

THE BALANCED POLICY OF THE CAUCASIAN STATES IN THE ERA OF RIVALRY OF GREAT EMPIRES (EARLY MIDDLE AGES)

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ABSTRACT

As is known, in the broad chronological framework from the beginning to the end of the 1st millennium (1st century BC - 10th century AD), the Caucasus region, in particular, had the status of a border area and a geopolitical buffer zone between the global empires of Caucasian Albania, Iberia, and Atropatena. The article analyzes this concept in a comprehensive manner and examines the role of the region in the strategic conflicts between the Roman-Parthian, Roman-Sasanian, and Byzantine-Sasanian rivalries, as well as the new power centers of the early Middle Ages: the Caliphate, the Khazar Khaganate, and the Byzantine Empire. The main scientific novelty of the study is that it presents the local rulers and elites of the Caucasus not as passive parties subject to the will of the great empires, but as active political forces directly influencing the processes, and refutes the existing erroneous historical approaches on this subject. On the contrary, in the light of the information of ancient and medieval authors (Plutarch, Tacitus, Ammianus Marcellinus, Musa Kalankatli, and early Islamic sources), it is demonstrated how local elites preserved their internal autonomy and statehood traditions through agile "balancing diplomacy", reconciliation of sovereign status, and inter-ritual maneuvers. Here, the issue of the Caucasus becoming a buffer zone was conditioned not only by military factors, but also by the transformation of local subjects into active diplomatic agents.

Keywords: Caucasus region, balance of power diplomacy, treaties, wars, geopolitical policy

1. INTRODUCTION

The Caucasus region is of strategic importance in terms of both the history of international relations and its geographical position. It is not just a junction connecting Europe and Asia, where trade routes pass. The Caucasus was also a very sensitive and tense political border zone in ancient and medieval times, where huge empires (for example, Rome, Sassanid, Arab Caliphate, Ottoman, and Safavid) faced each other, and different religions and cultures clashed with each other. The military and political strategy of the Roman Empire envisaged a double line of defense to ensure the security of the state. On the one hand, strong fortresses, protective fortifications, and military camps were built along the official borders of the empire, and on the other hand, neighboring states and kingdoms on the very edge of these borders were brought into the sphere of influence of Rome. Rome formed these "dependent kingdoms" as a "buffer zone" between itself and its great enemies so that in the event of any attack, these small states would receive the first blow and no danger would penetrate into the empire.

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For the Parthian and its successor Sasanian empires, located in the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia to the east, the Caucasus was both a shield for the central cities (such as Ctesiphon) from the nomadic threat from the north, and a military base to prevent the Mediterranean powers from infiltrating the East Eurasian trade routes.

In the tense geopolitical conditions that arose, the Caucasian states, especially the ancient Albanian state, Iberia (Georgia), and Atropatena, which were distinguished by their strategic position, developed a unique border diplomacy to protect their existence. The main essence of this flexible policy was that local rulers did not demonstrate absolute and permanent loyalty to any of the great empires. As the balance of military forces in the region shifted in one direction or another, they immediately changed partners in accordance with their own interests. In order to preserve the internal independence of the state at all costs, they used the official symbols of legitimacy offered to them by rival empires, such as crowns, high ranks, and titles, as well as religious affiliations, as a mere diplomatic maneuver and a political tool to preserve their power. In ancient and early medieval times (1st century BC - 6th century AD), the Caucasus region - especially the states of Caucasian Albania, Iberia, and Atropatena - played the role of a global buffer zone and border area between the Roman (later Byzantine) Empire, representing Western civilization, and the Parthian (later Sasanian) Empire, representing Eastern civilization. In such geopolitical conditions, while the Caucasus region was exposed to diplomatic and military pressure from the Roman-Byzantine Empire on the one hand, on the other hand, the Parthian-Sasanian Empire faced strong political pressure through the systems of serfdom and vassalage. As a result, regional Caucasian subjects located at the intersection of both global powers were forced to pursue a unique "balancing policy" to protect their existence in the face of these two-sided imperial threats and pressures (Shnirelman, V. A. 2001. P. 135).

