

## The new multipolar world order and the south Caucasus

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### Abstract

The article will analyze the obvious phenomenon of changing global architecture of world power and domination in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which implies the transition from the unipolar dominance of the United States of America to a multipolar world order. In addition, the impact of the mentioned global changes on the South Caucasus region will be discussed. This article aims to analyze the changes from unipolar to multipolar world order in terms of economics, military balance, security, political conditions, and subsequent challenges for the South Caucasus. The South Caucasus region is already facing complex problems caused by the recent changes in global great power politics.

The article analyzes in detail the interests of global players in relation to the countries of the South Caucasus region, their actions in the past, present and actions expected from them. The presented article is also important from the point of view that only a few articles and works have been published about the South Caucasus region in the context of the transition from a unipolar system to a multipolar system, but given the current processes in the region, readers' interest in the topic is great.

**Keywords:** Multipolar World; New world order; The South Caucasus; International Security; Globalization.

### 1. Introduction

Today, the contemporary population of the world has the opportunity to witness the historical fact of the creation of new regional and global blocs and coalitions against the backdrop of fierce competition of ideological and geopolitical interests. The nature of alliances, coalitions, and blocs existing in the modern world is radically different from historically known unions. The comprehensive processes of globalization gradually lead to the formation of unified world interests, which should include the unification of large countries around the fight against terrorism, pandemics, racial/ethnic/religious, and other types of inequality and problems. However, in parallel with the unification around the above ideas, signs of political polarization are visible in the world, which is caused by the different geopolitics and strategic interests of the superpowers. Accordingly, in the mentioned process of polarization, there are active processes of formation of alliances and coalitions with different goals around different values and interests. Today, it can be safely said that there is a transition from a unipolar system to a multipolar system on a global scale.

### 2. New Multipolar World Order

The world community has the opportunity to observe the historical phenomenon, which is called the active phenomenon of change of political vectors and global polar systems. This is demonstrated by the fact that the economic rise of China, India, and other developing countries is creating new centers of attraction for world finance and trade.

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To understand this issue in depth, let us analyze current world events. The last two years have been marked by two major global conflicts: the war in Ukraine since February 2022 and the war in Gaza since October 2023. These conflicts, together with the decline in regional risks and security, have caused geopolitical instability at the international level, damaged the global economy, and accelerated the movement towards a new multipolar order. Together with climate change, these processes will have profound long-term consequences for the global economic, financial, political, and institutional system. The years 2023 and 2024 are witnessing the beginning of a new era of political uncertainty and increasing risks of conflict. In October 2023, the war in Gaza began – with large-scale geopolitical and economic consequences – at a time when the first major conflict of this century – the war in Ukraine – is still in its active phase. Like the war in Ukraine, the fighting in Gaza demonstrates a geopolitical game in which the United States and China, the main global players in the distribution of geopolitical influence, are actively involved in the process of establishing a multipolar system. In addition to real conflicts, the world is facing serious latent conflicts, with Asia as the epicenter. The region is in the spotlight given its important role in global trade and economy, as well as the China factor, which is a significant competitor to the United States in the struggle for global leadership. The current century has been particularly marked by the growing militarization of the region, aimed at developing defense capabilities against the backdrop of China's growing regional, economic, and political assertiveness. As the largest conflict between the United States and China, Taiwan is a risk factor for a major military confrontation in the region. Since the summer of 2022, China has been increasing military pressure in the Taiwan Strait. De-escalation and a peaceful outcome seem unlikely, and the likelihood of an invasion, embargo, or hybrid operation on the Chinese island remains high in the coming years. It is also worth noting the emergence of new hotbeds of tension in the aforementioned Indo-Pacific region, namely in the South China Sea, with frequent naval clashes between Philippine ships and the Chinese Coast Guard. Meanwhile, the strengthening of Pyongyang's advanced nuclear potential and frequent missile tests on the Korean Peninsula increase the risks of a new conflict, in which the United States of America and China will actively participate. Against the backdrop of global climate change, the African continent is also characterized by increasing instability, where over the past 5 years the influence of China and its satellite Russia has significantly increased, both economically and politically, as well as in the direction of artificially managing refugee flows. The economic and political rise of China, whose actions have become increasingly aggressive mainly from an economic point of view, is already openly threatening the supremacy of the United States. In addition, Russia's actions contribute to the increase of China's supremacy, thereby hoping to grab its share of the "tasty morsel" from the table of the masters. Also noteworthy is the emergence of Iran's regional hegemony, which is upending the existing international order. Also, in the current geopolitical processes, the role of Turkey as a regional and global player with clear competitive interests at both the regional and global levels is very important.



