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The geopolitical architecture of the Caucasus-Caspian region: a theoretical-conceptual perspective

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The purpose of the article is to present a detailed theoretical and conceptual analysis of the geopolitical architecture of the Caucasus-Caspian region, which is a strategic zone of intersection of global and regional forces. The problem under consideration is aimed at understanding how traditional geopolitical theories and modern power dynamics shape the strategic landscape of this region.

Methodology and methods: The article uses the method of qualitative analysis of facts applied in the theory of geopolitics and international relations. This method includes analytical and descriptive study of scientific literature of professional authors, content analysis of political documents and geopolitical strategies of key players. A conceptual framework for assessing regional patterns of coordination, rivalry and institutional mechanisms has been developed.

The novelty of the article lies in the presentation of the issues under consideration in the ideas of integration of classical geopolitical theories, such as Mackinder's Heartland theory and the realist school, with modern studies of regional security. In addition, the article contributes to the development of domestic scientific literature by proposing a conceptual model of the geopolitical architecture of the Caucasus-Caspian region, taking into account both global multipolarity and the peculiarities of regional aspects.

Main results: In conclusion, the author came to the conclusion that the Caucasus-Caspian region is characterized by an emerging multipolar world order, formed under the influence of the competing interests of Russia, the United States, China, Turkey and Iran. Despite various regional initiatives, the geopolitical architecture remains fragmented, without a coherent system of security and cooperation. The study emphasizes the role of strategic geography, energy corridors and external intervention in shaping the regional order.

It is noted that the Caucasus-Caspian region has witnessed numerous attempts to institutionalize cooperation through regionalism and multilateral frameworks. However, it is pointed out that, unlike the European model of institutionalized integration, the region's geopolitical fragmentation, historical rivalries, and asymmetric power relations have resulted in limited and selective forms of regionalism. The aspects of multilateral initiatives under consideration have emerged from both within (regional players) and without (global powers), each pursuing different strategic goals.

It is also pointed out that the geopolitical landscape of the Caucasus-Caspian region has changed significantly as a result of the post-war influence of Azerbaijan, as the winner of the Second Karabakh War in 2020.

Key words: Caucasus-Caspian region; geopolitics; regional security; power rivalry; strategic architecture; international relations theory.

Introduction. The Caucasus-Caspian region has emerged as one of the most strategically contested spaces in the post-Cold War geopolitical landscape. Positioned at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the region serves as a critical juncture for global energy flows, trade routes and military transit corridors. It is not only geographically significant but also politically sensitive, where the interests of global powers—such as the United States, Russia and China—intersect with those of influential regional actors, including Turkey, Iran and the European Union.

The purpose of the article is to present a detailed theoretical and conceptual analysis of the geopolitical architecture of the Caucasus-Caspian region, which is a strategic zone of intersection of global and regional forces. The problem under consideration is aimed at understanding how traditional geopolitical theories and modern power dynamics shape the strategic landscape of this region.

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Analysis of the latest publications. Historically, the Caucasus and Caspian basin have been viewed through the prism of classical geopolitics. Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory and Nicholas Spykman's Rimland Theory both positioned this space as essential for controlling Eurasia [1]. Today, however,

the region's geopolitical importance has evolved in line with changes in global power configurations, particularly with the rise of multipolarity and the growing complexity of regional conflicts [2].

In recent years, the region has witnessed a reassertion of Russian influence, growing Chinese economic involvement via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and NATO's strategic recalibrations. Simultaneously, intra-regional dynamics—the role of the Caspian Sea in energy politics, and the competing connectivity initiatives—have contributed to an increasingly fluid and fragmented geopolitical environment [3][4].

Despite numerous studies focusing on individual states or bilateral rivalries, there remains a gap in the academic literature concerning the conceptual structure of the region's geopolitical architecture. While some scholars have examined the region through lenses such as security complexes, regionalism, or energy geopolitics, few have attempted to integrate these dimensions into a unified theoretical framework [5].

This article addresses that gap by offering a comprehensive theoretical-conceptual analysis of the geopolitical architecture of the Caucasus-Caspian region. It explores the region as a dynamic geopolitical system shaped by historical legacies, strategic geography, and evolving patterns of power competition. Through the application of international relations theory—primarily realism and neoclassical geopolitics—it aims to construct an analytical model that explains both the drivers of regional instability and the possibilities for cooperative regional order.