2. MAIN TEXT

The Caucasus became the focus of global border diplomacy in the mid-1st century BC, at the peak of Rome's eastern expansion. The campaign led by the great general Pompey in 66-65 BC fundamentally changed the foreign policy strategy of the local states.

According to Plutarch and Strabo, the resistance of the Albanian ruler Orois to the Roman army in the battle on the banks of the Kura River in 65 BC was not just a military confrontation, but a response to Rome's attempt to annex the region. Pompey, realizing that he could not completely eliminate the local kingdoms, signed alliance treaties with them.

The Treaty of Randeia, signed between the Roman Empire and the Parthian (Arsacid) state in 63 AD, is considered one of the most important examples of geopolitical compromise and "balancing diplomacy" in the ancient world. This treaty was the first major agreement in which two great powers formally made mutual concessions to divide their spheres of influence in the region. The Peace of Randeia was important in terms of regulating relations between the empires, realizing that the parties could not eliminate each other by military force. This treaty was the first step in which both great powers established formal rules to maintain peace in the region and began to resolve border problems through diplomacy. According to the treaty:

1. Local claimants to the throne in the region had to be from the Parthian Arsacid dynasty (Eastern factor).
2. The crown of these individuals had to be officially presented and approved by the Roman emperor (Western factor) (King, C. 2008. Pg. 32).

This unique mechanism of compromise between the empires gave local rulers a wide legal basis and freedom of action for diplomatic maneuvers between the two giant powers. Thanks to these formal international rules, the Caucasian states did not fall under the full pressure of one of the empires, but on the contrary, they were able to maintain their internal independence by taking advantage of the legal gaps and the existing situation.

During the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96), the XII Fulminata ("Twelfth Lightning Legion") legion arrived near Baku (Gobustan) and left a Latin inscription there, which was a means of reviving the eastern borders of the Roman Rhandaia system and psychological pressure against the pre-Sassanid Parthian claims.

With the rise to power of the Sassanids in the 3rd century (224), the "soft" policy of Parthia's vassalage was replaced by aggressive, centralized rule. During the reign of Shapur I (240-270), the "Kabiyyi-Zardosht" inscription in Naqsh-e Rostam already lists Albania, Iberia, and Armenia as territories that paid tribute to the Sassanids (Mammadova, F. C., 2006, p. 124). However, the events of the peace treaty of Nasib (Nisibis), signed in 298, changed the course of events again in favor of Rome. This treaty was one of the fundamental agreements signed between the Roman Empire and the Sassanid state and completely changed the system of regional international relations in late antiquity, especially the geopolitical status of the Caucasus. According to the terms of the 40-year peace, the protectorate over Iberia and Armenia passed to Rome, while Albania retained the status of a neutral transition zone between the two empires.

The largest and most strategic diplomatic move of the period in question was related to the complete politicization of the religious factor. The declaration of Christianity as the official state religion in the country by the Albanian ruler Urnair should not be viewed as a mere theological (religious-philosophical) choice of faith. This step was a strong resistance to the policy of the Sasanian shahs to forcibly spread Zoroastrianism in the Caucasus, Persianize the local population, and implement cultural-religious assimilation. By adopting Christianity, Albania created an ideological bond with the Roman Empire, which belonged to the same religion, and tried to form a western-oriented security shield against the Sasanians. In 387, the Byzantine and Sasanian empires carried out the first major division that completely froze the geopolitical picture of the region. As a result of this division:

1. The western part of the Caucasus fell under the direct rule or political influence of the Byzantine Empire.
2. The eastern part of the Caucasus, including Albania and Atropatena, was included in the Sasanian Empire.

After the partition of 387, the Sasanians pursued a policy of limiting internal autonomy in the Caucasus. They introduced the Marzban (military governor) system to the region. The Battle of Avarayr in 451 and the subsequent rebellions led by the Albanian ruler Vache II were manifestations of general Caucasian resistance to the Sasanian policy of religious assimilation.

