the approach outlined by Waever (2011) and others, which in this instance is Russia doing the acts of security in order to meet what it perceives as being foreign meddling in their zone of 'privileged interests' by various actors and most notably US-led NATO. This is done with the logic of historical arguments that support the premise of this privileged zone. There is also the security argument of maintaining hegemony in the region to protect Russia's southern flank from possible compromise from foreign actor based threats. The intended effects of securitisation are to maintain and possibly expand its own influence and interests in the region at the expense of other actors.

NATO's engagement in the region

Since 1994, all three countries in the South Caucasus have been members of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) Programme. The stated reasoning and logic for engagement in the region is that it is intended 'to support international efforts to promote confidence building measures […] to foster a better environment for conflict resolution, primarily by helping the states of the South Caucasus to establish institutions that are better able to deal with the varied security challenges each country faces' (German 2012, 152–153). US unipolarity after the Cold War imposed fewer constraints and gave greater room for manoeuvre, consequently the subsequent strategy (balance of threat theory) and goals concerned the maintenance of this global position (Mastanduno 1997). Manning and Jaffe (1998) noted that the United States and NATO were buoyed by the apparent victory in the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed entry in to regions such as Central Asia and the South Caucasus. At the time of the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008, 'the United States and its military allies envisioned NATO becoming the security power broker in Russia's near abroad' (Toal 2017, 95). Furthermore, Toal saw the US-Georgian relations as being driven by affective rather than strategic calculations and understandings. This situation places NATO and Russia on a conflictual path owing to the incompatible nature of their security interests and goals.

NATO may be the sine qua non for security in the South Caucasus (Cornell et al. 2004, 7). But it doesn't mean that the South Caucasus countries have to be full members. There have been calls at

what is seen as a means of redressing the 'security deficit' in the South Caucasus is through the gradual extension of NATO programs into the region. Regional states, including Armenia, are now gradually realizing that their relations with NATO are in fact concerned with how to select, develop, and incorporate NATO programs that will, together and increasingly over time, transform the regional security picture overall.[12] When evaluating such calls within the framework of old versus new Great Game, such suggested strategy falls within the frame of Realpolitik in the New Great Game as it does not involve direct occupation, but influence through collaboration and partnership.

'The Caucasus is not only a major flashpoint of frozen conflicts, but also presents itself as a limit for NATO's expansion on Russia's southern tier' (Antonopoulos, Velez, and Cottle 2017, 375–376). The varied security interests and threat perceptions also complicate the region for NATO, where Georgia views Russia as a threat, Azerbaijan does not, and Armenia is a traditional ally. The main obstacles to a pivotal role for NATO in energy security within the Caspian region are: a lack of means and tools at NATO's disposal, which impedes to implement the intentions expressed in NATO's Strategic Concept; Russia's reluctance to engage in a joint-effort with NATO. Any action that the Alliance would implement, especially involving the military, could give rise to a Russian reaction to counterbalance the Euro-Atlantic presence in such a vital region for its national interest; discord within NATO for a greater NATO commitment to energy security; weak coopera-tion on energy security with Caspian partners.[13] This complicated system of security and energy politics, together with the jostling for an advantageous position in relation to competing actors, which is based rhetorically along the lines of national interests has the hallmarks of the practice of Realpolitik. In order to realise the advantage, actors need to create reciprocal relationships with the countries of the region, rather than an approach of formal occupation. This is based on realism that is driven by two branded events – the New Great Game (regional competition) and the New Cold War[14] (global competition).

There is an increased use of branded concepts in foreign policy and international relations that is applied to political and geopolitical trends and processes at play in order to create a desired communicational effect for the sender (Sussman 2010). So far in this paper the New Great Game has been mentioned, however, this branded concept falls within another branded concept, the New Cold War. We consider that this falls on the strategic (global) level, such another (in)famous brand, the Global War On Terrorism. Brands such as the New Great Game (South Caucasus) and the Arab Spring operate within the operational (regional) level of branding international processes and trends. The New Cold War is another brand that utilises faulty logic as a means to create an inaccurate link to past events, which are perceived as being more legitimate such as the original ideologically based bipolar global order of the Old Cold War. This is intended as a means to prime and mobilise the public for otherwise hard to sell or risky policy (Simons and Glaser 2019). This needs to be backed by the political will and capacity to carry out the policy. Hence we postulate, the deeper the level of distrust and the increased level of conflict and competition (short of direct armed conflict), the more likely the sides are to use such brands in order to sell policy to their respective publics as a matter of 'urgency'.

