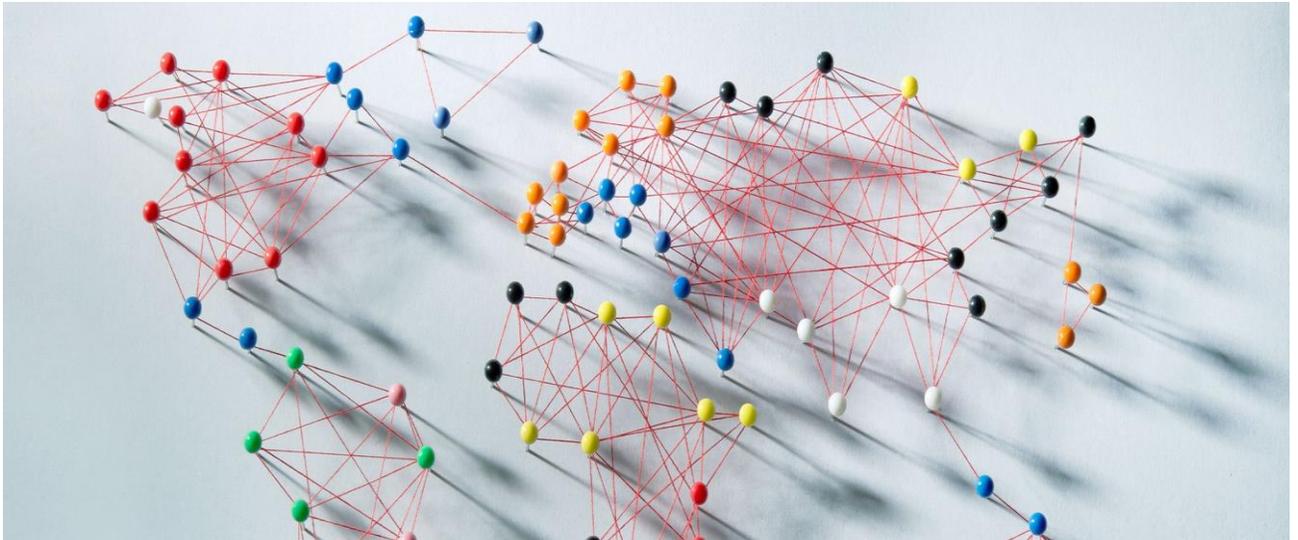


On Specific Issues – So Simple, Yet So Complex

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February 18, 2021*



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Today's system of interstate relations, namely the aspiration of a state to influence and spread its interests over others, has been based on an elemental "instinct" for several centuries now. Judging by the reality in the world today, this cause of global order (or disorder) is not anticipated to be removed of its priority status, revision, or reassessment in the near future. It is an inexorable constant that the imminent attitude of unceasing competition (which Thomas Hobbes distinguished among the people and explained in his teaching) remains the main determinant among subjects of international relations between states.

The Spatial Factor

The endless processes of geopolitical reorganization over the centuries, the desire of some countries to "invade" and establish "living spaces" in the spheres of influence of others, have revived the teachings of geography and turned them into practical tools for developing and pursuing specific interests. Leaving aside the vast scientific entrails, geopolitics has come to observe specific forms and mechanisms of interaction of national interests; it is focused on conclusions, recommendations, and predictions, how specific forces will be deployed in a global or regional context, and how they will be further rearranged under the influence of external and internal factors.

This is an event of great and profound significance, the practical effect of which our country can neither bypass now nor in the future. This is not surprising, since we are accustomed to the fact that Georgia's location, its presence at the crossroads of strong, large-scale, and conflicting geopolitical interests, has been and remains what equally brings both unique opportunities and fateful challenges. Moreover, for the Georgian state, this historically consistent dilemma will forever remain, as due to the collapse of Communism, Fukuyama's

announcement about the “end of history” finally passed, and the realization of all other similar geopolitical predictions was postponed to an uncertain future. As a result, as Immanuel Kant said, the struggle for “eternal peace” has “failed”, and the renewed confrontation over spheres of influence is taking on an updated theoretical-practical format of great geopolitical competition.

Clearly, like so many other events that relate to the once-existing and now-forgotten, the factor of geographical location and space is not new either, and it is linked to several, already relatively old theoretical roots. Among them, the doctrine of Halford Mackinder is one of the basics in political geography, which speaks of the role of Eurasia as the “heartland” of world domination, which is very relevant for Georgia.

When talking about the Eurasian space, we must mention the school of thought of Nicholas Spykman, which, in terms of fighting for influence, highlights the importance of coastline and countries along the Eurasian “heartland”. When discussing sea basins (Black Sea or other) as political-geographical spaces, Spykman’s doctrine has now been modernized, having once been less “relevant” than Mackinder’s. And finally: Talking about the teachings of geopolitical space would be incomplete if we do not recall here Alfred Mahan’s theory of the control of naval arteries for the purpose of general space control. This is just a short note to illustrate that geography and location have always had, and will continue to have, a characteristic purpose in terms of both geopolitical analysis and practical policy. That is why, when discussing the Georgian foreign and domestic vectors, along with other external and internal aspects, we must “magnify” the geopolitical and spatial factor of our country and make a more complex and substantive observation. This is necessary to draw the right conclusions.