Main matters. Theoretical foundations of geopolitical architecture. The conceptualization of geopolitical architecture requires a firm grounding in the theoretical traditions of international relations and classical geopolitics. In order to analyze the Caucasus-Caspian region as a geopolitical system, it is essential to first understand how states perceive space, power and security within regional and global contexts. This section outlines the principal theoretical foundations that inform this study, focusing on realism, classical geopolitics and neogeopolitical approaches.

Realism and the logic of power politics. Realism remains one of the most dominant paradigms in international relations theory, emphasizing the anarchic nature of the international system, the centrality of states, and the primacy of power and national interest. Within the realist tradition, the struggle for power and influence is considered inevitable due to the absence of a central authority and the self-help logic that governs state behavior [6]. From this perspective, the Caucasus-Caspian region is viewed as a strategic buffer zone, where great powers compete for influence in order to secure vital interests—particularly in the domains of energy, security and trade.

Neorealism or structural realism, further refines this outlook by arguing that the distribution of capabilities within the international system determines state behavior. According to Waltz, regions like the Caucasus become arenas of contestation when systemic shifts (e.g., the decline of unipolarity or the rise of multipolarity) create power vacuums or unbalanced security configurations [7]. This theoretical lens is particularly useful for explaining the geopolitical assertiveness of Russia and the counterbalancing efforts of NATO, Turkey, and other regional actors.

Classical geopolitics and strategic space. Classical geopolitical theories provide the spatial logic necessary for understanding the strategic importance of the Caucasus-Caspian region. Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory famously positioned Eurasia as the "geographical pivot of history", arguing that control over this area was essential to commanding global power [8]. In this view, the Caucasus—situated near the Heartland—serves as a corridor or gateway, making it geostrategically invaluable.

Nicholas Spykman, by contrast, emphasized the significance of the Rimland—the coastal fringes of Eurasia—which also includes the Caucasus region. His theory posited that controlling the Rimland was more critical to global dominance than the Heartland itself [9]. These classical theories remain relevant, particularly when analyzing how external powers view the region's value in broader Eurasian strategies.

Neogeopolitics and regional complexity. Contemporary geopolitics—or "neogeopolitics"—extends classical thought by incorporating non-state actors, economic interdependence, and ideational factors such as identity, nationalism, and soft power. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how modern geopolitical architecture is formed—not solely through military dominance or territorial control but also through energy diplomacy, infrastructure investment, and normative influence [10].

Neogeopolitical analysis helps explain why initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or the European Union's Eastern Partnership target the Caucasus-Caspian region. These projects seek to reconfigure the region's connectivity and alignment without necessarily resorting to coercive strategies [11]. Moreover, neogeopolitics accounts for the growing influence of regionalism and institutional frameworks, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) or GUAM, in shaping alignment patterns.

Constructing regional geopolitical architecture. The term "geopolitical architecture" refers to the structural configuration of power relations, spatial control, institutional mechanisms and strategic perceptions that define a given region. In the case of the Caucasus-Caspian, this architecture is neither static nor cohesive; it is in constant flux, shaped by the interplay of systemic forces and regional agency [12]. Constructing an analytical model thus requires synthesiz-

ing insights from multiple theoretical traditions—realism to explain power competition, classical geopolitics to contextualize spatial dynamics and neogeopolitics to interpret modern instruments of influence.

By engaging with these frameworks, this article seeks to offer a layered conceptual understanding of the region's geopolitical architecture—one that reflects both its deep historical embeddedness and its dynamic contemporary realignments.

Regionalism and multilateral initiatives. The Caucasus–Caspian region has witnessed numerous attempts to institutionalize cooperation through regionalism and multilateral frameworks. However, unlike the European model of institutionalized integration, the region's geopolitical fragmentation, historical rivalries, and asymmetric power relations have led to limited and selective forms of regionalism. Multilateral initiatives have emerged both from within (regional actors) and from outside (global powers), each driven by divergent strategic objectives. This section assesses the role, effectiveness, and limitations of regionalism and multilateralism in the geopolitical architecture of the Caucasus–Caspian zone.

Functional regionalism refers to cooperation driven by shared interests in non-political domains such as trade, transport, and energy. The Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia (TRACECA), launched in the late 1990s with support from the European Union, represents an early example of externally sponsored functional regionalism aimed at integrating the South Caucasus and Central Asia into the global economy [13].