The increasingly strategic nature of the region, the geopolitical rhetoric and posturing of the competing sides' features aspects of both the 'Old' and 'New' Great Games. It has been noted that NATO provides a means and a mechanism for the West to attempt to integrate the region into its sphere through the transferring of the principles (values and norms) of democratic governance and rule of law (Jolicoeur and Labarre 2011, 163–167) to bring the South Caucasus in line with those of liberal democracy. The general approach is to attempt to create and maintain 'like-minded' states in order to balance Russia's common historical experiences and interests approach. In addition, Russia has shown that it uses the frozen conflicts and energy as tools in order to push NATO away from its borders and to weaken its cohesion.

Blank criticizes what he terms as 'mistaken lobbying' of US foreign policy in the Caucasus that he assumes benefits Russian policy and interests there by the lack of challenge to Russian hegemony. He ultimately calls for the US to 'beat the Russians at their own game.'[15] This isolated statement

seemingly confirms to the Russians the subversive intent of the US in the region. This illustrates the 'institutionalised mistrust among political, diplomatic, and military communities in the region.'[16] But this does not answer whether the perception of the policy elites of NATO/US and Russia that their interests and security are at an equal level of urgency and importance.

For local and external actors, the process can be hard to comprehend and maybe construed as threatening by other external actors in the region such as China, Iran and Russia. Therefore, events in the South Caucasus, from a NATO perspective, can be seen as a sort of 'side show' and this can mean that the issue has a higher foreign policy priority from a Russian perspective. There is a highly complex and inter-related series of connected foreign policy interests and goals that go well beyond the region of focus in this article. These include limiting Russian influence and operations in Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. This is further complicated by the developing relationship of convenience between Turkey and Russia as this has potential implications for the Middle East and the South Caucasus. An important observation includes the remark that what is happening in the South Caucasus is part of the larger geopolitical and geo-economic picture.

The rationale and logic of NATO's engagement in the South Caucasus also fits well with the process of securitisation. US-led NATO is the actor engaged in the act of security based on a number of different motivations, such as securing energy transportation routes, bringing stability to the region via the export of norms and values that will create more like-minded societies, and to keep Russian influence in the region in check as a regional aspect of the global New Cold War that involves positioning the US and Russia as civilizational adversaries. The intended results are to extend the influence and reach of NATO and US influence and to counter the perceived Russian threat.

Conclusion

The process of securitisation begins with a contructivist approach with the creation and application of a 'brand' that is recognised and understood in international relations. For example, the Global War On Terrorism, the Arab Spring or in this case, the invocation of the Great Game to a new geopolitical scenario and context. This is understood by various audiences in terms of threat and expectation associations based upon historical memory, given the wars in Afghanistan and other 19th century conflict hotspots that resulted from the perceptions. If the stakeholders and audiences believe the threat in the brand name, the intangible construction is used as the basis to create a tangible and justified realpolitik response to counter the perceived risk/threat.

Realpolitik is observable at different stages of the post-Soviet era where the US and NATO saw an opportunity with the Soviet collapse in a unipolar world, and now with Russia in what appears to be the beginnings of the formation of a multipolar system. A five day war in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 showed that Russia has returned to the arena with a sense of purpose and proved its assertiveness through its actions. Russia seemingly will pull out all the stops in order to exert its influence in its 'Near Abroad' and reassert itself as a dominant power like elsewhere in the post-Soviet space. The South Caucasus with its proximity to Russia occupies an important place in this 'Near Abroad'. The pragmatic nature of Realpolitik in the 21st century as demonstrated by the events and processes of the New Great Game in the South Caucasus, enables some actors bargaining room and possibilities while still retaining their sovereignty and independence and to move beyond a zero sum game, which did not exist in the Old Great Game.

