Russia’s foreign policy in the changing regional chessboard

In the last months, Russia has adopted a proactive foreign policy in the former soviet space, aimed to restore its geopolitical influence in Central Asia and Caucasus - partially eroded by the growing dynamism of China, due to the huge investments within the geo-economy strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative - and to recalibrate its initiatives in the changing regional scenario.

The Caspian basin: a traditional sphere of Russian influence

After several months of diplomatic contacts and relations, on 12 August Russia and the other four littoral countries of the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iran and Turkmenistan) signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, which should theoretically allow the realization of the long-awaited Trans-Caspian underwater pipeline, through which Turkmenistan could export natural gas to Azerbaijan and then to the European market filling the Southern Energy Corridor. At present Russia has apparently showed a good approach to a project which has vehemently opposed for several years - due to the fact that it is conceived as a pipeline aimed to reduce the EU dependence on Russian gas imports - even if there are again several potential hindrances which can affect the concrete implementation of this pipeline linking the two shores of the Caspian Sea: the article 14 of the Convention recognizes the right to realize an underwater gas pipeline if there is an agreement between the countries involved in the planned route, but “on the condition that their projects comply with environmental standards and requirements embodied in the international agreements to which they are parties...”, so influencing its realization due to the expected negative observations on this issue by Russia and Iran.¹

In addition to the energy dimension, the agreement (article 3, paragraphs 6 and 7 of the Convention of the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea) to ban the access of foreign military forces to the Caspian basin (and also to realize bases or military facilities along the coastline)² will have significant geostrategic implications: as a matter of fact, Russia will be able to frustrate potential ambitions of external international actors (such as the United States, other NATO’s member countries, or China), also allowing Moscow to consolidate its own presence in the Caspian basin which is traditionally conceived by Russia as an area under its semi-exclusive sphere of influence.

Considering the geographical position of the basin, Russian military forces benefit of the possibility to directly access to the Caucasus and Central Asia region, as well as to lead military operations concerning Middle East region. Two weeks after the agreement, Russia’s Caspian Flotilla carried out special exercises in the basin - together with aviation and coastal-air defense groups - to identify


and to neutralize low-flying missiles and aircrafts, so emphasizing Russian military supremacy and hegemony in this strategic basin and preventing the access of perceived-hostile forces.³

**Guidelines for a new foreign policy in the Southern Caucasus**

Armenia’s new political course has represented one of the main source of concern for Moscow: between April and May a wave of protests and popular manifestations forced the former President Serzh Sargsyan to resign from his post as Prime Minister (a political role obtained thanks to constitutional amendments came into force in April), while the opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan has become Prime Minister.

The replacement of the former pro-Russian political elites and the strong critics expressed by Pashinyan on the orientations of the Armenia’s foreign policy - based on a strong cooperation with Russia, as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)⁴ - have alarmed Moscow about the potential implications of the Armenia’s political repositioning triggered by this kind of velvet revolution.⁵ In July, the decision to arrest the former President Robert Kocharyan and the current CSTO Secretary General Yuri Khachaturov - for their role in suppressing popular demonstration in the country in 2008 - enhanced Russian fears to lose a traditional regional partner in the security and economic field, so weakening the geopolitical extent of the regional integration projects, in spite of the limited economic and industrial relevance of Armenia within the Eurasian Economic Union.

However, the Prime Minister Pashinyan has worked to legitimize the new government with the traditional ally, confirming the political will to preserve cooperation and positive relations with Russia. After he took office, Pashinyan met President Putin: in his speech, the Armenian Prime Minister stressed that the bilateral strategic relations are not under discussion, hoping to boost economic and political cooperation, also in the military sphere.⁶ This approach has been confirmed during a bilateral meeting held in Moscow in September, which was particularly significant because it was organized after the arrests of the former Armenian President and of the CSTO Secretary General.⁷ In October, following a meeting among Defense Ministries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) held in Tashkent, the Armenian Defense Minister Tonoyan and the Russian Defense Minister Shoigu signed a bilateral defense cooperation agreement for 2019.

At present Russia and Armenia have apparently reached a profitable and mutual “modus vivendi”, within which the military cooperation plays a great relevance. In July Russia delivered to Armenia $200 million worth of weapons and military equipment and the Caucasian republic hosted a bilateral military exercise involving the joint Armenian-Russian force (set up in 2000) in order to fight against a simulated invasion.⁸


Concerning the “frozen conflict” in Nagorno-Karabakh - which since 90’s opposed Armenia and Azerbaijan - Pashinyan has expressed its intention to settle peacefultly this issue, declaring that the breakaway region should be integrated in the Armenia’s territory. Furthermore, he also called for accepting the self-determination right of the Nagorno-Karabakh population, also proposing that its representatives should directly participate in the peace talks. Azerbaijan has completely rejected this approach, asking that the territorial integrity of the country have to be completely restored in accordance with international laws. During the CIS summit in Dushanbe (Tajikistan) Armenian Prime Minister met Azerbaijani President Aliyev and both agreed on the need to avoid provocations and to reduce tensions between respective national armies.