**Figure 1.** South Caucasus

Based on the above, we will analyze the issues of the evolution of the foreign policy of the USA, China and Russia concerning the countries of the South Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia) in the context of global events of the modern shift of geopolitical power from the West to the Indo-Pacific region.

In the process of transition from a unipolar world governance to a multipolar system, the activities of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) organization and the clarification of the real reasons for its creation deserve

special attention. Speaking about the goals and objectives of the mentioned organization, it is enough to consider the statements of officials of the member countries:

- Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar: "BRICS must send out a strong message that the world is multipolar, that it is rebalancing and that old ways cannot address new situations". "At the heart of the problems we face is the economic concentration that leaves too many nations at the mercy of too few".
- Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira described the BRICS as an "indispensable mechanism for building a multipolar world order that reflects the devices and needs of developing countries"
- Chinese Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu said the BRICS group could be expanded to provide assistance to developing countries and emerging market economies.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov - "more than a dozen" countries including Saudi Arabia had expressed interest in joining the group.



**Figure 2** Creating New World Order

Based on the active processes taking place in the world and the existing facts we fully share the view of research fellow of the University of Buckingham Georgiana-Elena Enache and Distinguished Professor at Beijing, China Michael Adrian Peters that "At the end of the Cold War, the United States was the hegemonic power, but the so-called American unipolar moment' has unquestionably ended, and the international world order is swiftly transitioning to a multipolar order. The rising geopolitical, economic, nationalist, and resource competition among three major powers, the United States, China, and Russia, can directly trigger changes in the distribution of power in the international system."

### **3. US interests and policy in the South Caucasus**

The three small countries of the South Caucasus, given their size, attract much more attention from US politicians than one might expect. What is behind such extraordinary attention of Americans to the region? The explanation for this is primarily the huge reserves of Azerbaijani oil, the great transit potential from Asia to Europe, and the strategic geographic location of the region, which for many centuries has led to the intersection of interests in the region between the superpowers.

The history of U.S. interests in the South Caucasus begins in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, except for earlier minor efforts that, under the Iron Curtain and isolation of the Soviet Union, were limited to intelligence activities by the United States.

Even though the United States of America, since the 1990s, has always expressed a clear interest in Azerbaijan, it has sided with Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which was reflected in the Freedom Support Act adopted in October 1992, based on which the United States sharply limited aid to Azerbaijan. The greatest contribution to this position was undoubtedly made by the strong Armenian diaspora in the United States, which occupies strong positions in the American Congress and in the ruling circles.



**Figure 3** The leaders of Azerbaijani and the United States

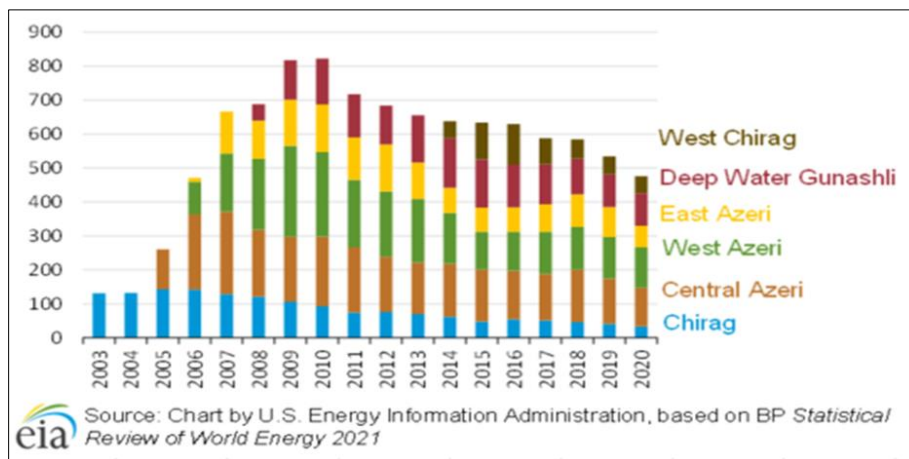
This was followed by a whole series of anti-Azerbaijani resolutions and articles from the United States:

