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BORDERLINES AND BATTLELINES: ASSESSING REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE CAUCASUS

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Borderlines and Battlegrounds: Assessing Regional Security in the South Caucasus

Introduction

By: Maia Otarashvili and George Scutaru, Eds.



Assessing regional security in the South Caucasus requires treating the region not as a peripheral post-Soviet space, but as a central hinge between the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Central Asia, Türkiye, Iran, Russia, and Europe. The region's security environment is shaped by overlapping pressures: unresolved or recently transformed conflict dynamics between Armenia and Azerbaijan; Georgia's democratic backsliding and vulnerability to Russian coercion including through its Russia-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Armenia's effort to preserve democratic resilience despite pressure from Moscow; and the broader strategic effects of Russia's war against Ukraine. These dynamics make the South Caucasus a key test case for whether smaller states can preserve sovereignty, political agency, and diversified external partnerships in an increasingly competitive Eurasian security order.

The South Caucasus is also a corridor region whose security is inseparable from trade, energy, infrastructure, and great-power competition. The Middle Corridor, linking Asia and Europe while bypassing Russia, has gained new importance since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions on goods transiting Russian territory. This has increased the strategic value of Azerbaijan and Georgia, while also tying the South Caucasus more closely to developments in Central Asia, Türkiye, and the Caspian Sea.

At the same time, new patterns of military cooperation among Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Central Asian states suggest that regional security architectures are evolving beyond older Russian-dominated frameworks. Assessing security in the South Caucasus, therefore, requires an integrated approach that considers military risks, domestic resilience, Russian and Iranian spoiler capacity, Turkish influence, energy transit, and the region's potential role in strengthening Euro-Atlantic access to Central Asia.

As we enter this new phase of power dynamics in the South Caucasus, a set of questions merits thorough examination:

- How have recent conflicts in the South Caucasus reshaped regional power balances and security perceptions?
- How do Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and Western actors compete and cooperate in shaping Caucasus security dynamics?
- To what extent does growing Chinese economic engagement affect regional security calculations?
- What scenarios could most plausibly destabilize the region in the coming decade, and how can they be mitigated?

In order to address these questions, the New Strategy Center and Delphi Global Research Center convened a roundtable discussion at the tenth edition of the Black Sea and Balkans Security Forum, organized by the New Strategy Center, in Bucharest, Romania, bringing together experts from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Germany, and the United States. This report is a product of those discussions.



The South Caucasus in the New Geopolitical Order: Shifts in Power, Connectivity, and Europe's Strategic Role

By: Khatia Kikalishvili

The South Caucasus can no longer be viewed as a geopolitical peripheral region. The region is increasingly becoming a battleground for competing power projections and connectivity strategies, where the United States, the European Union, Russia, China, Türkiye, and Iran are attempting to shape the future order. For Europe, this means that the South Caucasus is no longer solely a matter of European neighborhood policy or conflict management. It is increasingly becoming part of Europe's security, energy, and connectivity architecture.

Russia's weakened monopoly and the new reality in the South Caucasus

The most significant change in recent years is that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan can no longer be understood solely as a frozen ethnic-territorial conflict. Following Azerbaijan's military victory in Karabakh and the US-backed peace efforts, the conflict has become part of a broader geopolitical realignment.

The White House's August 2025 peace declaration, as well as the TRIPP project (Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity), signal that the US is no longer operating from the sidelines but is seeking to actively shape regional connectivity. TRIPP is planned as a rail and road corridor through southern Armenia, connecting Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan and onward to Türkiye, while also becoming part of the broader Middle Corridor linking Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Europe. This fundamentally alters the region's strategic logic.

The first major consequence concerns Russia. For decades, Moscow positioned itself as the central guarantor of security and peace in the South Caucasus. In reality, however, Russia was never a mediator but rather a central actor in regional instability. The 2008 war against Georgia, the subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the systematic use of unresolved conflicts as instruments of power illustrate how Russia continues to this day to attempt to shape the regional order through coercion, military presence, and political dependencies.

Although Russia's monopoly has been weakened, particularly in Armenia and Azerbaijan, Moscow continues to conduct hybrid operations in all three countries to maintain its influence and rejects any closer alignment of Armenia and Georgia with the European Union. Recent threats from Moscow toward Armenia clearly underscore this.

What has changed is not Russia's claim to dominance, but its ability to enforce that claim unchallenged. Russia remains, however, a powerful and disruptive actor that will continue to shape regional dynamics.