More recently, the Middle Corridor (or Trans-Caspian International Transport Route – TITR), supported by Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, has gained strategic momentum, especially in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war and the subsequent re-routing of Eurasian trade away from Russian territory. These initiatives not only enhance East–West connectivity but also reduce dependence on Russian-controlled infrastructure [14].

Azerbaijan's proactive role in regional transport and energy infrastructure development has positioned the country as a central hub within the Middle Corridor framework. Projects such as the Port of Baku, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and the future Zangezur Corridor (envisioned to connect mainland Azerbaijan with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and further to Turkey) exemplify Baku's strategic vision to boost regional connectivity. These developments, alongside sustained investments in logistics and energy interconnectors, support Azerbaijan's long-term positioning as both a transit and energy-exporting power.

In addition to these functional initiatives, recent years have seen the emergence of new multilateral cooperation formats led by regional actors. One notable example is the “3+3” regional platform, proposed by Azerbaijan and supported by Russia, Turkey,

and Iran, which aims to bring together the three South Caucasus countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia) and three neighboring powers to address regional issues through dialogue and cooperation. This format offers a promising mechanism for promoting regional ownership over conflict resolution and economic integration, while minimizing external intervention.

Moreover, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has emerged as a significant multilateral platform, strengthening ties among Turkic-speaking countries, including Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The OTS has expanded its agenda beyond cultural and linguistic ties to encompass cooperation in energy, transportation, education, digitalization, and security. Azerbaijan has played a pivotal role in the organization, leveraging its geographic position and infrastructure to facilitate deeper integration among Turkic states and to promote a shared regional identity within the broader Caucasus–Caspian space.

Despite these positive trends, functional cooperation has largely struggled to evolve into deep institutional integration due to limited political trust, competing external alignments, and the absence of supranational governance mechanisms. Cooperation remains primarily project-based and pragmatic, rather than driven by a shared regional identity or political vision [15].

Security-focused multilateralism in the region has been largely dominated by external power-sponsored alliances. Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) reflect Moscow's efforts to institutionalize a regional order centered around its hegemonic influence. Armenia is a member of both organizations, while Georgia and Azerbaijan have opted for non-aligned or Western-oriented trajectories.

Conversely, the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development—comprising Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova—was established in the early 2000s to counterbalance Russian dominance and to promote Euro-Atlantic integration. However, GUAM has remained largely symbolic, with minimal institutional depth, due to divergent member interests and the absence of collective capacity [16].

Other multilateral platforms, such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), also aim to foster regional collaboration, but their effectiveness is often undermined by overlapping memberships and unresolved political tensions. None of these frameworks has matured into a comprehensive regional security institution capable of addressing cross-border challenges such as conflict resolution, arms control, or counterterrorism.

China's entry into the region has introduced a new model of regionalism—infrastructure-led, investment-driven, and non-conditional. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has established mul-

multiple bilateral and minilateral agreements focused primarily on connectivity, without imposing governance or ideological preconditions. While not a formal multilateral bloc, the BRI functions as a form of soft regionalism, reconfiguring economic linkages and infrastructural alignments across the region [17].

Although China's preference for bilateralism may limit the development of collective regional institutions, it nonetheless promotes transnational interdependence, particularly in logistics, energy, and digital connectivity.

Despite the proliferation of multilateral initiatives, the region continues to suffer from fragmented regionalism. No single regional actor possesses the legitimacy or capacity to serve as an integrative force across the entire Caucasus–Caspian space. The ongoing rivalry between Russia, the West, China, Turkey, and Iran has so far prevented the emergence of a cohesive regional order [18].

However, the increasing regional ownership of initiatives—such as Azerbaijan's infrastructure diplomacy, the 3+3 platform, and cooperation under the OTS—reflects a growing capacity for autonomous regionalism. While still in a formative phase, these frameworks offer an alternative to externally imposed models by promoting collaborative, interest-based, and regionally driven solutions to shared challenges.

In this regard, regionalism in the Caucasus–Caspian space remains largely instrumental rather than transformative—yet recent trends signal the potential for more sustainable and homegrown multilateral cooperation, provided there is sufficient political will and strategic coordination among regional stakeholders.

Conclusion. The geopolitical architecture of the Caucasus–Caspian region is evolving through a complex interplay of historical legacies, strategic interests, and emerging patterns of regional and global engagement. Rather than a static or fragmented geopolitical space, the region increasingly reflects characteristics of a dynamic, multi-layered system shaped by both external pressures and internal agency.