The greatest diplomatic success of the local authorities during this tense period was the Aluen (Aqen) church council of 488. This council, convened at the initiative of Momin Vachagan III, approved the internal Constitution of the country. The Aqen Code regulated the rights and duties of local nobles, church officials, and ordinary people (Kalankatli, M.2006. p. 85). The adoption of such a legal document and its official recognition by the Sasanian shah, while being part of a colonial empire like the Sasanians, was a great success for the Albanian rulers. This was the result of very clever and secret diplomacy carried out by the Albanian elite to protect the internal independence and integrity of the country. The Dara peace treaty signed in 562 further institutionalized the function of the Caucasus in Byzantine-Sasanian relations. According to the document, Byzantium undertook to pay the Sasanians to protect the Derbent pass defensive walls from northern nomads. This was official proof that the Caucasus was perceived as a civilizational barrier in a global sense.

The fall of the Sasanian Empire in the mid-7th century and the emergence and rapid expansion of the Caliphate brought a completely new dimension to the border diplomacy of the Caucasus. The region became a battlefield for not two, but three great powers: the Caliphate, the Khazar Khaganate, and the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire.

The activities of Javanshir (638-681), the ruler of the Albanian state in the mid-7th century, entered the history of world diplomacy as a classic example of a small state defending its independence in the

face of huge global powers:

1. In the midst of intensifying regional competition in the mid-seventh century, the Albanian ruler Javanshir pursued a unique geopolitical maneuvering strategy. In the first stage (in 654), He attempted to create a regional "Christian bloc" by entering into a diplomatic alliance with the Byzantine emperor Constantine II in order to resist the Arab threat from the south. However, seeing the changing balance of power in the region, Javanshir made a quick foreign policy change and in the next stage (in 667) began direct peace negotiations with the head of the Umayyad Caliphate, Caliph Muawiyah I. As a result of Javanshir's pragmatic step, Albania's internal independence was completely preserved, and the amount of taxes the country would have to pay to the Caliphate was reduced to one third (King, C. 2008. Pg. 54)

Moisey Kalankatlı describes Javanshir's geopolitical steps in his work "History of the Albanian Country" with chronological accuracy. Javanshir initially (654) tried to protect the country from Arab raids by forming an alliance with the Byzantine Emperor Constantine II. He was given the high titles of the Byzantine court (Protopatrician). However, after the Umayyad dynasty came to power in 661 and the Caliphate was firmly established in the region, Javanshir made a sharp turn.

Javanshir made trips to the capital of the Caliphate, Sham (Damascus), in 667 and 670.

As a result of negotiations with Caliph Muawiyah I:

- Albania's internal independence and sovereignty were preserved.
- Taxes collected from the country were reduced to one-third (1/3).
- Javanshir undertook to protect the northern borders of the Caliphate (Bunyadov, Z. M. 2007. Pg. 76).

This agreement was the largest diplomatic document ever adopted by a local Caucasian ruler in the heart of the Islamic world.

The Arab-Khazar wars that continued throughout the 8th century turned the Caucasus into a military border zone in the true sense of the word. While for the Arabs this geography was the northern border of the Islamic world, for the Khazars it was a fortress to prevent southern expansion.

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In the early medieval historiography of the Caucasus, the northern expansion of the Islamic Caliphate and the resistance strategy of the Khazar Khaganate further sharpened the borderland character of the region. This military-diplomatic dynamic unfolded around four main historical events:

-Treaty of Derbent in 643 - This agreement, concluded between the commander of the Caliphate army, Suraqah ibn Amr, and the local Sasanian ruler of Derbent, Shahriyar, is a unique example of a compromise practiced in the region. According to the terms of the agreement, the local population of Derbent was exempted from the classical jizya tax levied on non-Muslims, in return for which they assumed the military obligation to protect the northern borders of the Caliphate (the Derbent Pass) from attacks by nomadic tribes. This event proves the ability of local elites to gain privileges within the Caliphate while maintaining their status as military specialists.

-First Battle of Balenjar in 652 - The attack on the city of Balenjar by Arab troops led by Salman ibn Rabi'ah ended in a heavy defeat for the Arabs. The geopolitical result of this battle is that for the first time, Islamic armies were definitively stopped in the North Caucasus, and the de facto border between the parties remained stable for a long time, being strengthened along the Caucasus Mountains.