The Role of the US and the EU

At the same time, the regional balance of power has shifted significantly. Azerbaijan is in a stronger military, diplomatic, and economic position than it was just a few years ago. Armenia, for its part, is undergoing a strategic reorientation. Disappointment with Russia's behavior following 2020 and 2023 has opened the door to closer cooperation with the US and the European Union.

The EU-Armenia Connectivity Partnership agreed upon in May 2026 and the goal of visa-free travel with the EU demonstrate that infrastructure, investment, and geopolitical orientation are increasingly intertwined.



The return of the United States as a serious strategic actor further alters the regional equation. Under the Trump administration, the South Caucasus is not viewed primarily through the traditional lens of democratization and conflict management, but increasingly through the prism of peace agreements, connectivity, energy, infrastructure, and geopolitical competition.

From a European perspective, the South Caucasus today is about far more than regional stabilization or traditional neighborhood policy. The central strategic question is whether Europe is prepared to bind the countries of the region more closely to itself—or whether it will accept gradually ceding them to other centers of power.

For the European Union, the answer should be clear: greater engagement in the South Caucasus is in its immediate political, economic, and geopolitical interest.

First, it is about Europe's normative and strategic role. The countries of the South Caucasus are not a neutral geopolitical space. In a phase of global power shifts, different models of order are competing for influence. For the European Union, therefore, the credibility of its own values and its foreign policy aspirations is also at stake. States that wish to cooperate more closely with Europe must not be left to fend for themselves or permanently subjected to Russian pressure and authoritarian models of dependency.

Second, the region is increasingly relevant to European connectivity, trade, and supply chain policies. The Middle Corridor is gaining significant importance as an alternative to Russian-controlled trade routes. Issues of infrastructure, transport, energy, digital connectivity, and resilient supply chains have long been part of European economic and security policy.

Third, the South Caucasus remains closely linked to the security of the Black Sea—a region that has gained significant strategic importance since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The stability of connectivity projects, energy links, and East-West routes increasingly depends on how the security and power order between the Black Sea, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia develops.

The European Union's added value in the South Caucasus lies primarily in its political, economic, and normative appeal. Georgia and Armenia are not distant geopolitical outliers, but rather long-standing European nations with deep historical, cultural, and political ties to Europe. Especially in a time of global power shifts, the European Union has a strategic interest in not leaving these countries to authoritarian models of influence or Russian power claims.

Europe must therefore act in a more visible, strategic, and operational manner in the South Caucasus: through a stronger political presence, support for democratic institutions, economic integration, investments in connectivity, and credible political prospects for those actors and societies that wish to align more closely with Europe.

[China and the Geopolitics of Connectivity](#)

China is gaining increasing importance in the South Caucasus. While Beijing is not a traditional security actor in the region like Russia, Türkiye, or Iran, China's economic engagement nonetheless influences regional security calculations indirectly but significantly. Since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the Middle Corridor and the New Silk Road have been gaining strategic importance as alternatives to northern transit routes through Russia.

The central question here is: Who sets the rules of connectivity?

If infrastructure is designed according to Western standards—such as transparency, open tenders, and anti-corruption rules—then connectivity can strengthen the region's resilience and create genuine alternatives to Russian-dominated structures. If, on the other hand, infrastructure creates dependencies, reinforces opaque elite networks, or grants political influence on authoritarian actors, new strategic vulnerabilities arise.

From a European perspective, China's involvement should therefore neither be reflexively demonized nor naively welcomed. The region needs investment, trade, and infrastructure. However, Europe must ask the political question: According to which rules, with which standards, and with what long-term consequences are these projects being implemented? It is crucial to establish clear framework conditions so that existing dependencies are not merely shifted from Russia to China.

Georgia as a Test Case

From a Georgian perspective, this debate is of particular importance.

Georgia remains strategically important yet is politically weakened. For years, Georgia was the natural western gateway to the South Caucasus: As an EU candidate country with access to the Black Sea, east-west energy routes, the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway line, and the Middle Corridor, the country was a central anchor of Western regional strategies.

Yet the geopolitical realignment also creates new risks. The TRIPP project and new transport links through Armenia can open regional opportunities—at the same time, they could diminish Georgia's role if the country remains politically isolated or loses international trust.

Developments in Georgia's domestic politics are making this danger increasingly real. Democratic backsliding, political polarization, state capture, political prisoners, and the ruling “Georgian Dream” party's sabotage of the country's European course have significantly eroded the trust of Western partners. This is not merely a domestic issue for Georgia. For a politically isolated or increasingly authoritarian Georgia could evolve from the strategic anchor of the Middle Corridor into its weak point. The West runs the risk of investing in alternative connectivity routes that are formally presented as alternatives to Russia but, in practice, remain vulnerable to Russian political influence via Georgia.