The Near Abroad Influences

The results from the neighborhood are unfortunately well known to us. Even without quoting examples from distant history, the most recent experience offers extensive enough, although for the most part negative for Georgia, material from which to draw conclusions.

In general, the practice of a large state marking its own “vital interests” in a direct environment has existed for a long time. Once again, we are not going to call for eclectic historical parallels and will name the Monroe Doctrine as the first, relatively orderly theoretical-practical attempt. Its main point was related to the declaration of several basic principles of US foreign policy in the first half of the 19th century. In particular, through the systematic separation of the old (European) and the new (American) worlds, the United States declared its non-interference in European affairs, but at the same time, in its anti-colonial context, considered it inadmissible for European countries to participate in processes in the Western Hemisphere. In practice, the Monroe Doctrine was unsuccessful, but it was certainly the first systematic attempt to separate global spheres of influence, which, along with non-interference in internal affairs, was intended to avoid military conflicts between states.

In our time, this doctrine, has in fact been repeated several times in various forms. Today, it is relatively clearly expressed by China in regards to the South China Sea and the East China Sea. This is the geography where, with the revived Monroe Doctrine has been adapted to the Beijing template. It is an attempt to establish the surrounding area as a zone of Chinese influence. To date, such attempt is largely economic in nature and serves to restrict free shipping. However, in the wake of the declining interests of the US and its regional partners, it is expected that events will develop not only in the scenario of economic pressure. This is only a theoretical probability at the moment and its implementation in practice is possible only in the case of a few fateful factors.

We believe that the way the world is developing will make the “Monroe Syndrome” more frequent in international relations. Moreover, in the conditions of egocentric tendencies and countries with nationalist, regional leaders, the practice of spreading influence in the immediate neighborhood becomes the “norm”.

Naturally, such practice will never gain legal support, but the created conjuncture will give it the effect of the force of a legal-like counter-realism. This becomes a formidable equation in international politics, especially in regions with geopolitical and mutually exclusive interests. One such region, unfortunately, is the South Caucasus, where, to “break” the existing configuration of our allies, the actions of the West and Tbilisi require a qualitatively new stage.

We consider the formation of new, multilateral or bilateral military-political alliances on the regional mark (Black Sea) as one of the legally and morally proven forms for such a “crossing”. In the conditions of “scattering” the global map, the most effective and flexible cooperation of the chosen partners in the West and its distant or not far geographies acquires the contours of micro-alliances (a so-called small NATO). Considering the given global and regional context, in the case of the Black Sea and Georgia, this approach may also work. We have discussed this in previous publications. By the way, using alliances to expand one’s own interests in terms of geography – and consequently, to limit undesirable counter-interests – is used by many revisionist countries in international systems. Probably the most prominent among them is in regards to the Russian experience. When discussing this particular topic, we obviously do not consider further distorting the practice of increasing influence – when it transcends written and unwritten norms and takes the form of open military aggression, occupation, and annexation. Such a gross violation of international law has manifested itself in the attitude of the Russian Federation towards its neighbors. This turned not only the regional order upside down, but also set a dangerous precedent for the sustainability of global relations in general – a system that, even without Russian intervention (since the end of the Cold War), has struggled to find the optimal balance. In Moscow’s spatial policy, the once Soviet sphere has been replaced by the vague connotation of the “Near Abroad”. And its theoretical substantiation with the formulation of Primakov’s doctrine, has meant nothing more than declaring the Russian neighborhood a “privileged sphere of influence” and gaining recognition as such by the West.

The so-called “ethnic” – in reality, geopolitical conflicts (including in Georgia) – and then military aggression and occupation (in the case of Crimea, annexation) has become a tool to incarnate this doctrine. In the military sense, the Anti Access/Area Denial method has become a spatial method in terms of geographical expansion. It should also be noted that in recent years (especially after the annexation of Crimea) the Russian methodology has been relatively refined, which is more often manifested in the impact of soft power on the countries of the region.

“Strategic depth” in Geopolitical Plans

Georgia feels a practical effect of this very specific set of words. But before we discuss it more specifically, it is necessary to note that modern national influence or power is manifested in its geographical access, economic potential, and military resources. The last two categories are not relevant for the immediate purpose of this article and, therefore, we will focus only on geographical access.

The influence of a global or regional leader country is mostly within its national borders, and its external influence is the result of the external gravity of resources concentrated in the national territory. By the way, such a synergy reminds us once again of one of the principles of the modern arrangement, according to which, at present, domestic and foreign policy are inseparable: One is only a natural continuation of the other.