- The “Armenian Protection Act” (H.R.7288) demanded an end to US military aid to Azerbaijan; The “Azerbaijan Sanction Review Act of 2024” (H.R.8141) enforced sanctions against Azerbaijani officials who are allegedly responsible for “war crimes and human rights abuses”.
- The “Supporting Armenians against Azerbaijani Aggression Act” (H.R.5683) imposed sanctions against Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev and ended US aid to Azerbaijan.
- The “Azerbaijan Sanction / Artsakh Aid Act” (H.R.5686) promoted the accountability of the Azerbaijani government.
- The “Armenian Protection Act” (S.3000) adopted by the US Senate protects and provides humanitarian assistance to Armenians in Armenia and Karabakh impacted by actions taken by Azerbaijan.
- “Azerbaijan Human Rights Accountability Resolution” (H.R. 735) which requested information on Azerbaijan’s human rights practices according to section 502B(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.
- “US Recognition of Artsakh Resolution’ (H.R. 320) recognized the independence of the “Republic of Artsakh” (Karabakh) and condemned Azerbaijan’s aggression against Armenia.

P.S. The article cites only a portion of anti-Azerbaijani resolutions and acts.

It should be taken into account that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia, which was in constant conflict with Azerbaijan, always took a pro-Russian position and pursued a policy of having no alternative to Russia.

Although the United States has always defended Armenia’s position in the region, this has not prevented it from having a great interest in Azerbaijani oil. This is evidenced by the fact that American firms and corporations are currently actively involved in Azerbaijani consortia. The United States has expressed clear interest and is actively involved in the Azer, Chirag, and Gunashli oil projects, where together with BP owns 34.1 percent of the shares of the National Oil Company of Azerbaijan.



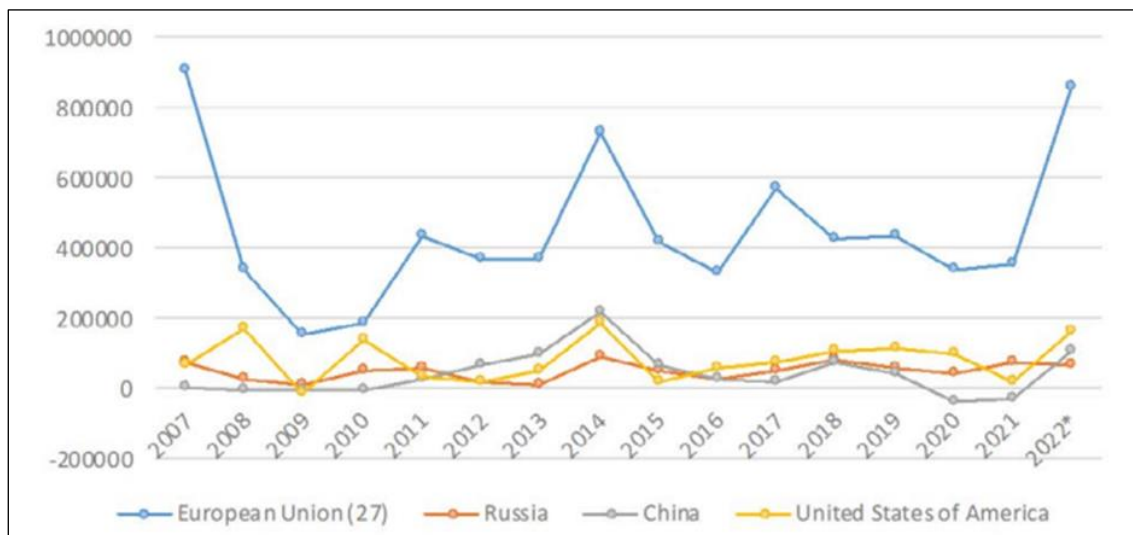
**Figure 4** Azeri- chirag-gunashil production thousand barrels per day



