Russian Geopolitical Perceptions and Imaginations of the South Caucasus

Vincenc Kopeček

University of Ostrava
Czech Republic

Abstract
The paper examines the last three hundred years of the history of the South Caucasus in the frame of Russian geopolitical conceptions. We deal with the first Russian military expeditions in 1720s, 19th century Great Game, Baku oil boom or the collapse of the Soviet Union. Then we analyze the development of the new Russian geopolitical conceptions and their implementation in practice.

Key words: Geopolitics, perception, imagination, South Caucasus, Russia, Mahan, Mackinder, Great Game, Euro-Asianism, Euro-Atlanticism

Introduction
Geopolitics belongs among the most controversial terms in political geography or in political science in general. Tomeš (in Daněk, Jehlička and Tomeš 2000) shows the history and the different conceptions of geopolitics: geopolitics as a science, as an applied science, theory, method, analysis, conception, strategy, doctrine or code and finally characterises geopolitics as a post-modern “flexible phenomenon”. This corresponds with the terms “new geopolitics” (Agnew and Corbridge 1995) or “critical geopolitics”. O’Tuathail and Dalby (1998) then speak about perceptions and imaginations; geopolitics according to them more than with the maps of states and borders operates with the maps of significances and representations.

Rather than some type of geographical determinism, geopolitics deals with perceptions and imaginations of space or imaginations of certain political activities. Territories have surely some strategic importance, however we have to be aware of who is describing the territory and evaluating its geography, its natural and human resources, culture, military capacities etc., and what he/she expects from the territory as well as from the description or evaluation itself.

In this paper we deal with the South Caucasus region and we will simply examine the question about the role this territory plays in Russian geopolitics and how its role has changed in the course of the last three centuries. We also summarize Russia’s recent foreign policy in the South Caucasus region and evaluate it vis-à-vis two significant Russian geopolitical schools.

Mahan vs Mackinder
The first Russian military adventure in the South Caucasus occurred in 1722, when the armies of Peter the Great crossed the Caucasus and conquered the Caspian coastline including the town of Baku, assessed by Peter the Great as “the key to the Caspian” (O’Hara and Hefferman 2006, footnote 6). After Peter’s death in 1725, Russians were forced to march back and they have not come back until 1783 when the king of Kartli-Kakheti Erekle II signed the Treaty of Georgievsk that put Georgia de iure under the Russian protectorate. After king Erekle’s death Russians simply annexed eastern Georgia as the first “Transcaucasian”
territory. Other Georgian territories were gained subsequently: Mengrelia, Guria, Abkhazia, Svaneti, Akhaltsikhe and finally Ajara in 1878.

The eastern Transcaucasia was dominated by Persia, but in fact it was disintegrated into a number of more or less independent petty khanates. Between 1804 and 1806 most of these khanates were gained by Russia, some of them by vassal treaties similar to those of Georgievsk (Karabakh), others were conquered after heavy fighting (Baku). The Treaty of Gulistan, signed in 1813 between Russia and Iran, transferred the Talysh-Mughan khanate under the Russian jurisdiction and finally when the Iranian counterattack collapsed in 1828, according to the Turkmanchai Treaty Russia moved its frontier as south as the Aras River and gained the khanates of Nakhchivan and Yerevan. In 1878 Russia, according to the Berlin Treaty, which was signed with the Ottoman Empire, gained the Armenian inhabited provinces of Kars and Ardahan. The Russian move towards the south had been stopped.

However our primary interest dwells in the strategic and geopolitical imaginations that forced Russia to cross the Caucasus Mountains. At least since the times of Peter the Great, Russians had striven for what they used to call “Warm South Seas”. The Baltic and Black seas harbouring the Russian fleet were ice free, however the Russian fleets could be simply blocked in the straits of Oresund, Bosphorus, Dardanelles or Gibraltar. Russia’s dream was to reach the Indian Ocean where it could face Great Britain and hopefully become the world’s greatest power. The Caucasus was perceived as a kind of natural barrier between the vast Eurasian steppes, already controlled by Russia, and Iran, stretching southwards to the ocean coastline. Northern parts of Iran had been actually controlled by Russia for two short periods in 1722-1735 and 1827-28.

The British intelligence officer Arthur Conolly was probably the first who called the Russo-British rivalry “Great Game” in 1830s; whilst Rudyard Kipling’s novel Kim published in 1901 brought this term to fame. The British strove to stop the Russia’s move towards South Seas and possibly India, however, there were only a few proxy wars and preventive military actions and the British and Russian armies never directly fought each other. In 1907 the Russo-British rivalry ended by signing a treaty assigning their spheres of influence.