The strategic message from a Georgian democratic perspective is therefore clear: Georgia should position itself as the democratic gateway to the Black Sea, as the safest western route to Central Asia, and as the anchor of the Middle Corridor. However, this is only possible if the country restores its democratic legitimacy and credibly defends its European orientation.

A democratic, Western-oriented Georgia is not only in Georgia's national interest. It is a strategic asset for Europe. For without a stable, democratic, and reliable Georgia, any serious European strategy for the South Caucasus remains incomplete.

Conclusion: Europe's Strategic Moment

The South Caucasus is currently shifting from a structured, Russia-centered order to a fragmented and competitive geopolitical landscape. This opens opportunities, but also new risks.

The crucial question is whether this competition can be shaped within the framework of rules-based cooperation or whether it will lead to new cycles of instability.

Assessing Regional Security in the Caucasus from the Armenian Perspective

By: Sergey Minasyan

This paper examines the evolving security environment of the South Caucasus from the Armenian perspective. Had it been written in previous years its central focus would inevitably have been the military-political and diplomatic dynamics surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation. However, following the August 8, 2025 Washington agreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan – mediated by the Trump administration and culminating in the initialing of a peace treaty – the strategic calculus of the region has materially changed.

It is evident that full historical reconciliation between Armenia and Azerbaijan and their societies remains a long-term objective, and that numerous risks and complications persist along the path to durable peace. Yet it is increasingly credible to argue that a foundational framework for peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, according to the political statements of their leaders, has now been initially established at the political level. However, a peace affirmed in political declarations is not yet a peace embedded in the structural realities on the ground. The translation of formal Armenian-Azerbaijani agreements into sustainable, historically durable arrangements remains the defining challenge ahead.



For this reason, this paper turns its primary attention to other regional dynamics in the South Caucasus likely to shape the future security environment. Chief among these is the unprecedented intensification of Armenia's partnership with the European Union – brought into sharp relief by two landmark European summits convened in Yerevan in early May 2026, which, for two consecutive days, effectively transformed the Armenian capital into a central point of European political space.

The European Political Community Summit, held in tandem with the inaugural EU-Armenia bilateral summit, represented a historic inflection point in Armenia's foreign policy trajectory and a significant reconfiguration of the broader geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus.

In recent years, Armenia has achieved an unprecedented depth of partnership with the European Union for a country that holds no formal candidate status. Through the implementation of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), the deployment of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMA) in Armenia since 2023, and the unfolding development of a second EU mission focused on countering non-kinetic and hybrid threats (EUPMA), Armenia has advanced a multidimensional EU integration process. This has been further reinforced through support provided via the European Peace Facility and the Resilience and Growth Plan – instruments that together signal a qualitatively new level of EU strategic commitment to Armenia.

On July 22, 2024, the European Council reached an unprecedented decision to provide €30 million in assistance to Armenia through the European Peace Facility (2024-2026), aimed at enhancing the logistical capacity of the Armenian armed forces, supporting defense reform and improving civilian protection during crises and emergencies. This marks the first time the EU has provided such substantial security sector assistance to a non-candidate, non-NATO country (other than Ukraine) – reflecting both Armenia's strategic importance and Brussels' innovative approach to the region. The centerpiece of the EU's financial commitment to Armenia is the €270 million Resilience and Growth Plan (RGP) for 2024–2027, announced in April 2024. The Plan comprises €200 million in grant assistance to support socio-economic reform and deeper sectoral cooperation, and €70 million in investment grants targeting connectivity, energy, transport, and the private sector – representing a 50 percent increase in EU funding to Armenia compared to previous cycles.^[1]

From the EU's perspective, Armenia fulfills several distinct and complementary strategic functions. It currently stands as the leading democratic partner in the South Caucasus, demonstrating sustained reform momentum that differentiates it from its neighbors. It serves as a gateway for critical connectivity initiatives – including the Middle Corridor and the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) project – linking Europe with Central Asia. Armenia also functions as a test case for the EU's emerging approach of combining values-based and geography-based engagement in contested regional environments, while simultaneously acting as a structural counterbalance to competing geopolitical actors seeking influence in the region.^[2]

For Armenia, deepening engagement with the European Union is equally transformative. It accelerates democratic consolidation, strengthens institutional resilience, supports economic diversification, and enhances geopolitical flexibility. It also positions Armenia as a potential transit hub in regional connectivity and trade – a role with both economic and strategic implications. EU integration thus serves not merely as a foreign policy posture or government's political tool for the Armenian domestic purpose, but as an instrument of national resilience in a challenging geopolitical neighborhood.