Georgia, located at the crossroads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe, is a small but open market that benefits from international trade, tourism, and transportation.

Georgia has always been a country connecting the transit corridor between Asia and Europe. Now, against the backdrop of very complex relations between Europe and the United States with Russia, as well as the diversification of energy resources, Georgia has become doubly valuable for the United States of America in terms of increasing needs for the transportation of Asian resources and in the transit of energy resources.

Relations between the United States and Georgia, as well as with Azerbaijan, began after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the relatively tense relations between Georgia and the United States today, it is still safe to say that Georgia is America's number one partner and stronghold in the South Caucasus region. This is also evidenced by the Strategic Partnership Charter signed between the US and Georgia in 2009. Over the past 30 years, U.S. assistance to Georgia has been impressive, providing nearly \$6 billion (\$1.9 billion from USAID) in that period to strengthen the country's security and democratic institutions. USAID currently invests in approximately 40 programs worth approximately \$373 million and an annual budget of more than \$70 million.



**Figure 5** Geography of investments in 2007-2022(THE EU, RUSSIA, CHINA and THE USA: THOUSAND USD)

The data presented show that from 2007 to 2022, total investments from the US and EU member states significantly exceeded investments from Russia and China. However, it is also worth noting that the country there are observed growth trends in Chinese investments from 2014 to 2022.

Since 2000, Georgia has been trying to become a member of NATO with the support of the United States. However, the membership of Georgia and Ukraine has been postponed indefinitely due to strong opposition from Russia. In February 2012, it was decided that the United States and Georgia would begin work on a free trade agreement, which, if implemented, would make Georgia the only European country to have such an agreement with the United States. American citizens visiting Georgia do not currently require a visa. Citizens will receive a 90-day tourist visa at points of entry into the country.

During these years, the relations between the USA and Georgia in the direction of military cooperation are also impressive. Along with the USA, Georgia was one of the largest contributors of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan.



**Figure 6** The former Leaders of Georgia and the United States

Despite the multifaceted and close ties that have developed between the two countries, cracks have appeared in the long-standing good relations under the Biden administration. After the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, Georgia refused to join the sanctions imposed on Russia, which it explained by its economic dependence on Russia. At the same time, Georgia supports the territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine in all international organizations and official statements. The volumes of humanitarian aid provided by Georgia to Ukraine are also constant and impressive. However, since this period, Georgia has been pursuing a pragmatic policy towards Russia. In official circles in Georgia, unofficial statements have increasingly been heard that the United States of America is constantly putting pressure on Georgia to involve it in the Ukrainian-Russian war, which isn't supported by specific facts. Recently, mutual accusations have been increasingly heard, which was especially aggravated by Georgia's adoption of the law on foreign agents. America has clearly begun to discuss revising relations with Georgia, which was followed by the introduction of economic sanctions against a certain part of Georgian officials and judges. Georgian Prime Minister proposed a "reset" to mend relations with the United States after Washington paused more than \$95 million in aid over concerns about democratic backsliding. Opposition politicians and the West say the law, which requires organizations that receive more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as "agents of foreign influence", is authoritarian and will stifle dissent.

At this stage, the current government of Georgia is looking forward to the arrival of a new administration in the United States of America and expects a reset and further development of relations. Today, the fact is that the weak positions caused by the inaction of the United States of America in Georgia and the clear and aggressive economic and political policies of China and Russia have led to the United States, like the European Union, losing an important partner and support in the South Caucasus region, which has recently been reflected in obvious changes in Georgia's political vectors.

