

Geopolitics of the South Caucasus in Flux: Towards a New Security Order

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Geopolitics is never constant. There are always actors with revisionist ambitions who seek to alter the existing political order with a hope of securing a better position in the emerging circumstances. Presently, the world appears to be traversing one such period of geopolitical reconfiguration, characterized by the rivalries and overt confrontations among several major global powers. These dynamics in international relations, particularly the repercussions of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, have also had implications for the security order of the South Caucasus. Facing an unexpected military debacle in Ukraine and massive economic troubles at home, Moscow has also encountered challenges in the South Caucasus, a region that Russia has traditionally treated as part of its “zone of privileged interests” and dominated its security space. In parallel with the decline of Russia’s regional hegemony, other external actors discern new opportunities to step into the resulting power vacuum in this geographically strategic region. Meanwhile, the three countries of the region – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – are strategizing to take the most advantage from the situation, boost their independence, and safeguard their national interests. The developments in regional politics over the last few years signal a significant transition towards a new security order. This article explores the veracity of this ongoing transition and, if it is indeed taking place, what repercussions it might hold for the future of the South Caucasus.



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Introduction

The South Caucasus has long been subject to a dynamic interplay of power and influence, marked by a complex history of shifting alliances and territorial disputes. As the world witnesses a period of geopolitical reconfiguration, instigated by the Russia–Ukraine conflict and a more assertive global competition for power, the implications of these changes have reverberated through the South Caucasus. This article delves into the intricate landscape of the South Caucasus, exploring its evolving geopolitical dynamics and the potential emergence of a new security order.

Traditionally, this region has been under the considerable influence of Russia, which has regarded it as a part of its “zone of privileged interests”. However, Moscow’s regional dominance has faced challenges, primarily due to its unexpected military setbacks in Ukraine

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and economic troubles at home. This shift in the global geopolitical landscape has created opportunities for other external actors to fill the void left by Russia’s diminished influence.

Meanwhile, the three countries of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – have been strategically positioning themselves to capitalize on the changing dynamics, safeguard their national interests, and enhance their independence. These recent developments in regional politics signal a significant

transition toward a new security order, prompting an examination of the unfolding transformation and its potential consequences for the future of the South Caucasus.

This article seeks to shed light on the ongoing transition and assess its implications, exploring the origins of the Russia-dominated security order, its subsequent decay, and the emergence of a possible new security framework in the South Caucasus. As we delve deeper into the intricate geopolitical shifts within the South Caucasus, this article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the emerging security order and the opportunities and challenges it presents for the countries and actors involved.

Origins of the Russia-Dominated Security Order

The South Caucasus has passed through a multitude of significant junctures over the two centuries since the Russia–Iran agreement of 1828, commonly referred to as the ‘Turkmenchay Treaty’. The treaty concluded the war that occurred between 1826 and 1828 between the two empires and formalized Iran’s recognition of this region as part of the Russian Empire, with the Araz River serving as the border between the two empires. Moscow managed to maintain its dominance over this area, with a brief exception occurring during the transition in Russia from Tsarism to Bolshevism in 1918–1920. Until the late 1980s, the region remained under Moscow’s nearly unchallenged dominance as part of the Soviet Union, along with three regional countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) that had constitutional, but not *de facto*, secession rights.

The South Caucasus countries, along with other fellow Soviet states, regained their independence in 1991, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This event, which was named “the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” by President of Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, put an end to Russia’s unchallenged hegemony over its neighbourhood.¹ Nevertheless, Russia was able to obtain a dominant role in the newly emerged security order of the South Caucasus. Towards this purpose, Russia took advantage of the separatist movements and territorial conflicts in the region. Moscow’s support to Abkhaz separatists in Georgia and for Armenia’s occupation of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan in early 1990s provided the Kremlin with important and effective leverage in its relations with these countries.

This translated into a resurgence of the Russia-dominated security order in the region in the post-soviet period, but with more assertive independent states that sought to boost their sovereignty while minimizing Russia’s hegemony. In subsequent years, Armenia joined the Russia-led security and economic integration project, with full membership at the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Since 1995, the military base in Gyumri city of Armenia has served the Kremlin as a stronghold in the region. In this period, Armenia developed multi-sectorial dependency

1 Rferl.org, *World: Was Soviet Collapse Last Century’s Worst Geopolitical Catastrophe?*, April 29, 2005, Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1058688.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

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on Russia, which emerged as the largest trading partner and security provider for this South Caucasian country.

Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan managed to establish a neutral and multilateral foreign policy, thereby enjoying the benefits of its economic independence, made possible through the exports of its hydrocarbon resources.² Azerbaijan succeeded in avoiding any dependency on Russia in economic and security terms,

but Baku respected Russia’s core regional concerns and interests. This nature of relations played an important role in Azerbaijan’s efforts to liberate its occupied territories in 2020 without provoking a military escalation with Russia, Armenia’s security ally.³

Georgia, the only country of the region that sought to ‘escape’ by joining the Euro-Atlantic political and military structures, faced insurmountable obstacles on this path. The pro-Western aspirations of Tbilisi resulted in the deterioration of Russia–Georgia relations. Russia’s occupation of two regions of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) in 2008 dealt a severe blow to Georgia’s national security.⁴ As a result, Tbilisi failed to reach its goal of entering the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The post-Soviet security order in the South Caucasus has been, therefore, more volatile compared to earlier periods. The occasional military escalations between Armenia and Azerbaijan (1994–2020), along with the war in Georgia (2008), manifested such sporadic disruptions of the regional security order. However, in both cases, Russia succeeded in its intention to act as hegemon by brokering a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan and putting a *de facto* veto on Georgia’s integration into the Euro-Atlantic political and military blocs. Even during the full-scale military operations between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020, known as

2 Gurbanov, I. “Relevance of Non-Alignment for Azerbaijan’s Foreign and Security Policy”, *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 2020. Available at: <https://cspjournal.az/post/relevance-of-non-alignment-for-azerbajjans-foreign-and-security-policy-410> (Accessed: 15 November, 2023)

3 Huseynov, V. “Vicious Circle of the South Caucasus: Intra-regional Conflicts and Geopolitical Heterogeneity”, *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 2020. Available at: <https://cspjournal.az/post/vicious-circle-of-the-south-caucasus-intra-regional-conflicts-and-geopolitical-heterogeneity-418> (Accessed: 15 November, 2023).

4 Ibid.

the 44-Day War, Russia acted as the only mediator with enough authority to bring the sides to a ceasefire. By deploying its peacekeeping troops to the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the termination of military operations, Russia succeeded in ensuring its military presence on the soil of each of the three countries of the region.

Thus, in the post-Soviet era, Moscow largely succeeded in maintaining the security order in the region under the hegemony of Russia, albeit with somewhat less assertiveness and determination than in the past. The Kremlin was compelled to recognize the increasing security connections between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and responded with a more measured approach to these ties, as Baku exhibited respect for Russia's fundamental national interests and concerns in the region. Azerbaijan's signing of a declaration on allied interactions with Russia in February 2022 was a notable manifestation of Azerbaijan's cautious policy approach towards its northern neighbour.⁵

Decay of the Russia-Dominated Security Order

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, opened a new chapter in the history of international relations and had similarly significant implications for the South Caucasus. Facing an unexpected military debacle in Ukraine and massive economic troubles at home, Russia began to face challenges in this region. Russia's regional aspirations face particular challenges, especially concerning Armenia and Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Georgia appears to be attempting to find a balance with Russia while seemingly distancing itself from its pro-Western aspirations.⁶

Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus that has a territorial conflict with Russia and feels threatened by its northern neighbour. The Georgian government has therefore been attentive to the potential spillover of the Ukraine conflict into its territories.⁷ These security

⁵ President.az, *Declaration on allied interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation*, Statements, February 22, 2022, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55498> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

⁶ Genté, R. "Broken Dream: The oligarch, Russia, and Georgia's drift from Europe", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 21, 2022, Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/broken-dream-the-oligarch-russia-and-georgias-drift-from-europe/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

⁷ Tass.com, *Georgian PM says opposition wants to drag Tbilisi into war with Russia*, February

threats have prompted Tbilisi to reevaluate its foreign policy concerning the EU and the USA while reducing the emphasis on its aspirations to join NATO. In parallel, the government of Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has attempted to diversify the country's foreign policy by establishing stronger ties with China and refraining from an all-out confrontation with Russia.⁸

Georgia has also stood out as one of the few countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia that significantly increased its trade with Russia after the West imposed sanctions on Russia in response to its aggression against Ukraine. In the year following the onset of the conflict, the overall trade between Georgia and Russia surged by nearly 22 percent, despite objections from the EU and the United States.⁹ The Georgian government has exhibited a resolute commitment to maintain its newly adopted multi-dimensional foreign policy, irrespective of criticism and occasional pressure from Western powers.¹⁰