In the bigger strategic picture and to address the research question that was posed in the beginning of this paper, can a New Great Game be said to exist? The answer is not a simple yes or no, but a more nuanced picture that lands somewhere in-between these extremes. An observable competition for power and influence in the South Caucasus by foreign powers is clearly present, and especially between Russia and NATO. It is a situation where the actions of the other side are perceived as being equally provocative by both NATO and Russia even if these processes and events occur beyond the region of the South Caucasus, and therefore the logic is presented as being in need of some sort of firm policy response. However, the current New Great Game, which is a contested term and event, there are some

significant differences that exist as the very basis of the great power conflict and competition. The Old Great Game concerned two great powers clashing over 'unclaimed' land as they progressively moved closer towards each other. At its roots, the New Great Game transpired owing to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which opened up an area that has been in Russia's orbit until this time, to the influence of other foreign actors. The Old Great Game very much involved the direct occupation and colonisation of territory. Whereas the New Great Game concerns the pursuit of influence of countries through the use of institutions – NATO, GUAM, EU versus CIS, CSTO and Eurasian Union, being based upon various competing sets of 'security' and economic interests and objectives. As to the most striking similarity, at its very heart, the New Great Game as the Old Great Game, involves a deliberate attempt to try and exclude the presence of competing actors from a specific geographical region.

The problem of accurate foresight and prediction becomes more problematic to attain owing to the use of branded narratives, such as the New Cold War and the New Great Game. These are mechanisms used to shape the cognitive domain to accept extraordinary measures in extraordinary times, even those this assessment can be difficult to objectively qualify. The effect is to break down the previously agreed upon rules of conduct in foreign policy and international relations, which had its roots in the Treaty of Westphalia. Currently there is a lack of agreed upon and universal accepted practice, which makes the system more volatile, especially in the context of an evolving global order.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, the South Caucasus is defined and understood as including Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.
2. Sergey Markedonov, NATO looks to the Caucasus, National Interest, http://nationalinterest.org/ commentary/nato-looks-the-caucasus-6933?page = 2, 17 May 2012.
3. In this context, 'popular' literature is understood as being non-fiction and non-academic in nature, but still able to reach a large audience. It is necessary to include this category as this contributes shaping and influencing the New Great Game concept.
4. This has included increasing military spending, but also shifting the foreign and security policy focus, which prioritises some regions and sectors and reduces others. For a summary of this please see the following report https://www.brookings.edu/research/quality-over-quantity-u-s-military-strategy-and-spending-in-the-trump-years/.
5. Maria Raquel Freire, *Security in the South Caucasus: the EU, NATO and Russia*, policy brief, Norwegian Peace Building Resource Centre, February 2013.
6. Popeski, R. & Antidze, M., *NATO Holds Key to European Club for Georgia*, Ukraine, Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-georgia-ukraine/nato-holds-key-to-european-club-for-georgia-ukraine-idUSL3017545320080331, 31 March 2008 (accessed 27 November 2019).
7. Cavid Veliyev, *Can Trump shake up the South Caucasus?*, National Interest, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/can-trump-shake-the-south-caucasus-18774, 18 December 2016.
8. Elkhan Nuriyev, *Facing Difficult Choices: The South Caucasus Between Russia and the European Union*, Digest RIAC, http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/digest/facing-difficult-choices-the-south-caucasus-between-russia-a/, 20 January 2015 (accessed 15 January 2018).
9. Tatia Dolidze, *Russian and Western Engagement in the South Caucasus Conflicts: Building Sustainable Stability in the Region?*, 2 December 2015.
10. Elkhan Nuriyev, *Facing Difficult Choices: The South Caucasus Between Russia and the European Union*, Digest RIAC, http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/digest/facing-difficult-choices-the-south-caucasus-between-russia-a/, 20 January 2015 (accessed 15 January 2018).
11. Mahir Khalifazadeh, *The South Caucasus: Obama's Russia 'Reset' And Putin's Doctrine*, CESRAN International, http://cesran.org/the-south-caucasus-obamas-russia-reset-and-putins-doctrine.html, 27 July 2014.
12. Nika Chitadze, *NATO – One of the Main Guarantees of Peace and Security in South Caucasus*, International and Security Research Centre, http://www.isrc.ge/researches-and-publications/nato—one-of-the-main-guarantees-of-peace-and-security-in-south-caucasus, no date given.
13. Aurora Ganz, *Energy Security Issues: is NATO Becoming a (Pivotal) Actor?*, Sciences Po, http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/dossiersduceri/energy-security-issues-nato-becoming-pivotal-actor, September 2014.
14. For an analysis of the New Cold War arguments, which are beyond the remit of this current paper, please see http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/shaping-cold-war-20-role-information-and-identity.