The United States established diplomatic relations with Armenia in 1992, following its independence from the Soviet Union. Officially, the United States is committed to helping Armenia strengthen its democratic institutions and promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth. As noted in the article, the United States has consistently supported Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as evidenced by just a few of the resolutions and acts presented in this article.

The 2020 US Census alone showed that approximately 800,000 to 1,500,000 Armenian Americans are living in the US, and the Armenian American community is known to be the most politically influential community in the Armenian diaspora. The list of Armenian immigrants living in America who have achieved great success in the United States is quite large and includes senators, congressmen, tycoons, and others. Undoubtedly, the significant influence of the Armenian Diaspora on American politics and active lobbying of the Armenian issue has led to the fact that the official position of the United States of America towards Armenia is always favorable.



**Figure 7** EU-Armenia-US meetings

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia, as well as Georgia and Azerbaijan, along with former members of the Soviet Union - Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, united in the so-called Commonwealth of Independent States organization, which was Russia's attempt to reincarnate the Soviet Union. Armenia, including Azerbaijan, is currently a member of this union. Georgia formally withdrew from the organization after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. In 2002, Armenia joined with Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan in the so-called Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which it remains a formal member to this day. The military alliance is a failed attempt by Russia to form an organization similar to the Soviet-style Warsaw countries military alliance.

Even though Armenia is economically and politically completely dependent on the Russian Federation and on the territory Republic of Armenia currently located 102nd Russian military base, during this period it has always tried to establish good relations with both the United States and NATO. To this end, Armenia has participated in NATO peacekeeping missions and operations with minimal contribution.

Thus, the policy of the United States of America towards the South Caucasus region appears to be very inconsistent. This inconsistency has been particularly evident under the Biden administration. Undoubtedly, the United States of America has strategic interests in the region, but its policy for the effective implementation of these interests is somewhat confusing and unclear. When we talk about the inconsistent policy of the United States in the South Caucasus, we are talking first of all about their strategic partner in the region – Georgia. After Russia annexed 20% of Georgia's territory in 2008, the United States adopted a fairly loyal policy towards Russia and tried to improve both economic and political relations with it. Finally, the result of such relations and policies was that Russia felt open and began to actively restore its influence in the South Caucasus. In this regard, special pressure was put on Georgia. The pressure consisted of restoring economic dependence, as well as expanding politically loyal relations with Russia in the region. To achieve this, Russia has done a lot in a relatively short period. It wonders what actions the United States took against this. Nothing. It calmly followed the events in Georgia and during this time did not take any effective steps to maintain its influence and increase its authority in the region. Georgia, as the main partner of the United States in the region, really deserved the establishment of a visa-free regime, the signing of a free trade agreement and many other actions from the United States. While the United States (especially under the Biden administration) tried its best not to bring the issue of Georgia to the forefront, Russia and China act very effectively and efficiently. And now, when it comes to the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar system of governance in the world, as applied to the South Caucasus region, the trends of increasing Chinese-Russian influence in the region are becoming increasingly obvious.

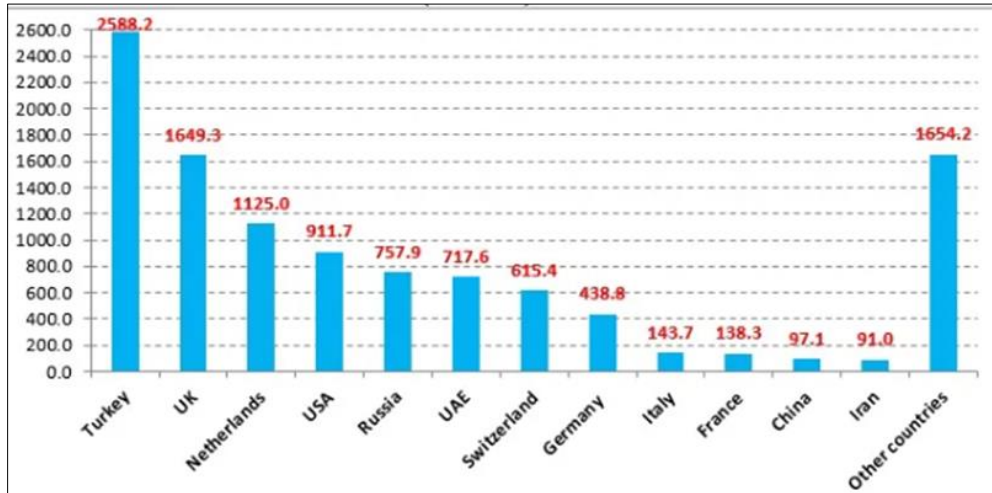
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#### **4. China's interests and policy in the South Caucasus**