The issues debated during this bilateral meeting must be interpreted following the ongoing geopolitical rapprochement between Russia and Azerbaijan. On 27 September Russian President paid an official visit to Baku, in order to corroborate the deals signed in Sochi some weeks earlier, when Putin and Aliyev concluded several cooperation agreements in different domains (tourism, economy, agriculture, defense): among them, the $5 billion deal to purchase Russian weaponry is the most important, not only as a further step to boost bilateral cooperation in the security field but potentially foreshadowing an Azerbaijan’s potential membership in CSTO. In August, Ali Huseynli - Azerbaijani member of Parliament and head of the Azerbaijani-Russia inter-parliamentary group - declared that a future adhesion of Azerbaijan in the Russian-leded security multilateral organization could be profitable and advisable, mainly because this membership will allow Azerbaijan to buy weapons and military equipment from Moscow at favorable-Russian domestic prices, lower than international ones.

Azerbaijan’s membership in CSTO would represent a landmark in the regional security architecture, with evident implications also in the Armenian-Azerbaijani low-intensity conflict in Nagorno Karabakh. Even if Russia is the main regional partner for Armenia in the security field (but also in the political and economic sphere), Moscow traditionally seeks to maintain its influence in the Southern Caucasus providing weapons to both countries.

Yerevan government is profoundly concerned about this rapprochement between Russia and Azerbaijan, also fearing that the vulnerable regional balance could be modified favoring Baku, also considering the work-in-progress relations between Russia and Armenia. According to Pravda, in the case that Azerbaijan joins CSTO, Russia could exert its influence to Armenia to return five of the seven provinces of the Azerbaijani territory conquered by Yerevan during the Karabakh war in 1993. This appear as a mere hypothesis and none official authority confirmed Pravda’s version: nevertheless, Pashinyan government reacted declaring that Armenia will be ready to express veto about Azerbaijan’s membership to CSTO and EEU until a comprehensive peace plan for Karabakh is achieved.

10 Ibidem
On the Russian perspective, Azerbaijan membership in CSTO would enhance regional integration projects, due to the huge economic, military and energy weight of the Caucasian republic: moreover, Azerbaijan is also a strategic partner for the EU to implement the Southern Energy Corridor and key route for the European diversification strategy of natural gas imports.

The enhanced strategic partnership with Uzbekistan

In Central Asia, the enhanced cooperation between Uzbekistan and Russia could prefigure a new geopolitical phase that will influence the regional balance of power. Between 19 and 21 October, the Russian President Putin paid an official visit to Tashkent and signed with Uzbek President Mirziyoyev $27 billion worth of trade agreements, which legitimize the return of Russia as privileged partner for Uzbekistan. These agreements represent the largest package of investments and trade deals concluded by this Central Asian republic, compared to the $23 billion worth of trade agreements signed with China in May 2017 during the Belt and Road Initiative summit in Beijing, or $5 billion worth deals granted after Mirziyoyev’s official visit to Washington in May 2018.

Russia is the second largest investor in Uzbekistan - more than $8.7 billion have been already invested in several projects - after China. Following the strengthening of the commercial relations, these countries aspire to increase the trade turnover to the target of $5 billion in the next years: in 2017, Russian-Uzbek trade grew 34% to $3.7 billion, while in January-July 2018 trade turnover grew 32.1% compared to the similar period of the last year. Furthermore, Russia has decided to open national borders to the Uzbek agricultural products, even if Uzbekistan refuses to join the Eurasian Economic Union.

In the energy sphere, Uzbekistan and Russia have started works to build a $11 billion nuclear power plant near Tudakul lake (east of Bukhara, in the Navoi velayat or province), in cooperation with Rosatom, the Russian nuclear energy company. This nuclear plant is estimated to produce 2.4 Gigawatt of electricity by 2028. According to the director of Uzatom state agency, Uzbekistan will double its energy demand by 2020 so the new nuclear plant will be able to satisfy 15% of this rising energy consumption, also reducing carbon dioxide emissions while additional volumes of natural gas can be allocated for exports.

Moreover, Russia and Uzbekistan signed a strategic cooperation deal in the defense sector, which allows to military aircrafts of both countries the mutual access to one another’s airspace. According to the Russian foreign minister, Shoigu, this initiative is necessary to fight jointly against common challenges and threats, mainly the spread of international terrorism in the region. This agreement clearly shows the progressive improvement of their bilateral relations and the mutual will to build a long term military and security cooperation, also considering the relevant military deals concluded in the last two years.

As a matter of fact, the new Uzbek President Mirziyoyev has decided to strengthen the bilateral military cooperation with Russia, but reconfirming at the same time the adherence to the key principles of the Uzbekistan’s foreign policy doctrine - no foreign military bases in Uzbekistan, no alignment with foreign military or political blocks - aimed at improving economic and political

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cooperation with other Central Asian countries and preserving an efficient and profitable geopolitical balance among Russia, United States and China's strategic interests.\(^{20}\)

In April 2017 Tashkent and Moscow ratified an agreement on military-technical cooperation which allows Uzbekistan to purchase military equipment from Russia at prices close to Russian domestic prices - similar to prices granted to CSTO member countries, so highlighting the strategic role of Uzbekistan in the regional security architecture - as to repair existing hardware and to expand research and development activities. In October 2017, these countries held their first joint military exercises since 2005, when Tashkent realized its eastward geopolitical shift to Russia and China after refusing to renovate the concession of Karachi-Khanabad military airbase to US military forces.\(^{21}\)

The evolution of the renovated military and economic cooperation between Russia and Uzbekistan represents a strategic trend to monitor carefully, even if the current improvement of bilateral relations does not mean a short-term adhesion of Uzbekistan in CSTO, strengthening regional security architecture, or in the EEU, further developing the project of economic integration in the former soviet space.