The concept of “strategic depth”, which refers to maintaining a comfortable area in the border countries of the Russian Federation, is connected with geographical access: gaining and strengthening more influence in a region. This can be achieved with or without a direct military presence in a particular territory by using other means to maintain some form of control over that territory. The main thing is the result: To prevent or

maximally restrict the interests of the country in the geographical area. The practical manifestation of this approach is the occupation of Georgian territories by the Russian Federation, as well as the delay or prevention of Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

Moscow strengthens its security interests by having so-called buffer zones through such a military-political status quo. It can be said that because of the agreement of November 10 of last year, practically the whole South Caucasus was involved in such a "buffering". Here we add that from the point of view of our country, the current situation can develop both in our favor and vice versa: It can be aggravated in the case of inertia or inconsistency on the part of Tbilisi and its strategic allies and partners. It is also expected to become a prerequisite for completely new opportunities with bold, non-standard actions tailored to the time and circumstances.

The above example is a concrete form of strategic depth, and it is related to open military aggression and occupation. But this is not the only example, the unsystematic nature of the system of international relations offers others, too. In particular, the variegated geopolitical mosaic of the Middle East, among other processes, is distinguished by the construction of Tehran's "Arch of Influence", including the area which largely covers Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and secretly and to a lesser extent, three more Middle Eastern countries.

It is true that a few years ago this arch was more robust, but its impact is still felt today. Moreover, this very specific aspect of the projection of Iranian power, the desire to assimilate new spatial signs, also stands out. The most recent example of this is the resumption of Tehran's diplomatic efforts towards the South Caucasus. However, it should be noted that in the case of the four countries already named, Iran's strategic depth pursues much more practical-military-political goals to curb anti-Iranian forces in the region and weaken their focus on the intra-Iranian agenda.

While the realization of strategic depth is sometimes done in gross violation of the norms of international law (such as in the case of the occupied territories of Georgia), in other places it simply lacks the appropriate legal justification (in Yerevan's view, for example, universal security is considered to be the "depth" of Nagorno-Karabakh), and still elsewhere it is due to circumstances of inadequate demarcation and delimitation which in turn exacerbate relations between countries (such as the reefs in the South China Sea which have become "artificial islands" causing disagreements between neighboring countries), that are at the same time precedents when the maintenance of strategic depth should be conditioned by the legitimate interests of its national security. Among them, in our opinion, is the example of Israel (Golan Heights).

In any case, it is a fact that today, along with those geographical boundaries marked by state borders, the notion of geopolitical boundaries (the marking of real influences) has firmly taken root. In the conditions of the modern redistribution of forces and new geopolitical competition, the geopolitical boundary is sometimes wider than the geographical one, and more dynamic and even more decisive. It is impossible that such a "mistake" does not remain an object of constant attention, study, and evaluation of political Tbilisi. As for the context of the South Caucasus, Black Sea, and Caspian Sea macro-regions, this is practically a 24/7 challenge for Georgia.

The Georgian "Regional" Dimension

The regional specifics of recent years are very complex. It is also unusual that in light of Georgia's irreversible Euro-Atlantic integration and the intensification of the US-Georgia strategic partnership, the contradictory tendencies of these two events have intensified. The limitations of the Black Sea legal regime for better access by the Alliance, NATO's heterogeneous attitude towards its Eastern Partner countries, the asymmetry of the North Atlantic military-political shield between the north and south of the east flank – these and other factors have posed a major geopolitical puzzle to date. And the familiar configuration created recently in the South

Caucasus has made the issue of eliminating “natural backwardness” in Georgian-American-Western cooperation even more urgent. If not only this country maintains its foreign policy, but also our strategic allies and partners do not intend to cede the Black Sea and Caspian macro-regions as a strategic space of Eurasian political geography, then neither Tbilisi nor Washington (as well as the capitals of our partner countries) can in practice any longer retain much choice there.

The south of Eurasia has always been characterized by its traditional “historical confusion”. This, unfortunately, is still the case now. There are still several strong geopolitical currents crossing it, and are often in opposition to each other. As a result, irrespective of the motives for gaining influence and their justification (“zone of influence”, “privileged interests”, “strategic depth”, etc.), its instability, internal conflicts and external controversies have become a kind of trademark of our region. This will put a stamp on the domestic and foreign dynamics of the development of the Georgian state, turning us into a hostage trying to escape from the influence of an unfavorable “regional trademark”. It also restricts our allies in taking more effective and courageous steps. Realism in assessments and pragmatism in action requires conducting a different, strong, proactive (and not reactive) political line. At this point, the overlap between Georgian and Western interests has reached such a point that we have probably never seen before. This historical coincidence needs to be used. Delaying its execution can cost us all dearly, and the outcome can be expressed in a geopolitically harsh penalty: Its execution, for one reason or another, will eventually become long overdue.

We have talked about the issues discussed in this article many times; thus, we will refrain from the details and save the reader time. One “small” aspect that we want to mention is the concept of national security in Georgia: (a) accelerating the work on the document due its actual purpose and its benefit; (b) a greater openness of the process (within acceptable limits) and engagement in it, which will help to create a quality document. Not to mention that the concept of national security should become a “living” document adapted to the process and not just an attribute on the shelf. This country has practically no time and luxury to store such accessories.

This period requires great effort from both us and our allies, an objective assessment of the circumstances, and strong leaders. Clearly, the expectations of a Hegelian “historical leader” are superfluous, especially in the modern era of poor political talent. But the ability and knowledge – to correctly identify an already established or approaching historical moment – is what is essential for steering the process.

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