Over the past decade, China's unprecedented activity in the South Caucasus region has become evident. In recent months, China has signed agreements with Azerbaijan and Georgia that aim to effectively open the Middle Corridor trade corridor between the East and West. However, economic experts say that no significant changes are expected at this stage. The economic version of the Beijing-Georgia strategic partnership agreement (memorandum of understanding) was signed in September and includes simplification of customs procedures, infrastructure, security, and logistics. "The signing of the memorandum allows us to establish closer trade and economic ties with China, attract additional investments to the country, and increase the export of Georgian products to China," the Georgian Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development said.

On September 19, the State Railways of Azerbaijan announced that it plans to join a venture that will improve freight transportation along the Middle Corridor route.

The relations between these countries are not limited to expanding trade and investment. Since the summer, Azerbaijan has been trying to strengthen its role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and, since the same period, officially submitted an application to join the BRICS group, in which China plays a leading role.



**Figure 8** Countries of origin of direct investment to azerbaijan non-oil sector (2000-2017)

In 2013, the People's Republic of China launched the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, a strategic economic development plan aimed at building infrastructure and strengthening Eurasian ties. This initiative comprises two primary components: the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "Maritime Silk Road." Azerbaijan emerged as the inaugural supporter of China's initiative in the Caucasus region, assuming a pivotal role as a logistics hub and facilitator in the execution of the "One Belt, One Road" strategy.

In parallel with Azerbaijan, there are noticeable trends in the growth of Chinese investments in Georgia. It is also noteworthy that the winner of the tender announced by the Georgian government for a project unprecedented for the entire region to build a deep-water port on the Black Sea was a Chinese state-owned company, which once again confirms the trend of growing Chinese influence and interests.



**Figure 9** The growing dynamics of Chinese investments in Georgia

The presented data once again confirms the growing dynamics of Chinese investments in Georgia.



Similar growth trends are observed in relation to Armenia. In recent years, the volume of both import-export and direct investments and capital investments has increased significantly.

<b>Bilateral trade volumes between Armenia and China (million US dollars)</b>			
	exports	imports (by country of origin)	imports (by country of consignment)
2019	193709.7	751428.7	463302.8
2020	289825.9	674176.1	437285.1
2021	393183.1	551819.7	867617.4
2022	369504.7	1383675.7	698075.8
2023	425350.6	1676979.7	951212.2

**Figure 10** Increasing influence of China in the South Caucasus

Based on the above, there are trends of increasing influence of China in the South Caucasus, which at this stage has already passed the phase of implementing serious and high-budget projects. Of course, it should be noted that due to the current policy of China, its actions in the region at this stage are limited only to economic activity, although this activity in a short time becomes so intense that it covers certain dangers and, in addition to receiving economic profits, primarily serves to weaken the position of the United States in the region.