One could say that the Great Game simply reflected something natural, something that is emanating from the essence of the geographical space. However, this essence is not natural or everlasting, but is created by the people who firstly perceive and imagine and then act. Indeed, the Russians and the British had different imaginations and acted according to different strategies and geopolitical conceptions. These conceptions had been formulated at the very end of the Great Game (1890 and 1904 respectively), but both powers had obviously acted according to those codes.

A. T. Mahan (1890) speaks about the sea power, which is superior to the continental power; each empire, attempting to rule the world, must at first control strategically placed straits or islands. In contrast, Sir H. J. Mackinder (1904) argues that the so-called Heartland (or Pivot Area), constituted by the core of the Euro-Asian “super continent”, and containing crucial sources such as oil, coal, metal ores etc., is due to the development of railway network and land forces able to become a threat to the “marginal” crescent of Eurasia (see figure 1) and potentially become the world’s superpower. Western sea forces were able to marginalize the Heartland for certain time, but now the sea power is declining. The control of the Heartland is crucial for any power attempting to rule the world, whereas the control of the Heartland is possible by limiting Heartland’s access to the seas and by means of possessing Eastern Europe, the key to the Heartland.30

30 “[T]he oversetting of the balance of power in favour of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight.” (Mackinder in Sempa 2000)
Mahan (1918, 29) argues: “The geographical position may be such as of itself to promote a concentration, or to necessitate a dispersion, of the naval forces. Here again the British Islands have an advantage over France. The position of the latter, touching the Mediterranean as well as the ocean, while it has its advantages, is on the whole a source of military weakness at sea. The eastern and western French fleets have only been able to unite after passing through the Straits of Gibraltar, in attempting which they have often risked and sometimes suffered loss.”

Figure 1: Mackinder’s world

It is surprising to what extent the above-mentioned situation applied to the 19th century Russia. In order to join the Baltic and the Black Sea fleets the Russian warships had to sail through at least four narrow straits, which could really be suicidal.

If the Russians had thought as Mackinder, their geopolitical imaginations could have been totally different. Instead of the move towards the South Seas, they could focus on power deal with Germany (seen by Mackinder as a crucial ally of the Heartland) and on controlling Eastern Europe (the key to the Heartland).

Three years after releasing Mackinder’s theory the Russo-British power deal in Central Asia and Middle East was reached and both powers allied against Germany as their main rival. If we evaluate the situation using the Mackinder’s theory, Russians were mistaken in their move across the Caucasus to the South Seas and moreover missed the golden opportunity to ally with Germany and face the British Empire in the world scene.

From Backdoor to Prize and from Prize to Backwater and Underbelly

At the turn of the century Baku became the world’s biggest oil producer. The region had transformed from the backdoor to the South Seas to the prize for the winner – which used to be Russia and some Western entrepreneurial families, such as Nobels or Rotschilds.

After the bourgeois revolution in March 1917 the South Caucasus started to move from the control of the central government and after the Bolshevik revolution the territory gained independence in the form of the Transcaucasian Federation comprised of three republics – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Only after one month of its existence, in May 1918, the federation dissolved into three independent states.
South Caucasus got rid of the Russian rule; however, it became a place of Turkish, German and British interests, focusing on Baku’s oil deposits. After seizing Baku by the British general Dunsterville and its immediate loss in favour of the Turks in September 1918, the British troops finally came to the South Caucasus in November of the same year. However, after the internal power struggle between Curzon and Churchill the British left the region in August 1919 (O’Hara and Heffermann 2006), letting the Bolsheviks retake this former Russian territory. Until 1921 the Bolsheviks had consolidated almost all of the former Russian Transcaucasian Viceroyalty with the only exception of Kars and Ardahan, ceded to Kemalist Turkey.

The importance of Baku’s oil as well as the Baku-BlackSea transport route diminished after the World War II. Huge oil deposits in the Persian Gulf, Western Siberia and elsewhere were discovered and South Caucasus had transformed into a backwater of the Soviet Empire; only the Qabala radar base gave the region some geopolitical importance.

However, in 1980s and 1990s the region had become an underbelly, where, together with the Baltics, the dissolution of the Soviet Union started. Four years after the first skirmishes in Armenia and Azerbaijan the whole region exploded as a powder keg and this explosion metaphorically set the whole empire in fire.

