

The South Caucasus: Transition from Subjugation to Independence (Tracing India's Footprints)

Achal Malhotra, Macmillan and Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, 2020, 248 pp., Price: US\$ 30.06 (Hardcover), ISBN: 9789390069644

Anirban Chatterjee

To cite this article: Anirban Chatterjee (2022): The South Caucasus: Transition from Subjugation to Independence (Tracing India's Footprints), Strategic Analysis, DOI: [10.1080/09700161.2021.2020445](https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2021.2020445)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2021.2020445>



Published online: 28 Feb 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Book Review

Achal Malhotra, **The South Caucasus: Transition from Subjugation to Independence (Tracing India's Footprints)**, Macmillan and Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, 2020, 248 pp., Price: US\$ 30.06 (Hardcover), ISBN: 9789390069644

Anirban Chatterjee

The South Caucasus region consists primarily of three countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The region finds scant attention in International Relations deliberations in India. It also lags behind in the foreign policy articulation of successive Indian governments despite being an energy-rich region and situated at the crossroads of Asia and Europe through which several important freight transit and energy corridors pass. Against this backdrop, Achal Malhotra, a former Indian ambassador to Armenia and Georgia, makes an endeavour to introduce readers—especially those who are interested in foreign policy issues—to the region. The book contributes to filling the gap in domain knowledge and literature about the region. The timing of the book's publication is relevant, given the context of the latest flare-up between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, what was referred to as a frozen, yet simmering conflict.

The book is divided into six chapters, where each chapter reads more like a semi-independent essay. It traces the historical evolution of the South Caucasus region from the medieval to the modern times, particularly the last 150 years. Malhotra highlights how the South Caucasus region was at the heart of political transitions in broader Central Asia from one Empire to another, namely Persian, Ottoman, and Tsarist, until its incorporation in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the 1920s, which according to the author, marks the onset of the region's subservience. The period of subservience lasted for seven decades, until the collapse of the USSR in 1991. With the launch of ambitious reform initiatives such as *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* by the last Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, the long-suppressed ethnic aspirations of different nationalities began to surface, ultimately emerging as independent countries after the disintegration of the USSR. The author also subtly foregrounds the ethno-religious composition of this immensely diverse region with its complex and intertwined history.

The book focuses on the political, economic, and foreign policy trajectories of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia after their independence. It also throws light on the context and the conditions under which the three countries figure out their distinct trajectories. While Armenia and Georgia have managed to establish a semblance of democracy, Azerbaijan continues to be ruled by the Aliyev dynasty. The nuances of their foreign policy approaches, which the author lucidly brings out,

will help readers to understand the three countries' engagement with the outside world.

While Azerbaijan and Armenia chose to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) after their independence, Georgia stayed away. Georgia has shown unflinching inclination to get itself integrated into the Euro-Atlantic security and political economy architectures such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) after its war with Russia in 2008. Armenia seeks to strike a balance between Russia and the West, while its leaning towards Russia is evident since Armenia is a member of both the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which are Russian initiatives. Azerbaijan, being an energy-rich country, possesses more bargaining capacity than Armenia and Georgia. It manages to keep an equal distance from both the power blocs on its own terms and conditions, but wants to remain engaged with Europe through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Southern Gas Corridor pipelines. Europe too has important energy security interests which Azerbaijan can fulfil.

The notions of regional conflict, conflict resolution/management, and peace processes have been adequately dealt with in the book while comprehending the modern history of the region. In doing so, the author underscores two major conflicts inflicting the region with considerable global significance. In this regard, the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia's conflict with South Ossetia and Abkhazia find special mention. Malhotra opines how ethnic and identitarian considerations of different nationalities were overlooked by the Soviet Union which ultimately strengthened the basis for national self-determination. Although the author holds the Soviet Union responsible for the ethno-religious problems that erupted after its demise, he could have gone into the details of the complexities of the Soviet 'Nationality Policy' which accommodated several nationalities over a period of time into one single union.

According to the author, 'Despite being geographically contiguous, the region remains one of the least integrated regions in the world, widely varied and individualistic republics' (p.36). What the readers will find interesting is the holistic discussion on these conflicts supported by facts and information. Malhotra articulates how these conflicts continue to erupt despite repeated regional/international attempts to resolve them. He points out the interplay between two contradictory concepts of territorial integrity and the right to self-determination as the major hindrances to stability and peace in the region. Besides, he underlines the dogmatic attitude of the stakeholders as a factor prolonging these conflicts.

The author underlines the region's economic and strategic significance for Europe, especially with respect to energy security. Azerbaijan has a huge stockpile of oil and gas reserves. Armenia and Georgia do not have energy reserves like that of Azerbaijan but provide important transit routes for the transportation of Caucasian and Caspian energy sources to Europe and Turkey. The presence of some of the important pipelines in the region such as the BTC Oil Pipeline, the Baku-Supsa Oil Pipeline, and the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline are crucial for the supply of crude oil to European markets. Thus, for Europe, the region has the potential to fulfil two goals. Firstly, to emerge as a fulcrum for the diversification of secured energy supplies to Europe, and secondly, to become an alternative source of energy

resources by minimizing Europe's over-dependence on Russia, with whom the relationship is strained, especially after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.

In the final two chapters, the book discusses India's footprints in the region from antiquity till the modern day. Malhotra highlights the silk route connection and settlements between India in South Caucasus and vice-versa and focuses on the vicissitudes of India's engagement with the region in the post-Cold War era. The author spells out the three countries' position on the Kashmir issue, their stand on India's nuclear policy, and their response towards India's bid for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Similarly, India's predicament in terms of balancing its relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and taking care of its strategic partner Russia's sensitivities in the region when it comes to India's relationship with Georgia, have been explained. The author also throws some light on how India's trade with Georgia and Azerbaijan supersedes Armenia—the closest regional partner actualized through the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation of 1995.

Malhotra recommends the need for augmenting India's engagement with the region, especially within the framework of India's energy security. Which is significant as India is contemplating diversification of its energy imports to reduce dependence on the West Asian region. He further notes that the issue of connectivity is also an important factor to reckon with from the Indian perspective. The presence of other players in the region, such as China, Iran and Turkey, and the growing Chinese footprints within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) needs to be taken into account by New Delhi. India needs to devise appropriate mechanisms and formulate suitable policy choices to focus on this complex region to fulfil its multi-faceted interests.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

The Reviewer is Assistant Professor in Department of Political Science, Plassey College, Nadia, West Bengal, India.