

The New Geopolitics of the South Caucasus: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and Conflict Resolution. Shireen T. Hunter, ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. 2017. 304 pp. (ISBN-13: 9781498564960)

The Caucasus, on geopolitical and economic grounds, is a critical region in 21st-century global affairs. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, rivalries among the great powers and the newly rising regional powers to fill the power vacuum have become astonishingly intense. Most certainly, Western interest in the South Caucasus has also increased considerably since 1991, triggered by the amalgamation of energy security and ethnic separatism. For instance, within the context of the South Caucasus, this competition has reaffirmed itself concerning some adjustments in geopolitical considerations involving energy security. The Caucasus is potentially one of the most delicate regions of the former Soviet space, subject to swift and unexpected developments, which in turn could lead to a dramatic chain of events.

In this edited volume, Shireen T. Hunter, a research professor at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, focuses on the evolving geopolitics of the South Caucasus. Hunter and her colleagues, after examining the record of the region in the last quarter century, try to draw the future trajectory of the region's developments and the factors most likely to contribute to that particular trajectory. Moreover, Hunter and her colleagues explore ways in which the region would benefit from genuine cooperation instead of being more confrontational.

This edited volume, in a series of meticulously detailed essays, analyzes the essential factors in the political calculations and policies of key international and regional players. The chapters provide in-depth analysis of the policies of surrounding regional powers – Turkey, Iran, and Russia – and other great powers external to the region – the United States and the European Union – towards the South Caucasus by taking into consideration the very peculiar political, economic, and cultural dynamics of the region. The authors of the individual chapters aim to contribute to a better understanding of the South Caucasus and the factors that continue to affect its evolution. The contributors investigate the extent, nature, and meaning of the South Caucasus as a geopolitical fault line, and its economic and political implications over time. The volume thrives on providing a comprehensive illustration of regional realities to forge a venue for a cumulative body of knowledge. The book consists of two main parts that attempt to display an aggregate portrayal by depicting the critical factors and actors at play.

Part I centers on country studies of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, focusing primarily on the economic and political evolution of regional states, their foreign policies and the factors and forces that most contributed to their current situation.

Part II screens the policies of relevant regional and international actors such as the United States, Russia, the European Union, Turkey, Iran and other Middle East states toward the region. By examining the policies of these international and regional actors, the authors of each chapter attempt to decipher the rationale behind their motivations and objectives and subsequently to investigate how they affect a state's domestic political development and foreign relations.

A potential criticism of the book is the lack of any focus on China as a new key actor in the region. Over the last decade, China has grown increasingly active and has dramatically increased its engagement with the South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. China's appreciation for the South Caucasus is a recent phenomenon, and it has started to pour considerable investment into the region, a strategic intersection between Asia and Europe. Regional trade with China has grown exponentially, while China will further increase its investments in the region's most important infrastructure in the coming decades driven mainly by Beijing's ambitious multibillion-dollar bet on the Belt and Road Initiative, in which the South Caucasus is set to play a strategic role. Consequently, China as an emerging critical Eurasian actor has the potential to increase its presence in the Caucasus further and to initiate a shift in the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Indeed, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea ports, east-west highway and railway infrastructure are invaluable assets for China's trade ambitions connecting the Eurasian interior and Europe. Thus, it would be an avant-garde and appropriate approach to investigate these Chinese attempts to gain political weight in the region. Consequently, a chapter dedicated to the Chinese perspective on the Southern Caucasus would add another layer of explanatory power to the issue(s) under investigation.

This edited volume is a timely addition vis-a-vis the study of geopolitical factors at play in the South Caucasus. It provides numerous insights into how systemic factors affect the internal evolution of small states in a sensitive geopolitical zone such as the South Caucasus. By doing so, the volume in question deepens the reader's understanding of geography's role at this crossroad of peoples and cultures. The book

has exceptional value for Eurasian geopolitics and Caucasus studies, and it will benefit academics and researchers as well as policymakers and students focusing on the post-Soviet Eurasian space.

Cagri Erdem
Keimyung University