The developments involving Armenia and Azerbaijan exhibited significant differences when compared to those concerning Georgia, marking a trend that can be described as the erosion of the Russia-dominated security order in the region. One pivotal development in this context revolved around the involvement of external mediators in the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace negotiations. Prior to the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Russia had been the primary mediator in these talks, but in 2022 and 2023, the EU and the USA assumed a more active role in mediating. The Kremlin referred to these actions by Western powers as “geopolitical games,” with the apparent goal of diminishing Russia's influence in the South Caucasus.¹¹

28, 2022, Available at: <https://tass.com/world/1413305> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

8 Ge.china-embassy.gov.cn, *Full text: Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and Georgia on Establishing a Strategic Partnership*, August 7, 2023, Available at: http://ge.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202308/t20230807_11123383.htm (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

9 Politico.eu, *'Ridiculous' to rope Georgia into Western sanctions against Russia, PM says*, May 24, 2023, Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/economic-sanctions-from-georgia-would-not-affect-russias-economy-pm-says/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

10 Kandelaki, G., *Russia is losing in Ukraine but winning in Georgia*, August 31, 2023, Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-is-losing-in-ukraine-but-winning-in-georgia/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

11 Huseynov, V. “Moscow warns EU against Geopolitical Games in the South Caucasus”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 19, No. 79, May 2022, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-warns-eu-against-geopolitical-games-in-south-caucasus/> (Accessed: November 15, 2023).

Nevertheless, Moscow failed to keep the process under control. Most importantly, Armenia and Azerbaijan recognized each other's territorial integrity in the EU-mediated summit of the leaders of the two countries on the sidelines of the first gathering of the European Political Community in Prague on October 6, 2022.¹² The recognition of the Karabakh region by Yerevan as part of Azerbaijan was a development that was not planned by the Kremlin, whose representatives were proposing to leave the issue of the “status of [the] Karabakh region” to future generations.¹³ A month after the Prague summit, Russian diplomats clearly expressed their dissatisfaction with Armenia's recognition of the Karabakh region as part of Azerbaijan. For instance, on November 1, 2022, Russia's Ambassador to Yerevan, Sergei Kopyrkin, told reporters that “the status . . . is an issue that should be left to the next generations, when the conditions for a solution to the problem acceptable and fair to all are in place”.¹⁴

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12 Consilium.europa.eu, Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel, 6 October 2022, Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/07/statement-following-quadrilateral-meeting-between-president-aliyev-prime-minister-pashinyan-president-macron-and-president-michel-6-october-2022/> (Accessed: November 15, 2023).

13 Civilnet.am, *Putin: Status of Karabakh is not Resolved*, November 17, 2020, Available at: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/474884/putin-status-of-karabakh-is-not-resolved/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

14 Azatutyun.am, *Deal on Karabakh's Status Should Be Delayed, Says Russia*, November 1, 2022, Available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32110598.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

15 Apa.az, *Russian FM comments on proposals to open border checkpoints on the Lachin road*, February 28, 2023, Available at: <https://apa.az/en/foreign-policy/russian-fm-comments-on-proposals-to-open-border-checkpoints-on-the-lachin-road-397531/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

Until September 2023, Azerbaijan sought to resolve the conflicting issues through diplomatic means. Towards this purpose, Baku invited the representatives of the Armenian community of the Karabakh region to meetings in either an Azerbaijani city or Europe. The rejection of these proposals by the separatist regime played a critical role in Azerbaijan’s decision to launch anti-terror operations against the illegal military units in Karabakh on September 19–20, 2023. In less than 24 hours, the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan succeeded in forcing the separatist regime into capitulation. This has resulted in the self-dissolution of the puppet regime once established by Armenia in Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized territory.

Moscow did not intervene or publicly condemn Azerbaijan. It can be assumed that Russia did not want to risk its overall relations with Azerbaijan and the country’s major ally, Türkiye. This has been affected by the growing importance of the two countries for Moscow in the context of the disruptions of Russia’s relations with many countries due to the Ukraine war. The fact that the Azerbaijani government succeeded to restore its territorial integrity without sacrificing its independence

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vis-à-vis Russia or any other major power was an accomplishment few would have thought possible. In the aftermath of the elimination of the separatist regime, Azerbaijan emerged as a more assertive regional player with its territorial integrity restored and the ‘Karabakh card’ as leverage against Baku gone from Moscow’s hands.

