



GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS IN POST-SOVIET SPACE: THE CASE OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Abstract: This article analyzes the changing geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus following the decline of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space. The 2020 Second Karabakh War, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the recent developments in Nagorno-Karabakh have significantly altered Moscow's image as a regional guarantor. Azerbaijan's growing assertiveness, Turkey's active role, and Western engagement in the region reflect a multipolar shift. By reviewing recent developments and analyzing regional power dynamics, this article argues that the South Caucasus is undergoing a fundamental transformation away from the traditional Russian-centric order.

Keywords: South Caucasus, Russia, Karabakh conflict, post-Soviet, Ukraine war, Turkey, Azerbaijan, geopolitics

Аннотация: В данной статье анализируется изменение геополитического ландшафта на Южном Кавказе после ослабления российского влияния на постсоветском пространстве. Вторая карабахская война 2020 года, вторжение России на Украину в 2022 году и недавние события в Нагорном Карабахе существенно изменили имидж Москвы как регионального гаранта. Растущая самоуверенность Азербайджана, активная роль Турции и участие Запада в регионе отражают многополярный сдвиг. На основе обзора последних событий и анализа динамики региональной власти в этой статье утверждается, что Южный Кавказ претерпевает фундаментальную трансформацию, уходя от традиционного российско-ориентированного порядка.



Ключевые слова: Южный Кавказ, Россия, Карабахский конфликт, постсоветское пространство, война на Украине, Турция, Азербайджан, геополитика

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola postsovet hududida Rossiya ta'sirining zaiflashuvidan so'ng Janubiy Kavkazdagi geosiyosiy landshaftning o'zgarishini tahlil qiladi. 2020 yilgi ikkinchi Qarabax urushi, 2022 yilda Rossiyaning Ukrainaga bostirib kirishi va tog'li Qorabog'dagi so'nggi voqealar Moskvaning mintaqaviy kafil sifatidagi imidjini sezilarli darajada o'zgartirdi. Ozarbayjonning o'ziga bo'lgan ishonchi ortib borayotgani, Turkiyaning faol roli va G'arbning mintaqadagi ishtiroki ko'p qutbli siljishni aks ettiradi. So'nggi voqealarni ko'rib chiqish va mintaqaviy hokimiyat dinamikasini tahlil qilish asosida ushbu maqola Janubiy Kavkaz an'anaviy ruslarga yo'naltirilgan tartibdan uzoqlashib, tub o'zgarishlarni boshdan kechirayotganini ta'kidlaydi.

Kalit so'zlar: Janubiy Kavkaz, Rossiya, Qorabog' mojarosi, postsovet makoni, Ukrainadagi urush, Turkiya, Ozarbayjon, geosiyosat

The South Caucasus, long considered a strategic backyard of the Russian Federation, is undergoing a profound geopolitical transformation. The second Nagorno-Karabakh war (2020) and Azerbaijan's decisive military operation in 2023 have further destabilized the post-Soviet regional balance. For decades, Russia functioned as the principal arbiter in the South Caucasus, leveraging historical, military, and political ties to maintain influence over Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. However, Moscow's passive stance during recent crises, its overstretch in Ukraine, and the erosion of trust from traditional allies like Armenia have all contributed to a visible decline in its regional dominance. Simultaneously, other actors—including Turkey, the European Union, and the United States—have



become more active in the region. Turkey has deepened its strategic ties with Azerbaijan, the EU has hosted mediation efforts, and the U.S. has emerged as a diplomatic player in resolving Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions. This article argues that Russia's declining influence in the South Caucasus marks a systemic shift in the region's geopolitical architecture, opening the door to a multipolar environment where no single actor can impose unilateral control.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, comparative, and discursive analytical approach. It examines how narratives, policy positions, and geopolitical strategies reflect the shifting power dynamics in the South Caucasus. Drawing on policy papers, think-tank publications, and expert commentaries, the study analyzes Russia's declining leverage, the rise of Turkish influence, and increasing Western engagement. Scenario-based evaluation is used to illustrate potential trajectories of regional transformation. The article is grounded in the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism. This school of thought explains foreign policy behavior as a result of both systemic pressures—such as the distribution of power in the international system—and domestic factors, including leadership perceptions and institutional capacities. In the context of the South Caucasus, neoclassical realism helps explain why regional states like Armenia and Azerbaijan have recalibrated their foreign policy preferences in response to shifts in external support and power alignments. It also sheds light on Russia's weakening position as a hegemon and Turkey's opportunistic assertiveness.