15. Stephen Blank, *US in the Caucasus: Beat the Russians at their Own Game*, The Hill, http://thehill.com/opinion/international/370980-us-in-the-caucasus-beat-the-russians-at-their-own-game, 28 January 2018 (accessed 30 January 2018).
16. Minakov, M., *Victims of Geopolitical Optimism: Is Long-Term Peace Possible in Eastern Europe?*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76618, 18 June 2018 (accessed 19 June 2018).

Disclosure statement

References

Abbasov, N., and D. Siroky. 2018. "Joining the Club: Explaining Alliance Preferences in the South Caucasus." *Caucasus Survey* 6 (3): 252–267. doi:10.1080/23761199.2018.1507599.

Abushov, K. 2009. "Policing the near Abroad: Russian Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 63 (2): 187–212. doi:10.1080/10357710902895129.

Albert, M., and B. Buzan. 2011. "Securitisation, Sectors and Functional Differentiation." *Security Dialogue* 42 (4–5): 413–425. doi:10.1177/0967010611418710.

Anderson, E. W. 2000. "NATO Expansion and Implications for Southern Tier Stability." In *Crossroads and Conflict: Security and Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, edited by G. K. Bertsch, C. Craft, S. A. Jones, and M. Beck, 129–139. New York: Routledge.

Antonopoulos, P., R. Velez, and D. Cottle. 2017. "NATO's Push into the Caucasus: Geopolitical Flashpoints and Limits for Expansion." *Defence and Security Analysis* 33 (4): 366–379. doi:10.1080/14751798.2017.1379119.

Baele, S. J., and C. P. Thomson. 2017. "An Experimental Agenda for Securitisation Theory." *International Studies Review* 19: 646–666. doi:10.1093/isr/vix014.

Becker, S. 2012. "The 'Great Game': The History of an Evocative Phase." *Asian Affairs* 43 (1): 61–80. doi:10.1080/03068374.2012.646404.

Boréus, K., and G. Bergström. 2017. *Analysing Text and Discourse: Eight Approaches for the Social Sciences*. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage Publishing.

Buzan, B., O. Waever, and J. de Wilde. 1998. *Security: A Framework for Analysis*. Boulder (CO): Lynne Rienner.

Celikpala, M. 2010. "Escalating Rivalries and Diverging Interests: Prospects for Stability and Security in the Black Sea Region." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 10 (3): 287–302. doi:10.1080/14683857.2010.503640.

Cooley, A. 2012. *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cornell, S. E., R. N. McDermott, W. O'Malley, V. Socor, and S. F. Starr. 2004. *Regional Security in the South Caucasus: The Role of NATO*. Washington DC: Central Asia Caucasus Institute.

Cuthbertson, I. 1994/1995. "The New "Great Game." *World Policy Journal* 11 (4, Winter): 31–43.

Edwards, M. 2003. "The New Great Game and the New Great Gamers: Disciples of Kipling and MacKinder." *Central Asian Survey* 22 (1): 83–102. doi:10.1080/0263493032000108644.

Entman, R. M. 2004. *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Floyd, R. 2016. "Extraordinary or Ordinary Emergency Measures: What, and Who, Defines the 'Success' of Securitisation?" *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29 (2): 677–694. doi:10.1080/09557571.2015.1077651.

Fromkin, D. 1979. "The Great Game in Asia." *Foreign Affairs* 58: 936–951. doi:10.2307/20040512.

German, T. 2012. *Regional Cooperation in the South Caucasus: Good Neighbours or Distant Relatives?* Farnham: Ashgate.

Ingram, E. 1980. "Great Britain's Great Game: An Introduction." *The International History Review* 2 (2): 160–171. doi:10.1080/07075332.1980.9640210.

Jolicoeur, P., and F. Labarre. 2011. "NATO's Engagement in the South Caucasus: Looking for Energy Security or Expanding Norms and Values?" In *Reassessing Security in the South Caucasus: Regional Conflicts and Transformation*, edited by A. Jafalian, 157–176. Farnham: Ashgate.

Kazantsev, A. 2008. "Russian Policy in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea Region." *Europe-Asia Studies* 60 (6, August): 1073–1088. doi:10.1080/09668130802180983.