**From Atlanticism to New Hegemony**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union has meant substantial change in the foreign policy of its legal successor, the Russian Federation. Instead of the Soviet Foreign Ministry the Foreign Ministry of the former RussianSoviet Federative SocialistRepublic appeared as the new key player, lead by Andrei Kozyrev. This ministry constituted part of Yeltsin’s power clique and on that account it implemented Yeltsin’s policy of democratisation and cooperation with the West (Cornell 2001, 335).

Euro-Atlanticism became the dominant paradigm in Russian foreign policy during the first months after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It can be simply characterised by Kozyrev’s statement that “[t]he country’s greatness … is determined not by the scale of its empire but above all the level of its people’s well-being” (Kozyrev in Cornell 2001, 336) and thus Russia has to become a “great but normal power” (Cornell, ibid.).

The West, as well as its regional ally Turkey and rival Iran, started to penetrate the post-Soviet space immediately after the Russian withdrawal. However, the Russian withdrawal was not to last long. The so-called Euro-Asianism, or neo-imperial approach, emerged in 1992/1993 and since Yeltsin’s violent seizure of the Duma in October 1993 Yeltsin’s administration became more dependent on the so-called siloviki, and the new military doctrine was issued the same year. Since then Russia speaks about the so-called “Near Abroad”, the area of vital Russian interests (Cornell 2001, 340; Trenin 2009, 147, 152 or Běloševský 2007).

South Caucasus is one of the regions placed into the Near Abroad, although it was striving hard to get out from the sphere of Russian influence, namely in the cases of Azerbaijan and Georgia. The key point in Russia’s striving for the control over the Near Abroad was to incorporate the South Caucasian states into the Russia-dominated CIS. It needed little effort with Armenia, but it was rather difficult with Azerbaijan and Georgia; however, neither Armenia was a reliable Russian ally at the beginning of 1990s as it used to be later. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict Russians initially sided with Azerbaijan, which

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31 Tsygankov (2003) speaks about five schools of Russian geopolitical thinking that can be ranged from the Western-minded liberals to the ultra-nationalists as follows: Westernizers (Trenin), Geoeconomists (Kolosov), Stabilizers (Gadjhiyev), Civilizationists (Zyuganov) and Expansionists (Dugin). Euro-Asianism is more or less synonymous to Expansionism and Civilizationism; another synonyms are Euro-Atlanticists and Westernizers.
possessed a smaller threat to the dissolution of the Soviet Union than the nationalist Armenia, striving for the separation from the USSR. When the initial Armenian attempts to set up good relations with Turkey collapsed, the only Armenian choice was to rely on Russia as its most important ally. The Russian troops stayed in Armenia and allegedly were also involved in the Karabakh war (see Cornell 2001, 355-356).

Azerbaijan has lost the favour of Russia mostly during the rule of the nationalistic president Abulfaz Elchibey between 1992-1993. In this time Russia probably helped to originate the Talysh and Lezgin separatism in Azerbaijan, which ceased after Elchibey's step-down in June 1993. Moreover, Elchibey's political end was a really curious one, and was evidently trumped up in Moscow. The Russian troops deployed in the city of Gyandzha withdrew, leaving behind a lot of military equipment, which fell in the hands of the pro-Russian Azeri colonel Surat Huseinov. Huseinov and his armed men marched towards Baku, forcing Elchibey to step down. Elchibey tried to save himself by allying with Heydar Aliev, a former member of the Soviet Politburo, but he failed. Aliev shared a power deal with Huseinov, the former becoming president and the latter prime minister with “extended competences”. It seemed that Azerbaijan, ruled by the Aliev-Huseinov doublet, was to become a loyal Russian ally as it joined the CIS in September 1993. After that, however, Aliev refused the Moscow-led mediation in the Karabakh conflict as well as the prevalently Russian peacekeeping forces, and set up the mediations in the frame of the CSCE Minsk Group (Croissant 1998, 111). Moreover, Aliev succeeded in signing the so-called “contract of the century” with Western oil companies. Briefly after the signature of the contract Huseinov tried to overthrow Aliev, but failed in doing so, and had to flee to Moscow.

The most apparent Russian influence is evident in the politics of Georgia. This influence used to grow proportionally with the rise of Georgian anti-Russian behavior. Moreover, Georgia is perceived by Russia not only as the key to the South Caucasus, but also its Black Sea ports are, after Russia's loss of Sevastopol in Crimea, of high strategic importance.