RUSSIA'S DECLINING INFLUENCE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Russia's longstanding image as the dominant security guarantor in the South Caucasus has been severely undermined in recent years. The 2020 Nagorno-



Karabakh war marked a pivotal turning point: despite its military alliance with Armenia through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Moscow refused to intervene on Yerevan's behalf. This inaction raised serious doubts about Russia's credibility among its regional allies. The Kremlin's geopolitical overstretch—exacerbated by its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022—has significantly constrained its capacity to manage peripheral conflicts. Russia has diverted diplomatic and military resources to the Ukrainian front, leaving its traditional zones of influence, including the South Caucasus, increasingly unattended. Armenia's frustration became even more visible in 2023, when Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan openly criticized Russia's passivity and began pivoting toward Western institutions. Yerevan hosted joint military exercises with the United States and deepened its dialogue with the European Union, including talks on military cooperation and economic integration. These moves signaled not only disillusionment with the CSTO but also a desire to redefine Armenia's geopolitical orientation away from the Kremlin's orbit (Carnegie Endowment, 2023). Moreover, Russia's so-called "peacekeeping" mission in Nagorno-Karabakh failed to prevent Azerbaijan's 2023 offensive, further tarnishing Moscow's image as a neutral guarantor. The withdrawal of Russian forces from the Lachin corridor in late 2023 was interpreted by many observers as symbolic of Moscow's retreat, both literal and figurative, from the region (Chatham House, 2023). In essence, Russia's weakening grip is not just a result of external distractions like Ukraine but also of a growing perception among South Caucasus states that Moscow can no longer deliver security, leverage diplomatic solutions, or project soft power as it once did.

TURKEY'S ASCENDANCE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

In contrast to Russia's strategic withdrawal, Turkey has emerged as a powerful and proactive actor in the South Caucasus. Ankara's close alliance with



Azerbaijan—framed under the slogan “One nation, two states”—has evolved from cultural and linguistic solidarity into a robust military and geopolitical partnership. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war was a watershed moment for Turkish influence. Turkey provided Azerbaijan with extensive military support, including Bayraktar TB2 drones, military advisors, and real-time battlefield intelligence. These contributions were decisive in Azerbaijan’s swift victory over Armenian forces, cementing Turkey’s role as a co-architect of the new regional order (PONARS Eurasia, 2022). Following the conflict, Turkey’s role expanded beyond military engagement. Ankara participated in trilateral talks with Russia and Azerbaijan on post-war arrangements and launched several joint infrastructure and transportation projects, such as the Zangezur corridor initiative, which aims to connect Turkey to the Caspian region through southern Armenia. This initiative reflects Turkey’s broader ambition to position itself as a regional economic bridge between Europe and Central Asia (Eurasianet, 2022). Moreover, Turkey’s influence is bolstered by its soft power. Turkish universities, media, and religious organizations have expanded their presence in Azerbaijan and Georgia, promoting Ankara’s image as both a modern Muslim state and a successful post-Ottoman regional power. In short, Turkey has adeptly capitalized on the geopolitical vacuum left by Russia’s decline, asserting itself not only as Azerbaijan’s indispensable ally but also as a long-term stakeholder in the South Caucasus’ political future.

AZERBAIJAN’S ASSERTIVENESS AND REGIONAL SELF- CONFIDENCE

Azerbaijan has emerged from the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War as a confident and assertive regional actor, determined to reshape the South Caucasus order on its own terms. Backed by substantial energy revenues and a revitalized military, Baku has increasingly pursued an independent foreign policy that reflects



its national interests, often at odds with Russia's or the West's expectations. The 2020 war not only restored Azerbaijan's territorial control over much of Nagorno-Karabakh, but also fundamentally shifted the psychological and political dynamic in the region. For decades, Armenia had maintained the upper hand in the conflict. However, Azerbaijan's rapid and decisive military campaign, aided by Turkish support, overturned that balance and positioned Baku as the dominant force in the regional security equation (RAND Corporation, 2022). Azerbaijan's confidence was further evident in its 2023 operation to retake the remaining Armenian-controlled areas of Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite Russian "peacekeepers" being stationed in the region, Azerbaijan executed the campaign with minimal resistance, and tens of thousands of ethnic Armenians fled within days. Moscow's inability—or unwillingness—to intervene underscored Baku's calculation that Russia would not risk escalation (Reuters, 2023). Diplomatically, Azerbaijan has maneuvered skillfully. President Ilham Aliyev has deepened ties with Ankara, Beijing, and even Tel Aviv, while maintaining pragmatic energy cooperation with the European Union. Baku's ability to maintain working relations with multiple rival blocs reflects a strategic balancing act—allowing Azerbaijan to maximize autonomy while avoiding dependency on any single power (Atlantic Council, 2023). Azerbaijan's assertiveness is not merely military; it reflects a broader vision of regional leadership grounded in national pride, post-Soviet sovereignty, and geopolitical adaptability.

