Mehran Kamrava (ed.), The Great Game in West Asia. Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus

Reviewed by Ansgar Jödicke
Department of Social Sciences, University of Fribourg, Switzerland

This book contributes to a better understanding of international relations and political dependencies in the complex region of the South Caucasus. Although I will argue below that the title is partly misleading, the book is recommended to all scholars who are interested in the South Caucasus and especially its relation to West Asia.

The first four contributors outline competing national interests in the region. Anatol Lieven tackles West Asia since 1900 from the perspective of collapsing empires; therefore, he compares the situation in the South Caucasus with the Middle East. The latter had been under Ottoman rule, and the US now has only an incomplete and fragile hegemony. Similarly, Russia’s attempt for dominance in the South Caucasus in the 1990s failed after the Russian empire dissolved and the Soviet Union collapsed. Lieven concludes that in the two fragmented regions “no stable outside hegemony is in fact possible” (p. 33); an enduring geopolitical instability of the South Caucasus is the result. Mahmood Monshipouri analyses the role of energy projects in the South Caucasus that are “likely to intensify competition” (p. 60) among internal, surrounding and external political powers. While Monshipouri focuses on the South Caucasus as a region with external players, Gareth Winrow compares Turkey’s energy policy in the Middle East and the South Caucasus. As a factor of foreign policy, he argues, energy policy “may only have limited success” (p. 102) and “should not be over-stated” (p. 84) as being just one factor among others. Nevertheless, Turkey’s geographical location remains as geopolitical capital. The following contribution of Hamid Ahmadi is about the Iranian response to Baku’s irredentism. This long-lasting conflict over the Iranian minority of Azeris living in Northern Iran has dominated bilateral relations between the two countries for years. Ahmadi elaborates on three different political positionings: Azerbaijani politics, Iranian politics and the Iranian Azeri minority. By studying the clash of nationalist policies, the study extends the field of competing interests from policy and economy to ethnic and cultural aspects.

The second part of the volume addresses Russia’s and Turkey’s soft power capacities. The first chapter, however, partly falls out of the volume’s line by entirely focussing on Russia. Nevertheless, the author, Jeffrey Mankoff, analyses the means and channels of soft power of the most important political player in the South Caucasus: Russia. The two following chapters come back to Turkey and compare...
its influence in the South Caucasus with its influence in the Middle East. Meliha Benli Altunışık compares Turkey’s soft power policy in the South Caucasus with its policy in the Middle East. According to her analysis, Turkey’s outreach to the South Caucasus was shaped by a “Turkic” ethno-nationalist approach combined with religious elements backed by the Diyanet. In contrast, Turkey’s policy in the Middle East relied on neo-Ottoman patterns with reference to Islam in general (without including Diyanet) (p. 180). Overall, Altunışık remains hesitant whether Turkey’s soft power can be transformed into “behavioural power” (p. 182). The following chapter from Bayram Balci delves deeper into a very specific form of Turkish soft power: the Gülen movement. This is a nuanced analysis of the movement’s activities in the South Caucasus and Middle East. Obviously, the study was written in the year of the attempted coup in Turkey after which Erdoğan’s policy has radicalised into a ruthless fight against the Gülen movement. Thus, the description of Gülenists’ influence reflects the situation in 2015/2016, which has changed dramatically today. Balci was only able to comment on the beginning of this development; he expects that the “break leaves no winner, but one loser: Turkish soft power” (p. 200).

Bayram Balci's analysis of the Gülen movement.