The decline of Russian dominance in the South Caucasus is also being observed in relations between Yerevan and Moscow. There have been a wide range of decisions by the Armenian government over the last two years that have annoyed the Russian leadership. These decisions have related to both Armenia’s relations with Russia and the country’s attempts to deepen relations with the West. Yerevan invited a monitoring mission of the EU to observe the situation on the country’s border with Azerbaijan. In parallel, the government of Prime Minister Pashinyan was less receptive to the offer of the Russian side to deploy such a mission of the CSTO.¹⁶

¹⁶ Arka.am, *Khandanyan: Armenia has never refused to accept CSTO observation mission*, April 6, 2023, Available at: https://arka.am/en/news/politics/khandanyan_armenia_has_

Yerevan took further steps to distance itself from Russia's military bloc. In January 2023, it refused to host an exercise of the CSTO¹⁷ and, on March 10 of that year, it renounced its right to take part in the bloc's leadership rotation.¹⁸ In spite of the objections and threats by the representatives of Russia at various levels, Yerevan also proceeded with the ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which imposes legal obligations on Armenia to arrest the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, should he visit Armenia. The joint military exercises of Armenia and the United States on September 11–20 were seen in Moscow as another unfriendly move. In his press conference following the G20 summit in New Delhi, Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov harshly criticized these exercises:

*“We deplore Armenia's actions. We have said this ... Of course, the announced agreement about joint Armenian–American exercises looks all the more unusual since Armenia has been refusing to participate in CSTO exercises for two years now.”*¹⁹

These political tensions are replicated in the media sphere. Russia's state-funded media channels are targeting the Armenian premier and his cabinet members, accusing them of being agents of the West and of seeking to undermine Armenia–Russia relations. Simultaneously, the Armenian media disseminates anti-Russian sentiments by accusing Russia of “ceding Karabakh to Azerbaijan” and failing to fulfil its security commitments to Armenia within the CSTO and other bilateral agreements. Pashinyan is depicted by the Russian media and political circles as a prospective “Zelensky,” alluding to Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine, under whose presidency Russia–Ukraine relations deteriorated into a war.²⁰

never_refused_to_accept_csto_observation_mission/ (Accessed: November 15, 2023).

17 Kucera, J., “Armenia refuses to host CSTO exercises”, *Eurasianet.org*, January 10, 2023, Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-refuses-to-host-csto-exercises> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

18 Mgdesyanyan, A., “Armenia further downgrades participation in CSTO”, *Eurasianet.org*, March 14, 2023, Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-further-downgrades-participation-in-csto> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

19 Mid.ru, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions following the G20 Summit*, September 10, 2023, Available at: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1903728/ (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

20 Tass.com, *Pashinyan follows in Zelensky's footsteps by quantum leaps — high-ranking*

Against this backdrop, the government of Armenia is concerned that Moscow seeks to force a regime change in Yerevan. Some officials stated that Russia deliberately tried to drag Armenia into the fighting in the Karabakh region on September 19 and 20 with the purpose of destabilizing the country. “Since this scenario did not work out, now they are already trying to achieve their goal on the streets. They are trying to change the government in Armenia,” said Armen Grigoryan, secretary of the Armenian Security Council, in an interview with local media.²¹ Grigoryan’s statement came amid protests in Yerevan demanding Pashinyan’s resignation over his mishandling of the situation in the Karabakh region.

These simmering tensions have been further enflamed by public criticism from officials on both sides. Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, criticized Pashinyan for his engagement with the NATO and concluded with the suggestive phrase “imagine what awaits him”.²² Alluding to Russia’s role in the anti-government protests, the Prime Minister of Armenia criticized Moscow’s alleged intervention: “Some of our partners are making more and more efforts to expose our security vulnerabilities, now putting not only our external but also internal security and stability at risk, violating the ethics of diplomatic, interstate relations in the process.”²³

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Nevertheless, Armenia’s exit from the CSTO and the EEU, or its departure from Russia’s orbit altogether, does not seem realistic. It is important to note that Russia remains the country’s major trading

source in Moscow, October 18, 2023, Available at: <https://tass.com/world/1692799> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

21 News.am, *Grigoryan: Attempt was made to drag Armenia into larger regional conflict, now they try to replace government*, September 21, 2023, Available at: <https://news.am/eng/news/782453.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

22 Mediamax.am, *Dmitry Medvedev: “Guess what fate awaits him”*, September 19, 2023, Available at: <https://mediamax.am/en/news/foreignpolicy/52549/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