Connectivity initiatives occupy a central place in this strategic transformation. Armenia's "Crossroads of Peace" initiative aligns substantively with the EU's Global Gateway strategy - the European Union's flagship framework for developing sustainable, secure, and rules-based transport, energy, and digital connectivity corridors linking Europe with neighboring regions and global markets. At the same time, while projects such as TRIPP hold the potential to significantly reshape regional transport and energy architectures. If successfully implemented, these initiatives could enhance Europe's access to Central Asia and elevate the strategic relevance of the South Caucasus as a critical corridor for energy transit, trade, digital connectivity, and supply-chain diversification. In doing so, they would contribute to reducing strategic dependencies, improving regional resilience, and reinforcing the South Caucasus' growing role in the EU's broader economic and geopolitical engagement with Eurasia.

At the same time, these initiatives carry serious structural vulnerabilities: governance deficits, implementation uncertainties, exposure to hybrid threats, and susceptibility to the broader geopolitical and even military tensions that characterize the region. The ambition of these projects must therefore be matched by commensurate investment in resilience and protective frameworks.

The most immediate and potentially destabilizing risk at present is the threat of spillover from the ongoing military crisis surrounding Iran. The region has already registered indirect consequences during the initial phase of military operations earlier in March, 2026, including an incident involving strikes on Nakhichevan airport attributed to "unidentified drones of Iranian origin". Iran's institutional and strategic resilience – demonstrated even in the face of sustained and overwhelming military superiority and pressure from the United States and its regional partners – introduces a new and structurally uncertain dimension into the South Caucasus security environment. It also raises consequential questions regarding the future viability of major connectivity projects, including TRIPP, in conditions of continued US-Iran strategic confrontation.^[3]

The second major structural variable shaping the regional security environment is the ongoing trajectory of the war in Ukraine. How, when, and under what conditions this conflict ends – or transitions into a frozen long-term confrontation – will carry direct implications for the South Caucasus. As long as Russia remains deeply committed militarily in Ukraine, its capacity to project power and reallocate strategic resources to other parts of the post-Soviet space, including the South Caucasus, remains constrained.

Now entering its fifth year of full-scale hostilities, the conflict exhibits the defining characteristics of what may be termed a "war of endurance".^[4] Tactically, it is marked by the predominance of defensive and positional warfare over deep maneuver operations, and by attritional dynamics conducted across an increasingly transparent and sensor-saturated battlefield. The conflict may nevertheless evolve in qualitatively new directions – through a resurgence of maneuver warfare enabled by emerging weapons technologies, new operational concepts, or, most likely, a combination of both. In this sense, the conflict defies simple categorization and retains a capacity for strategic surprise.

There is a distant, structural analogy to the protracted Caucasus wars of the Russian Empire in the XVIII and XIX centuries: a conflict that has transitioned from conventional attrition into a prolonged phase characterized by the mutual adaptation of belligerents and the progressive institutionalization of hostilities. The critical strategic question is how and when this dynamic shifts. Crucially, the Ukrainian conflict is simultaneously providing the Russian military with unparalleled operational experience in large-scale modern warfare – integrating advanced and legacy weapons systems in the largest armed confrontation Europe has witnessed since the WWII. Depending on the geopolitical trajectory, a freeze or strategic pause in the conflict – combined with a political calculation in Moscow regarding the optimal redeployment of accumulated military capabilities – could generate a temptation to test those capabilities in other contested theaters, including the South Caucasus. This scenario remains, for now, contingent and hypothetical; it cannot, however, be dismissed as structurally implausible.

Analytical discussions of hybrid warfare as it applies to the South Caucasus – and specifically to the influence operations, economic coercion, and political interference affecting states in the region – are important and should not be minimized. However, caution is warranted against overstating their primacy. Hybrid threats, by their nature, can rapidly give way to – or serve as a preparatory phase for – conventional, kinetic confrontation. The analytical category should not become a conceptual substitute for rigorous assessment of hard security risks. The relationship between non-kinetic and kinetic threats in the region of South Caucasus is better understood as a spectrum than as a binary.

A variable of considerable strategic weight is the degree and consistency of US engagement in the South Caucasus. If the United States were to significantly reduce its regional presence or strategic attention, this would create structural openings for other actors – particularly Russia – to reassert influence in ways that could destabilize the current regional configuration. The Washington agreements of August 2025 demonstrated the leverage that active US diplomatic engagement can generate. Conversely, the absence of that engagement would be felt acutely across the region's security architecture. For now, this scenario of American disengagement remains hypothetical. But it represents a structural risk that regional actors and European partners would be wise to account for in their strategic planning.