The first Russian involvement in Georgia was probably overthrowing the president Gamsakhurdia by paramilitary forces led by Kitovani, Ioseliani and Sigua, equipped with the arms gained from the Russian military bases in Georgia (Cornell 2001, 346). The Russian involvement in the South Ossetian conflict (in 1990s) is said to be lower, but prevalently Russian peacekeeping forces guarding the Ossetian-Georgian border were placed only dozens of kilometres from the Georgian capital Tbilisi.

The more significant Russian involvement can be seen in the Abkhazian conflict, which broke out in 1992. After the initial Georgian advances and the seizure of the Abkhazian capital Sukhumi, Russian volunteers from the North Caucasus, and allegedly also Russian officers, crossed the borders and helped Abkhazians to defeat Georgian forces. As well as South Ossetia, Abkhazia became wholly dependent on Russia.

In 1993 the former Georgian president Gamsakhurdia rebelled in Mengrelia and Shevardnadze’s government had to ask Russia for help, promising to join the CIS and to allow Russian military bases on its territory. Russian military assistance then helped Shevardnadze to put down the Mengrelian revolt.

Similarly to Heydar Aliev, Shevardnadze balanced between Russia and the West; nevertheless unlike Aliev he had to allow Russian military bases in the Georgian territory as well as prevalently Russian peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. On the contrary Shevardnadze has been capable to join Western backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project, to close one of the Russian military bases in Vaziani in the outskirts of Tbilisi, and even to host US military advisers in Pankisi gorge. Pankisi then became the place of indirect Russian-US clash in 2002, when Russian aircrafts bombed Pankisi, accusing Georgia of sheltering Chechen rebels.
Shevardnadze’s balanced policy was replaced after the Rose revolution in 2003 by Saakashvili’s strong pro-Western policy. Saakashvili succeeded in closing all the Russian bases in 2007 with the exception of the Gudauta base, located in Abkhazia. His policy finally led to the brief August war with Russia, which has showed that Russia is determined and also capable to intervene in what it calls the Near Abroad. The question is what has Russia really earned in the war? It now de facto controls Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and it showed its military capacities. But Russia failed in ousting Saakashvili, and also the impact of the war on the South Caucasian states is questionable.

The real Russian success is the gaining of strategically located South Ossetia, from which Russia can watch over important Georgian transport lines including Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, and Abkhazia with its ports Sukhumi, Gudauta and Ochamchira; these ports can possibly harbour Russian Black Sea fleet after the lease of the Sevastopol port in Crimea, Ukraine, will run out.

Saakashvili is still supported by the Georgian middle class, whilst the opposition is fragmented, and comprised of various political figures from pro-Western Nino Burjanadze or Irakli Alasania to openly pro-Russian politicians as Igor Giorgadze. Also, Georgian society is divided into Saakashvili’s supporters and adversaries, and therefore it is highly improbable to expect a coup that can bring purely pro-Russian government.

The South Caucasian states are, after the August war, shaping new policies towards Russia. Russia has showed its strength, but it is highly improbable it will be able to repeat the August military adventure again in the nearest months. More likely is that all South Caucasian states will strive to enhance their ties with the West, and, in doing so, watch Russia carefully how it responds to their activities. What can even happen is that the August war will bring Armenia closer to the West and particularly to Turkey. The Russian military action in Georgia has been watched in Armenia embarrassingly. Georgia is crucial for the Armenian foreign trade, which would be endangered by unrest in Georgia. Moreover, Armenian society is divided into two parts, whose size is difficult to estimate. The core of the pro-Western part is comprised of people from the Diaspora who came back after 1991, and is represented by Raffi Hovhannesian’s Zharangutyun party in Armenia’s politics. As Armenian policy has always been very pragmatic, one cannot cut out the possibility that the August war could be one of the crucial moments helping find for Armenia a more balanced policy between Russia and the West according to the example of Shevardnadze’s Georgia or Aliev’s Azerbaijan.

Conclusions

We have showed that the Russian perceptions and imaginations of the South Caucasus have changed during centuries four or three times, though its behavior towards the southern neighbours has always been in a confrontational style. We claim that Russia is still caught in the trap of classical geopolitical thinking and does not reflect the discursive nature of geopolitics. As Dmitry Trenin (2009, 144) claims: “The Caucasus richly displays the stark contrast between Great Game-style confrontation policies and globalized soft power competition. Traditionally, Russian foreign and security policy has leaned toward the former, but Russia can be only successful if it learns the ways of the latter.” We argue that the recent August war is a good example of this approach, and that the confrontational style of Russian foreign policy, based on Euro-Asianist or neo-imperial geopolitics can bring more losses than benefits.
References