-Battle of Ardabil in 730 - A large army under the command of the Khazar prince Barjik crossed the South Caucasus via the Derbent Pass and defeated and killed the Arab governor Al-Jarrah near Ardabil, completely upsetting the balance in the region. With the Khazars descending to Southern Azerbaijan, the Caliphate faced the threat of losing its administrative and military control not only in Albania and Iberia, but also in the entire Caucasus region.

-Marwan ibn Muhammad's campaign in 737 - A large-scale counterattack led by the future caliph of the Caliphate, Marwan ibn Muhammad, was the culmination of the Arab-Khazar rivalry. The Arabs, who simultaneously crossed the Derbent and Daryal passes and advanced deep into the Khazar Khaganate (Idil-Volga region), forced the Khazar Khaganate to convert to Islam in exchange for preserving its internal autonomy. As a fundamental historical result of this march, the southward expansion of the Khazars was once and for all halted, and the South Caucasus (the geography of Azerbaijan and Georgia) definitively and irrevocably entered the political-cultural orbit of Islamic civilization.

These four chronological stages, analyzed clearly, show that in the 7th-8th centuries, the Caucasus region was not simply a passive geography that had become a battlefield for two foreign armies from outside. The active diplomatic and military participation of local dynasties and political forces in this struggle (the most obvious example of this is the strategic treaties and agreements around Derbent), as well as the control of important crossings such as Derbent and Daryal, directly determined the course of international relations. As a result, the Caucasus became the largest geopolitical defense zone, determining the trajectory of the global competition between the Arab Caliphate from the south and the Khazar Khaganate from the north, where both sides tried to stop each other.

Thus, against the backdrop of these wars, the diplomacy of local elites was completely fragmented. For example, the feudal lords of Dagestan and the North Caucasus often sided with the Khazars, while the rulers of Arran and Shirvan tried to protect their internal administration, relying on the military power of the Caliphate. In 705, after the Umayyads put an end to the rule of the local Mehranid dynasty in Albania, they established a single military-administrative structure covering the entire South Caucasus - the Emirate of Arran, and chose the city of Barda as its capital. Barda became not only an administrative center, but also a northern trade and military-diplomatic hub of the Islamic world. From here, expeditions against both Byzantium and the Khazar Khaganate were planned, and treaties were signed (Akhundova, N. R. 2011. Pg. 293).

By the 10th century, drastic changes had taken place in the system of international relations in the region. The weakening of the Khazar Khaganate, the protective shield of the northern borders, and the infiltration of a new, destructive military power, Slavic (Russian) groups, into the region from the same direction completely upset the existing geopolitical balance in the Caucasus. In this context, the Barda tragedy of 943 was the final chord (final point) of the old model of inter-imperial border diplomacy characteristic of the Caucasus in antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The Slavic fleet entering the Kura River from the Caspian Sea and destroying Barda, the ancient capital of Albania and the largest commercial metropolis of the region, revealed the helplessness of local rulers. The Sajid and Salarid dynasties, who acted as the successors of the Abbasid Caliphate in the region, were unable to establish an effective military-defense system against this external threat. This collapse of central and regional powers laid the foundation for a new historical stage in the Caucasus: the emergence of local and independent Azerbaijani dynasties (Shirvanshahs, Shaddadids, Ravidids), which emerged in an environment of feudal disarray. There are important conceptual discussions in modern Western and Azerbaijani historiography regarding the status of the Caucasus in this period:

-Europe- and Russia-centric approach: This approach has been dominant in European and Russian (especially Soviet) historiography for many years. The main essence of this approach is the idea that only huge empires (Roman, Byzantine, Sasanian, Arab Caliphate) ruled the world. According to historians who defend this idea, Caucasian Albania, Atropatena, or Iberia (Georgia) were small units that did not have independent will and simply occupied a place on the map, that is, ordinary provinces. The main goal here

is to minimize the independent positions of local states. That is, to form the opinion that "these peoples did not have their own say in history, their own weight, independent foreign policy; empires came, crushed them, and ruled through their successors."