The South Caucasus is entering a new and distinctly fluid phase of its security evolution. The traditional conflict dynamics that defined the region for three decades are being restructured, while novel geopolitical, economic, and security pressures are emerging in their place. The peace framework between Armenia and Azerbaijan, however fragile and contested in its implementation, removes one of the region's most chronic destabilizing factors – creating space, but not guarantees, for broader stabilization.

In this context, Armenia's deepening partnership with the European Union and its pivotal member countries is more than a bilateral relationship. It is a structurally consequential development with implications for regional geopolitics, connectivity architecture, and the balance of influence among competing external actors. Whether that partnership can be consolidated and insulated against the pressures – internal and external – that will inevitably test it, is one of the defining strategic questions for the South Caucasus in the years ahead.

[From Conflict Management to Institutional Peacebuilding: Reflections on the Emerging Security Architecture of the South Caucasus](#)

By: Yunis Gurbanov

What we seem to be witnessing now is a historically significant transformation in the South Caucasus. For years the region has been viewed in the context of unresolvable conflicts, military confrontation, geopolitical competition, and volatility. Now, for the first time since the early '90s, there is a genuine chance to gradually transition from conflict management to institutionalized peace and normalization of inter-state relations.

From this perspective, the signing of the Joint Declaration in Washington^[5] and the signing of the Agreement on Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia^[6] are an important political/legal development. What makes this milestone significant is the fact that these documents contain some key principles for stable co-existence in the region.

Above all, the principle of recognition of sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence, and inviolability of internationally recognized borders is stated directly in Article I of the Agreement. The next Article II of the document states that neither of the parties has territorial claims towards the other party and will not bring up such claims in the future.



This point is extremely important for stability in the region because without the recognition of border immutability, sustainable peace cannot be achieved. In this connection, the statement made in the Washington Declaration^[7] about the commitment to the UN Charter^[8] and the Almaty Declaration of 1991^[9] becomes very important for the situation. The recognition that the administrative borders of the former Soviet republics became international interstate borders after gaining their independence is one of the main elements of the new regional order.

The consistency between international and national norms in terms of border recognition and other issues is also an important factor in the context of the long-term peace sustainability.

Another significant change that is captured in the Washington agenda is the gradual move beyond the previous conflict management model in terms of the OSCE Minsk Group process. For many years, the key regional tool for addressing regional challenges was oriented not towards providing favorable conditions for the settlement but rather to managing the ongoing instability. In the current stage, however, a completely new rationale becomes evident, namely interstate relations-oriented, bilateral and implementation-driven approach.

In such circumstances, the region does not need tools aimed at prolonged mediation anymore but rather mechanisms that could provide assistance in implementing the peace process, building confidence, coordinating efforts and cooperation. This change is also indicative of the broader geopolitical trend witnessed in the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War in 2020.

The security situation in the South Caucasus is fundamentally different from what we have seen in previous decades. The emergence of the post-2020 reality has completely transformed the balance of power in the region. It has created new geopolitical circumstances that force the transatlantic community to rethink our approach to the South Caucasus. In this context, we should note that one of the most crucial aspects of the current peace process is connectivity.

It is necessary to emphasize that Article X of the Washington Agreement opens the door to cooperation in such spheres as economics, transit, transportation, humanitarian activities, ecology, and culture. The Washington Declaration also draws special attention to communications and regional connectivity projects. This issue is critical because regional stability is now limited not only to the military component - security is increasingly becoming a matter of interdependence.

This transformation is particularly visible within the broader Eurasian geopolitical environment. The South Caucasus is increasingly becoming part of a larger Black Sea-Caspian strategic space linked to European energy diversification, the Middle Corridor, East-West logistics, and wider Eurasian connectivity initiatives.

This change is evident in the increasing relevance of the Middle Corridor. Over the past years, the political fragmentation of the globe, the challenges posed by the war in Ukraine, and increased uncertainty related to established trade corridors have stimulated the global community's interest in new corridors for East-West connectivity. Under these conditions, the South Caucasus region has been gaining importance not only as a transit region but also within a larger system linking Europe, Central Asia, and the Caspian basin.

In turn, the stability of the South Caucasus region has become a factor affecting Black Sea and broader European security. The significance of infrastructure, transportation networks, and communications passing through the South Caucasus goes beyond economics and is linked to resilience, diversification, and geopolitics.

However, sustainable peace is contingent on the development of confidence and regional ownership of both, the challenges and the opportunities faced by the South Caucasus nations. This idea is reflected in Article VII of the Washington Declaration, concerning security and confidence building measures, and Article IX regarding the missing persons and other humanitarian aspects of the conflict. This focus is relevant because the normalization of relations after a military conflict is a humanitarian and institutional task as well.