The last three contributions are grouped in a section with the title “The travails of state-building”. They describe the reasons for, and consequences of, weak democratic institutions in the South Caucasus, rather than addressing external influence. Richard Giragosian examines the development of “a new commercial-political elite”, the “oligarchs” (p. 206) in Armenia. He titled his chapter “The Armenian imperative” and proposed ways for “defeating the power of the oligarchs by attacking” their “economic monopolies and cartels” (p. 227). Alexander Kupatadze distinguishes between internal and external factors in order to explain the different rates of corruption and white-collar crime in Georgia and Armenia. Some of these factors are unsurprising (like the external political orientation towards the West or Russia); other factors are original – like the cohesiveness and uniformity of the political elite – and “have the potential to be generalized” (p. 241). The last chapter is Anar Valiyev’s case study about urban panning in Azerbaijan’s capital, Baku. Valiev points out that politicians tend to choose Dubai as a model for Baku while Valiev remains highly sceptical about this choice. The three chapters in this part of the book reveal a fundamental weakness of political and institutional structures in South Caucasian independent states. This weakness is, according to the editor, another reason for the upcoming influence of Turkey and Iran – in addition to the diminishing influence of the great powers: the US, EU and Russia.

Nevertheless, the overarching perspective in the book remains puzzling. Kamrava seeks to demonstrate what is announced in the book’s title: the emergence of a “new great game” (p. 27) enabled by the erosion of both Russian hegemony and US interventionism. The editor’s introduction refers to the South Caucasus as a “new, emerging region over which new actors … compete. … [T]he prime contenders … are Iran and Turkey.” (p. 2) Iran and Turkey are considered to be the “main protagonists” and the “South Caucasus has become the main arena where the game is played” (p. 261). Although some appropriate reasons for this comprehensive view are clearly developed in the introduction, I have doubts if this view matches both the reality, and the content of the volume.

First, Russia is still part of the game in the South Caucasus. The US and EU have reduced their engagement; Russia has at least reorganised its strategic aims compared to the 1990s. These developments open a space for new actors;
especially Turkey and Iran. Iran has new opportunities especially after the lifting of international sanctions. Turkey has developed new strategies towards Central Asia and the South Caucasus. However, is it appropriate to speak of a power game only between these two countries? Can we really see a new “great game” over the South Caucasus leaving Russia aside? Monshipuri states that there is “no doubt that Russia is still the most important external player in the South Caucasus region” (p. 58). Consequently, almost all chapters of the book give the Russian influence enormous credit. Furthermore, the editor decided to include a chapter about Russian soft power although he did not include Russia in the thesis of the great game. Kamrava is somehow ambivalent on the inclusion of Russia. On the one side he presents Russia as one of the big powers having decided in the mid-1990s “that the region was of little strategic value and not a first-order priority” (p. 3). On the other, he admits that “Russia remains a formidable presence in the region” (p. 28). As many of the contributions show, there is no sign that Russia dropped out of the Caucasus in the same way that the United States or Europe did. Nevertheless, we can learn from the volume’s overall perspective that Turkey and Iran are competitive upcoming middle powers. Russia is different, bigger, more powerful and the South Caucasus has been under Russian rule for almost 200 years. Iran and Turkey are new. Consequently, the Russian perspective is a perspective of loss in contrast to the perspective of Turkish and Iranian opportunities.

Second, what exactly is the role of the region in the “new” power game? It is obviously true that the two “middle powers”, Turkey and Iran, are emerging powers in the Middle East that mostly compete in the South Caucasus. However, is it adequate to speak of the “new arena” where this rivalry is (and will be) fought out? Evoking a “new great game” between Turkey and Iran must include Syria, Saudi-Arabia and the whole Middle East. Consequently, some of the contributions include the Middle East in their analysis mostly in terms of comparison between the South Caucasus and the Middle East (Lieven, Winrow, Altuğışık, Balci). Nevertheless, the volume’s perspective encourages an understanding of the South Caucasus that is much more related to the Middle East than to Russia and West.

My critical view on the main thesis of the “new great game” does not substantially put into question the value of this excellent volume – neither of its contributions nor of its introduction and conclusion. They are clearly written, well-informed and with profound knowledge of the complexity of this region. According to my reading, this book is best understood as a volume about the interwoven relations between countries’ foreign policies, their economic powers and their steps to democratic state-building. The focus on Turkey and Iran offers a new perspective to the South Caucasus region. The rivalry between them offers a remarkably enlightening view on the external influence on the South Caucasus with a strong emphasis on Iran and Turkey rather than Russia.