## 5. Russia's interests in the South Caucasus

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has always perceived the former Soviet republics as its sphere of influence and interests. These interests have especially strengthened under Putin, who calls the historical fact of the collapse of the Soviet Union a global catastrophe for the world. Russia's provocation of conflicts in the South Caucasus region, manipulation of frozen conflicts, and instigation of permanent destructive processes against the integration of the South Caucasus countries into European and Euro-Atlantic structures have become the calling cards of the Russian Federation. As we have already mentioned, first of all, the acceptance of Putin's brazen actions for many years by the United States of America and the EU countries, ignoring the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea, and actions in Syria led to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the difficult de facto situation in the world. The economic and other sanctions imposed on Russia have not produced the desired results, as China saved Russia from the destructive effects of these sanctions, thereby becoming a vassal of China. I would assess Russia's current position as a subject in a large pocket of China's interests, which itself has pockets of its interests. Russia certainly considers the countries of the South Caucasus region to be in the pocket of its geopolitical interests, which it can only realize through a coordinated policy with China and its support. At this stage, Russia is well aware that due to the current situation and under the conditions of the new multipolar governance, it will not have the status of the world's second superpower, and therefore, at this stage, it has preferred to be content with the status of a regional power under the "great wing" of China.

At present, the determining factor in the close relations between Azerbaijan and Russia has become the fact that Azerbaijan has returned the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia and restored territorial integrity. In a situation where Russia is conducting full-scale military operations in Ukraine, it has become necessary for it to change its attitude and policy in the South Caucasus region. In the process of choosing priorities and searching for a politically advantageous move between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Russia has clearly taken the position of Azerbaijan, thereby earned the favor of Turkey and simultaneously strengthening relations with Azerbaijan. With this action, Russia has betrayed its old strategic partner and friend Armenia, where the presence of its military base was already guaranteed until 2044.

Following the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, the process of Armenia's revision of its foreign policy and change of political vectors is clearly visible on the political scene of the region. During the processes in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, Russia did not take active steps to cease fire, which was its obligation under the CSTO Collective Security Treaty Organization agreement, of which Armenia is currently a member. Russian peacekeeping forces withdrew from their positions, thereby giving full freedom to Azerbaijani troops to seize the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. In justifying her actions,

Putin placed the blame on Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan, who allegedly turned away from Russia. Recently, political scientists and specialists in the field have increasingly expressed the opinion that Armenia has begun the process of distancing itself from Russia and, given the further development of processes in the region, may in the future replace Georgia as a strategic partner for the United States of America and the European Union. However, in light of the current indicators of Armenia's economic and political dependence on Russia, this seems to be a rather long-term prospect. It should also be taken into account that there is no threat of closing the Russian military base in Armenia until 2044, and the degree of economic dependence on Russia is very high, which gives us reason to say that a rapid change in processes in Armenia regarding the change in political vectors is more a matter of fantasy than reality.



**Figure 11** Russia's share in Armenia's foreign trade (%)

## 6. Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated the geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus, and it is safe to say that now the future of the South Caucasus countries directly depends on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. At the moment, the region remains a subject of great interest for major powers, in addition to Russia, China, and the United States - Iran, Turkey, and the European Union also have interests in the region. Today, it's obvious that China, Iran, Russia, and Turkey are trying in every possible way to strengthen their positions in the region, thereby ousting the United States and the European Union from the political game. In this political situation and against the backdrop of weakening Western interests, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia are maneuvering and assessing all future geopolitical directions and priorities. Now the situation when Georgia was oriented only towards the West, Armenia towards Russia, and Azerbaijan towards Turkey has become history.

Current processes clearly indicate the process of formation of two superpower camps in the world. World governance is unconditionally moving from a unipolar to a multipolar governance system, where the presence of two opposing camps is emphasized - the USA and China. In such a scenario and with the development/continuation of current processes in this direction, all three countries of the South Caucasus, together with Russia, Turkey, and Iran, will definitely end up in the camp of the World Superpower China in the next 10 years. As for Azerbaijan, it can definitely be said that in this camp it will end up in the zone of interests and influence of Turkey under its patronage. In this case, the future of Georgia and Armenia is interesting. What status of autonomy will these two small countries of the South Caucasus have in this camp? Will they be able to preserve their independence and identity in the turbulent political whirlpool? The future of these three small countries of the South Caucasus, as well as the expected development of events throughout the world in the next 10 years, largely depends on the policies and further actions of the new Trump administration in the United States of America.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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