The region needs to slowly transition from an externally driven conflict to an internally driven stabilization process involving direct communications, border commissions, confidence building, humanitarian cooperation, and sustained interaction. Confidence building cannot be seen as an empty ritual. This is a strategic imperative to prevent future escalations and cycles of mistrust.

On the other hand, it is necessary to maintain realism about the difficulties that lie ahead. The most challenging phase in any peace process is not the drafting and signing of agreements; it is the implementation. Articles XIII to XV of the Washington Agreement are dedicated entirely to implementation issues, dispute resolution procedures, and the slow normalization of interstate relations.

This shows a vital truth: peace is not a single political moment; it is a lengthy process that involves politics, law, patience, and dialogue. The success of the process will not only depend on political pronouncements but also on the harmonization of laws and the gradual construction of an irretrievable trust relationship.

The broader geopolitical environment further complicates this process. The South Caucasus today exists within an increasingly fragmented international system characterized by geopolitical competition, competing connectivity projects, and growing strategic rivalry among major powers. Under such conditions, preserving regional stability requires careful balancing, pragmatic diplomacy, and avoidance of renewed geopolitical polarization.

The bigger geopolitical picture makes lasting peace in the South Caucasus harder to achieve but not impossible. Major powers are now competing more intensely in the region, and their overlapping connectivity plans just add to the complexity, especially with the world order splintering more than ever. Tensions between the U.S. and Iran have really shaken up the local security situation. Azerbaijan, right on Iran's doorstep, has a lot at stake, is keen on keeping things from exploding. If the standoff between Washington and Tehran drags on, it will complicate the situation. Azerbaijan has always tried to keep good relationships with both the West and its neighbors, but a drawn-out conflict would make that much trickier.

These days, the European Union (EU) is becoming more important to Azerbaijan. Sure, there are still some political disagreements—especially on regional issues and state management but energy security, transportation, and the push for economic modernization keep drawing them closer together. After Europe decided to diversify its energy supplies in 2022, Azerbaijan's reputation as a steady energy partner became a lot more valuable. That shift pushed both sides to work together even more.

From the Azerbaijani standpoint, the EU is able to make a valuable contribution to the peace-building process, mainly by means of economic collaboration, confidence-building measures, post-conflict reconstruction efforts, and regional connectivity projects. At the same time, peace is impossible without direct negotiations and agreements between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In other words, external entities are capable of creating the right conditions for peace, but they cannot replace the willingness to do so on the part of the disputing parties. In such circumstances, ensuring stability in the region presupposes diplomatic pragmatism and caution.

Yet another important element in the picture is that the region enjoys a once-in-a-generation historic chance. For the first time in decades, there is a very real chance to replace geopolitical fragmentation with a sovereign, integrated, connected, and pragmatic order.

However, not implementing the agreement would be detrimental to the entire South Caucasus region. Without proper implementation, the South Caucasus would once again be subject to strategic uncertainty, militarization, and competition between outside actors in trying to establish their influence. Therefore, institutionalizing the process of peace is as crucial as the very signing of the peace agreement itself. Peace will not come by its own accord. Instead, political commitment, processes of implementation, and functioning institutions are essential to sustain a peaceful process and resolve any disputes peacefully.

In this light, one should think about establishing such institutions between Azerbaijan and Armenia as those of joint border delimitation and demarcation, transport projects cooperation, economic cooperation and consultations at different levels, including both political and technical. Through such institutions, misunderstanding can be minimized, and any possible escalation avoided. Moreover, with the help of these institutions, it becomes easier to create an atmosphere of cooperation between the two countries.

There are still issues left unresolved by the documents initialed in Washington, and there are still some differences left between the parties. But what matters is that these documents have set the legal-political groundwork for the gradual emergence of a more stable regional order.

What matters now is that the South Caucasus finds itself at an important crossroads. On the one hand, the region is on course for institutionalized normalization and connectivity-based regional cooperation. On the other hand, it might revert to geopolitical ambiguity and renewed confrontation.

Security Challenges in the South Caucasus: Where Political and Military Perspectives Meet

By: Vakhtang Kapanadze

The South Caucasus region is often described as a bridge —between Europe and Asia, between the Black Sea and the Caspian, between Russia, Türkiye, Iran and the wider Middle East. But from a military-security perspective, the South Caucasus is not only a bridge. It is also a frontier. It is a contact zone. It is a pressure point.