While major powers—such as Russia, the United States, China, Turkey, and Iran—continue to exert influence, regional actors themselves are playing a growing role in defining cooperation formats, infrastructure initiatives, and institutional frameworks. Although institutionalized multilateralism remains limited in depth, there is a notable shift towards functional, pragmatic cooperation in areas like energy, trade, and transport. These developments indicate an ongoing process of regional adaptation to multipolar realities, rather than mere dependence on external forces.

In this context, Azerbaijan has emerged as a pivotal actor with the strategic capacity to influence regional trajectories. Its investments in connectivity (e.g., the Middle Corridor, the Zangezur corridor), its energy diplomacy, and its deepening partnership with Tur-

key underscore its central role in shaping East–West and North–South linkages. Azerbaijan's ability to leverage its geographic position, post-conflict political capital, and multi-vector foreign policy enhances its influence in both regional and interregional frameworks.

Furthermore, emerging formats such as the 3+3 regional cooperation platform, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), and broader Eurasian transport corridors point to a gradual normalization of regional dialogue and institution-building. These initiatives, while still in development, offer a foundation for more coherent and resilient forms of regional governance in the future.

This study conceptualizes the Caucasus–Caspian region as a flexible and adaptive geopolitical system within a broader multipolar order. The region's long-term stability and integration will depend on its ability to manage external competition while strengthening regional agency and cooperation. Future research should further explore the implications of global transformations—such as energy transitions, digital infrastructure, and shifting security paradigms—for the geopolitical consolidation of the Caucasus–Caspian space.

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Геополітична архітектура Кавказько-Каспійського регіону: теоретико-концептуальна перспектива

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Мета статті детально представити теоретичний і концептуальний аналіз геополітичної архітектури Кавказько-Каспійського регіону, який є стратегічною зоною перетину глобальних і регіональних сил. Розглянута проблема спрямовано розуміння того, як традиційні геополітичні теорії та сучасна динаміка сил формують стратегічний ландшафт даного регіону.

Методологія та методи: У статті використовується метод якісного аналізу фактів, що застосовуються в теорії геополітики та міжнародних відносин. Цей метод включає аналітико-описове вивчення наукової літератури професійних авторів, контент-аналіз політичних документів та геополітичних стратегій ключових гравців. Розроблено концептуальну основу для оцінки регіональних моделей узгодження, суперництва та інституційних механізмів.

Новизна у статті полягає у поданні розглянутих питань в ідеях інтеграції класичних геополітичних теорій, таких як теорія Хартленда Маккіндера та реалістична школа, з сучасними дослідженнями регіональної безпеки. Крім того, до статті вноситься внесок у розвиток вітчизняної наукової літератури, пропонуючи концептуальну модель геополітичної архітектури Кавказько-Каспійського регіону, яка враховує як глобальну багатополарність, так і особливості регіональних аспектів.

Основні результати: Підбиваючи підсумки автор дійшов такого висновку, що Кавказько-Каспійський регіон характеризується багатополарним світопорядком, що формується, що формується під впливом конкуруючих інтересів Росії, США, Китаю, Туреччини та Ірану. Незважаючи на різні регіональні ініціативи, геополітична архітектура залишається фрагментованою, без цілісної системи безпеки та співробітництва. Дослідження наголошує на ролі стратегічної географії, енергетичних коридорів та зовнішнього втручання у формуванні регіонального порядку.

Зазначається, що Кавказько-Каспійський регіон став свідком численних спроб інституціоналізувати співпрацю за допомогою регіоналізму та багатосторонніх рамок. Однак, вказується на те, що на відміну від європейської моделі інституціоналізованої інтеграції, геополітична фрагментація регіону, історичне суперництво та асиметричні співвідношення сил призвели до обмежених та виборчих форм регіоналізму. Розглянуті аспекти багатосторонніх ініціатив виникли як зсередини (регіональні гравці), так і ззовні (глобальні держави), кожна з яких мала різні стратегічні цілі.

Крім того, зазначається, що геополітичний ландшафт Кавказько-Каспійського регіону суттєво змінився внаслідок післявоєнного впливу Азербайджану як переможця після Другої Карабахської війни 2020 року.

Ключові слова: Кавказько-Каспійський регіон; геополітика; регіональна безпека; конкуренція за владу; стратегічна архітектура; теорія міжнародних відносин.

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