WESTERN INVOLVEMENT AND THE EROSION OF MOSCOW'S MONOPOLY

The post-war diplomatic landscape of the South Caucasus has increasingly featured Western actors seeking to mediate peace and shape the region's future. While Russia long held a near-monopoly on conflict resolution between Armenia and Azerbaijan, recent developments have highlighted a growing diversification of



mediators—most notably the European Union and the United States. In 2022 and 2023, Brussels hosted multiple high-level summits between Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, under the auspices of European Council President Charles Michel. These meetings signaled the EU's desire to present itself as a neutral, rule-based alternative to Moscow's traditionally coercive mediation style (Carnegie Endowment, 2023). The United States has also become increasingly active. In 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken facilitated direct talks between the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers in Washington, pushing for a sustainable peace deal. This level of engagement was unprecedented in the history of U.S. involvement in the region, and reflected Washington's intention to limit Russian and Iranian influence while stabilizing the European periphery (Washington Post, 2023). Although these Western initiatives have not yet resulted in a comprehensive peace treaty, their symbolic importance cannot be overstated. They mark a challenge to Moscow's status as the default broker of negotiations and offer Armenia and Azerbaijan alternatives in the diplomatic arena. More broadly, the involvement of liberal-democratic powers introduces new norms into the South Caucasus peace process—emphasizing transparency, legal frameworks, and human rights. These contrast sharply with the transactional, interest-driven diplomacy historically practiced by Russia. For Yerevan in particular, the shift toward Western formats reflects deeper political realignments: Armenia's democratic credentials, resentment toward Russian inaction, and aspirations for closer integration with the European political space have all contributed to a recalibrated foreign policy vision (Chatham House, 2023).



FUTURE SCENARIOS: WHAT NEXT FOR THE SOUTH CAUCASUS?

The shifting dynamics in the South Caucasus raise fundamental questions about the region's future geopolitical alignment. With Russia in retreat, Turkey asserting itself, and Western actors engaging diplomatically, the regional order is no longer unipolar or static. Several plausible scenarios emerge, each with its own set of implications.

Scenario 1: A multipolar balance of power. This is the most likely trajectory, where Turkey, the EU, the U.S., and possibly China play overlapping but competitive roles in the region. While Azerbaijan and Armenia retain greater agency, their room to maneuver will depend on how well they balance competing interests without becoming overly dependent on a single power. In this scenario, Russia remains present but marginalized—a background player unable to dictate terms.

Scenario 2: A Turkey-centric regional bloc. Given Turkey's military and cultural proximity to Azerbaijan and growing ties with Central Asian states, a Turkic regional framework may evolve. The Zangezur corridor, if fully realized, could physically and symbolically bind Turkey to the Caspian region, giving Ankara even more strategic leverage. However, such a model may alienate Armenia and provoke new tensions unless balanced by broader inclusion.

Scenario 3: Resurgence of Russia. Though currently in decline, Russia's long-term return cannot be ruled out. A ceasefire breakdown, leadership change in Moscow, or Western fatigue with the region could create openings for the Kremlin to reassert itself. This scenario would most likely favor a restoration of Moscow-led "managed instability," undermining Western-led peacebuilding initiatives.



Scenario 4: Western institutional integration. Particularly for Armenia, deeper alignment with Western structures—through trade, defense cooperation, and democracy support—may solidify. This would mark a historic break from Russia’s orbit and could reshape the political values and security doctrines of the region. However, such a shift would face resistance from pro-Russian segments and regional spoilers like Iran.

These potential futures suggest that the South Caucasus is at a geopolitical crossroads. The final trajectory will depend not only on the actions of great powers but also on the domestic resilience, leadership choices, and diplomatic flexibility of the regional states themselves.

CONCLUSION

The geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus is undergoing a fundamental reconfiguration. Russia’s traditional role as a regional hegemon is eroding rapidly, undermined by its military overreach in Ukraine, its failure to fulfill security commitments to allies like Armenia, and its inability to adapt to the new realities on the ground. Meanwhile, Turkey’s strategic ascent, Azerbaijan’s military and diplomatic assertiveness, and the active involvement of Western powers have reshaped the regional equation. The emergence of multiple diplomatic tracks—outside Moscow’s influence—demonstrates that the South Caucasus is no longer a Russian-led security space, but an arena of contested influence and shifting alignments. These developments point to a broader trend in the post-Soviet sphere: the fragmentation of the Kremlin’s informal empire and the rise of multipolarity. For the countries of the South Caucasus, this transition offers both opportunity and risk. Greater autonomy in foreign policy can be a vehicle for national empowerment, but it also demands careful strategic navigation in a crowded geopolitical field. Ultimately, the decline of Russia’s dominance is not merely the story of one actor’s failure, but a reflection of deeper systemic change. The future of the South Caucasus



will be shaped not just by external powers, but by the capacity of regional states to assert their sovereignty, build credible institutions, and chart their own course in an increasingly complex international order.

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