The South Caucasus region today sits at the intersection of several active and potential conflicts: Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine and its continued military presence in Georgia's occupied regions; the fragile post-war environment between Armenia and Azerbaijan; the growing strategic importance of the Middle Corridor; and the widening security risks linked to Iran and the ongoing US-Israel-Iran conflict, including drone and missile threats, instability along the southern approaches to the region, and Tehran's resistance to any regional order that reduces its influence.



In simple military terms the South Caucasus is no longer a peripheral theatre. It is part of a wider strategic contest. And for defense planners this means one thing: we must stop looking at the region only through the lens of frozen conflicts. The conflicts are no longer frozen. They are adapting, mutating, and connecting to broader theatres of confrontation. Let us begin with the basic geography.

The South Caucasus is a narrow strategic space. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are small states, but they sit between major military and political actors: Russia to the north, Iran to the south, Türkiye to the west, the Caspian basin to the east, and the Black Sea security architecture beyond Georgia.

This creates three military realities:

First, strategic depth is limited. In this region, borders, capitals, energy infrastructure, ports, railways, pipelines and military-relevant corridors are often located within short operational distance of one another.

Second, escalation can happen quickly. A local border incident, a drone strike, a cyberattack, or a clash around a corridor can become an interstate crisis before diplomacy has time to catch up.

Third, external powers are not external in practice. Russia, Iran and Türkiye all have direct interests, military tools, intelligence networks, economic leverage and historical influence in the region.

So, when we assess security in the South Caucasus in 2026, we should not ask only: "Will there be war between two regional states?" We must also ask: "How could the region be used as a platform, buffer, corridor, or pressure point by larger powers?"

That is both, a political and a military question.

A major feature of the 2026 security environment is the militarization of connectivity. The region is increasingly important because of transit corridors: the Middle Corridor, energy routes, railways, ports, pipelines, and proposed links between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan.

For politicians, corridors mean trade and development. For military planners, corridors also mean vulnerability. Every corridor requires security. Every railway bridge, port terminal, customs database, fiber-optic line, energy facility and tunnel become part of the strategic terrain. Russia understands this. Iran understands this. Türkiye understands this. Of course, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia understand this.

The danger is that the region's infrastructure becomes both an economic opportunity and a military target. In future crises, we should expect pressure not only on borders but on systems: cyberattacks on logistics platforms, sabotage against transport infrastructure, UAV surveillance of critical nodes, disinformation about corridor control, and coercive military exercises near sensitive routes.

Of the three South Caucasus states, Georgia remains the most vulnerable to potential Russian coercive actions. Unlike Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia continues to face the direct challenge of Russian military occupation, with approximately 20 percent of its internationally recognized territory remaining under the control of the Russian Federation and its occupation forces.

Georgia provides a compelling case study of Russia's long-term application of military, cyber, informational, economic, and political instruments of power, combining hard-power coercion with elements of soft-power influence. Without delving deeply into the historical background, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War serves as a particularly illustrative example. Alongside conventional military operations, Russia conducted one of the first widely recognized examples of coordinated cyber warfare accompanying a kinetic campaign, targeting Georgian government websites, media outlets, and communication infrastructure.

Today, the range of potential targets is significantly broader. Critical vulnerabilities include railway management systems, seaport logistics platforms, customs and border-control databases, energy distribution networks, and financial systems supporting regional trade and transit. Equally important are Georgia's strategic transport corridors and critical infrastructure, including the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, the South Caucasus gas pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars's railway, the ports of Poti and Batumi, and the planned Anaklia deep-water port.

Russia, deeply engaged in a costly and protracted war against Ukraine, does not necessarily require direct big scale kinetic strikes to disrupt the functioning of these assets. Significant effects could be achieved through a combination of cyber operations, unmanned aerial systems, electronic warfare, the activation of proxy or separatist structures, military intimidation, and coordinated disinformation campaigns. Georgia serves as a testing ground for Russian hybrid capabilities. The primary objective would be to undermine Georgia's political and economic stability while simultaneously eroding international confidence in the country as a reliable transit hub and investment destination. Such actions would also seek to raise perceived risks among investors, insurers, and international transport operators.

These concerns are not merely theoretical. Open-source intelligence, international analytical studies, and publicly available reports from Georgian institutions indicate several developments that merit attention. These include reports regarding the transfer of fiber-optic-controlled drones to proxy structures in occupied South Ossetia and the training of their operators. Equally concerning is the continued expansion of the naval facility in Ochamchire, occupied Abkhazia, which may enhance Russia's military presence and operational flexibility in the eastern Black Sea^[10].