-Modern Azerbaijani historiography: Historians Ziya Bunyadov and Farida Mammadova opened a very strong scientific front against this biased approach. They were based not on mere assumptions, but on original sources written by the most reliable Greek, Roman, Albanian, and Arab authors of ancient times. Azerbaijani historiography revealed that Caucasian Albania and Atropatena were active subjects of international law in antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The relations of these states with the empires were not blindly subordinate. Yes, the empires were powerful, but these states conducted border law diplomacy based on mutual interests.

3. CONCLUSION

The system of border diplomacy and geopolitical relations that developed in the Caucasus region during the ancient and early medieval periods laid the fundamental foundation for the strategic codes of the region that have persisted for centuries and are still relevant today. As shown above, the Caucasus region, especially the geography of Caucasian Albania, Iberia, and Atropatena, has not only been a military training ground for global empires, but also had the status of a dynamic border space where complex diplomatic doctrines were tested.

The entry of Christianity into the region as a political-cultural line during the Roman-Sasanian rivalry, and the subsequent arrival of Islam during the Caliphate-Khazar conflict, left indelible marks on the geopolitical fate of the Caucasus. These religious-ideological transformations turned the region not only into an administrative-political but also into a deep inter-civilizational front line. However, the local subjects of the region did not blindly accept these belief systems, but managed to use them as a diplomatic shield and "soft power" tool against imperial pressure. An important historical and scientific conclusion here is that the local political subjects and elites of the Caucasus were able to preserve their internal autonomy only as long as they correctly calculated the balance of power between the competing global powers, that is, the geopolitical balance point. The internal pillar of this balance was the region's unique legal-political structures. For example, the Aqeun Code, adopted during the reign of the Albanian ruler Momin III Vachagan, was a unique institutional adaptation mechanism that ensured the internal integration of subjects, separating local dynastic loyalty and the internal legal system from imperial legislation. Local elites relied on this internal legitimacy to maneuver in the face of external pressures.

As a result of the research, it was determined that when this historical balance was disturbed due to any external factor, and one of the dominant empires gained unique, absolute hegemony in the region, local statehood traditions faced crises and upheavals. The period of the Marzban regime, which aimed at direct rule of the Sasanians, or the period of the Arran Emirate, which was a manifestation of the centralization policy of the Caliphate, is a clear proof of this. The transformation of the competition of global powers into unilateral absolute dictates, rather than regional consensus or neutrality, accelerated the collapse of local dynasties (for example, the Mehranids) and disrupted the buffer zone mechanism. Thus, two different governance models were applied in the geography of the Caucasus throughout the ancient and early medieval periods, the first of which was the model of dynamic balance (Rhandaia or border diplomacy). Within this model, based on bi- or multi-polar strategic deterrence, formal vassalage agreements, and dynastic marriages, the internal autonomy of regional entities, local legislative systems, and the political status of elites were successfully preserved. In stark contrast, during the period of absolute hegemony (the Sasanian Marzban or the Caliphate of Arran) that emerged in the region, global powers pursued direct administrative control, a centralized tax system, and a policy of unification. As a tragic consequence of this absolute hegemony policy, the local dynasties of the Caucasus were abolished, internal autonomy was completely lost, and regional statehood traditions faced a deep systemic crisis.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the experience of border diplomacy of the Caucasus, dating back to the ancient and early medieval periods, plays the role of a fundamental historical and methodological basis for a deep understanding of the internal dynamics of modern Caucasian geopolitics. The search for multi-vectority, attempts to create a balance between regional powers, and the realities of the buffer zone, which are manifested in the foreign policy of the states of the region, especially Azerbaijan, today, actually have centuries-old historical roots. This rich experience, inherited from the past, serves as a strategic navigator (guide) in the correct formation of the regional security system (architecture) of today and the future. Historical inheritance and political tradition clearly prove that even in modern conditions of intensifying global and multipolar geopolitical competition, the most fundamental factors ensuring the strategic independence of the region remain unchanged. These are the flexible diplomatic maneuvers of local states in foreign policy and the internal political, legal, and military stability of the state.

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