Kremer, M. 2010. "European Partnership and the South Caucasus: Framework Condition for a Grand Bargain in 2025?" *Future Scenarios for the South Caucasus by Caucasus Analytical Digest No. 19*, August 13. 15–17.

Kurecic, P. 2010. "The New Great Game: Rivalry of Geostrategies and Geoeconomics in Central Asia." *Hrvatski Geografski Glasnik* 72 (1): 21–48. doi:10.21861/HGG.2010.72.01.02.

Lieven, A. 1999/2000. "The (Not So) Great Game." *The National Interest* 58, Winter: 69–80.

Manning, R., and A. Jaffe. 1998. "The Myth of the Caspian 'Great Game': The Real Geopolitics of Energy." *Survival* 40 (44): 112–129. doi:10.1080/713660015.

Markedonov, S. 2017. "Russian Policy toward the South Caucasus: Security, Unity, and Diversity." In *The New Geopolitics of the South Caucasus: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and Conflict Resolution*, edited by S. T. Hunter, 127–153. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Mastanduno, M. 1997. "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War." *International Security* 21 (4): 49–88. doi:10.1162/isec.21.4.49. Spring.

Molchanov, M. A. 2015. *Eurasian Regionalisms and Russian Foreign Policy*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Morgan, G. 1973. "Myth and Reality in the Great Game." *Asian Affairs* 4 (1): 55–65. doi:10.1080/03068377308729652.

O'Hara, S. 2004. "Great Game or Grubby Game? The Struggle for Control of the Caspian." *Geopolitics* 9 (1): 138–160. doi:10.1080/14650040412331307862.

Obydenkova, A., and A. Libman, eds. 2015. *Autocratic and Democratic External Influences in Post-Soviet Eurasia*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Peña-Ramos, J. 2017. "The Impact of Russian Intervention in Post-Soviet Secessionist Conflict in the South Caucasus on Russian Geo-energy Interests." *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 11 (3): 1–13.

Priego, A. 2008. "NATO Cooperation Towards the South Caucasus." *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 2: 1.

Scott, D. 2008. "The Great Power 'Great Game' between India and China: 'The Logic of Geography.'." *Geopolitics* 13 (1): 1–26. doi:10.1080/14650040701783243.

Simao, L., and M. R. Freire. 2008. "The EU's Neighbourhood Policy and the South Caucasus: Unfolding New Patterns of Cooperation." *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 2(4). Autumn.

Simons, G. 2019. "Digital Communication Disrupting Hegemonic Power in Global Politics: New Media Shape New World Order." *Russia in Global Affairs* 17 (2): 132–154. doi:10.31278/1810-6374-2019-17-2-108-130.

Simons, G., and M. Glaser. 2019. "New Cold War and the Crisis of the Liberal Global Order." *Outlines of Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, Law* 12 (3): 61–77.

Stritzel, H. 2007. "Towards a Theory of Securitisation: Copenhagen and Beyond." *European Journal of International Relations* 13 (3): 357–383. doi:10.1177/1354066107080128.

Sussman, G. 2010. *Branding Democracy: US Regime Change in Post-Soviet Eastern Europe*. New York: Peter Lang.

Toal, G. 2017. *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Trenin, D. 2009. "Russia's Spheres of Interest, Not Influence." *The Washington Quarterly* 32 (4): 3–22. doi:10.1080/01636600903231089.

Trenin, D. 2009a. "Russia in the Caucasus: Reversing the Tide." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15 (2, Spring/Summer): 143–155.

Valiyev, A. 2018. "U.S. Disengagement from the South Caucasus: The Throne Is Never Vacant." *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 545*, October.

van der Pijl, K. 2009. "Global and Local Rivalries in NATO's Push Towards the Caucasus." *Spectrum: Journal of Global Politics* 1 (1): 33–52.

Van Gils, E. 2018. "Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy Strategies and the European Union: Successful Resistance and Pursued Influence." *Europe-Asia Studies* 70 (5): 738–758.

Waever, O. 2011. "Politics, Security Theory." *Security Dialogue* 42 (4–5): 465–480. doi:10.1177/0967010611418718.

Williams, M. C. 2003. "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitisation and International Politics." *International Studies Quarterly* 47: 511–531. doi:10.1046/j.0020-8833.2003.00277.x.