In parallel, Russian forces have reportedly strengthened their electronic warfare and signals intelligence capabilities near Georgia's administrative boundary lines. The Russian military base in Gudauta regularly conducts electronic warfare exercises at the Nagvalou training area in the Ochamchire district, focusing on the suppression of communications and navigation systems. Mobile and stationary surveillance facilities operating in the Gali district and along the Enguri River reportedly monitor communications and radio frequencies within Georgian-controlled territory^[11]. These activities suggest a sustained effort to develop situational awareness and establish capabilities that could be employed during a future crisis.

As a crucial bridge between Europe and Central Asia, Georgia represents a geopolitical flashpoint where NATO's Euro-Atlantic integration goals directly collide with Russia's "sphere of influence" doctrine. The confrontation is not just military; it is deeply political. Russian and NATO interests and capabilities clash in Georgia along its strategic transit corridors and contested maritime boundaries. NATO aims to secure maritime supply lines and counter Russian naval dominance. Russia views NATO's naval presence in Black Sea and Georgia's deep-sea port ambitions as a direct threat to its Black Sea Fleet security, especially, after being forcibly expelled from Crimea by Ukraine and blocked in Novorossiysk. The factor of the South Caucasus Transit Corridor also needs to be considered: this narrow strip of land is the only land-based energy and trade bypass around Russia, making it a critical asset for Western energy security and a target for Russian disruption.

The security environment is further aggravated by the continuing process of "borderization" along the occupation lines and the recurring detention and abduction of Georgian citizens living near the occupied territories. At the same time, Russian information operations continue to employ a combination of coercive threats and promises of economic or political benefits, reflecting the classic "carrot and stick" approach.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that future pressure on Georgia is unlikely to be limited to conventional military threats. Rather, it is likely to involve a coordinated application of cyber, informational, economic, technological, and military tools designed to exploit vulnerabilities across multiple sectors simultaneously.

This is where "borderlines" become "battlelines." The old map showed borders. The new map shows networks. **And whoever can disrupt the network can shape the battlefield without necessarily crossing the border.**

When it comes to disrupting critical networks—including physical logistics, energy pipelines, cyber grids, and communications—Russia remains the faster and more effective actor, primarily due to geography and hybrid capabilities. Russia can disrupt physical supply lines almost instantly. As noted, its troops in South Ossetia sit directly above Georgia's East-West Highway. With minimal mobilization and support from 102nd Military Base in Gyumri (Armenia), Russian forces can physically slice the South Caucasus transit corridor in two, cutting off Western land access to the Caspian Sea. Almost the same effect can be achieved using sabotage and cyber attacks on strategic communications or another "soft kill" tools and methods.

Particular attention should be paid to Russia's repeatedly stated doctrine of protecting Russian citizens abroad, which Moscow has previously invoked as a justification for military intervention in neighboring states.^[12] Against the backdrop of the significant influx of Russian citizens into South Caucasus countries following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, such rhetoric deserves careful scrutiny. A related security challenge is the identification and disruption of potential intelligence, influence, and agent networks that could develop within the broader framework of Russia's expanding social, economic, and informational footprint. The growth of Russian communities and business networks may provide additional channels for influence operations, intelligence collection, and political leverage, requiring sustained monitoring and robust counterintelligence efforts by regional states.

Conclusion: deterrence through readiness

The South Caucasus in 2026 is not simply between war and peace. It is between competing security orders. One order is based on sovereignty, recognized borders, regional connectivity, and the right of states to choose their partnerships. This order supported with Democratic world, EU, NATO and the largest part of the society of the South Caucasus countries.

The other is based on pressure, spheres of influence, coercion, occupation, proxy structures, and the threat of force. Russia represents one version of that coercive order. Iran represents another, shaped by its own fears, ambitions and regional calculations.

While Russia retains the terrifying capacity to **disrupt** networks through proximity and hybrid means, its ability to dictate political outcomes has degraded. The region is transforming from a playground of Russian hegemony into a highly contested, multipolar corridor heavily influenced by Ankara and Western economic interests.

The political-military task for the states of the South Caucasus, and for their partners, is not to seek escalation. It is to prevent escalation through readiness.

Readiness means protecting the borders.

Readiness means defending the airspace.

Readiness means securing the infrastructure.

Readiness means resisting hybrid pressures.

Readiness means building partnerships without losing national responsibility. And readiness means understanding that in the South Caucasus, the line between borderlines and battlelines can be very thin.

The strategic objective should be clear: a stable region where borders are not battlelines, where corridors are not coercive tools, and where military power supports stability rather than undermines it.

That requires vigilance, requires cooperation, defense reforms. And above all, it requires strategic clarity.

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