23 Azatutyun.am, *Pashinyan Slams Russia Amid Continuing Protests in Yerevan*, September 24, 2023, Available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32606928.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

partner (45 percent of Armenia’s overall foreign trade)²⁴ and investor (40 percent of Armenia’s foreign direct investment)²⁵ according to 2022 statistics. Armenia has immensely benefitted from the Western sanctions against Russia by circumventing sanctions. With a 92 percent surge, Armenia’s trade with Russia reached US\$5.5 billion in 2022 and played a critical role in its economic growth of 12 percent.²⁶

While economic dependency may not be the sole determining factor in shaping the geopolitical orientation of states, it undeniably influences decision-making. According to Armenian experts, Armenia’s multi-sectoral dependency on Russia makes it “unrealistic to expect that Armenia fundamentally alters its foreign policy orientation towards the West without these dependencies being addressed and mitigated.”²⁷ Hence, it is not surprising that, despite all the above-mentioned tensions, the Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan asserts that his country is not changing its foreign policy vector and does not plan to exit the CSTO.²⁸ However, this statement may be a rhetorical attempt by Pashinyan to calm down Russia’s concerns while Yerevan is gradually pursuing its policies to diversify the country’s foreign policy.

Towards a New Security Order?

These developments in the geopolitical sphere of the South Caucasus suggest sufficient basis to conclude that the Russia’s domination of the security order of the South Caucasus has significantly weakened.

24 Baghirov, O., *Armenia’s Involvement in Russia’s Efforts to Bypass Western Sanctions, Analytical Policy Brief for Institute for Development and Diplomacy*, October 9, 2023, Available at: https://idd.az/media/2023/10/10/idd_policy_biref_-_baghirov_9_october.pdf (Accessed: November 15, 2023).

25 Russia-briefing.org, *Armenia-Russia Trade and Investment summary, 2023*, April 16, 2023, Available at: <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/armenia-russia-trade-and-investment-summary-2023.html/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

26 Azatutyun.am, *Armenia Sees Continued Surge in Trade with Russia*, July 12, 2023, Available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32500512.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

27 Rcds.am, *Rcds Insights: Armenia’s “Anti-Russian” Turn*, September 14, 2023, Available at: <https://rcds.am/en/rcds-insights-armenias-anti-russian-turn.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

28 Civilnet.am, *Armenia says its foreign policy not changing despite fraying Russia ties*, October 11, 2023, Available at: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/754017/armenia-says-its-foreign-policy-not-changing-despite-fraying-russia-ties/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

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The confrontation between the West and Russia and the latter's setback in the war against Ukraine have prompted the two republics with one-sided geopolitical orientations (i.e., pro-Russian Armenia and pro-Western Georgia) to simulate elements of Azerbaijan's foreign policy strategy, known as its "balanced approach in foreign policy". This strategy entails the pursuit of a neutral stance between the West and Russia, steering clear of provoking either side through excessive alignment with just one. With Armenia, however, this policy course is bound to incur Russia's antagonism. Given Armenia's extensive reliance on Russia across various domains, Moscow's frustration with Pashinyan's balancing act appears justified.

As observed in the earlier sections, Moscow's decline as a dominant actor in the region is leading to the growing role of other external actors in the regional affairs. For the countries neighbouring the South Caucasus (Iran, Russia, and, to some extent, Türkiye), the intervention and geopolitical positioning of faraway countries in this region is inadmissible and a grave national security threat. For instance, the "encroachment" of external players into the South Caucasus is observed with concern not only in Moscow, but also in Tehran, Iran. This was made clear by Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian on October 23, 2023, before the meeting of the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, that was organized on the sidelines of the ministerial meeting of the 3+3 regional cooperation platform in Tehran.²⁹ "The presence of outsiders in the region will not only not solve any problems but will also complicate the situation further," he stated without elaborating but with an implicit reference to the EU and the United States.³⁰

This emphasis on regional actors as the legitimate players to deal with their local problems in the South Caucasus has been supported by Russia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye. For instance, on September 16, President of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdogan, proposing a quadrilateral format of the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Türkiye,

²⁹ This format is discussed in more detail below.

³⁰ Reuters.com, *Iran hosts Armenia-Azerbaijan talks, Russia says main issue resolved in Nagorno-Karabakh*, October 23, 2023, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-talks-idCAKBN31M04W> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

hinted that local disputes need to be resolved by the countries of the region, not far-away nations.³¹

This approach was also observed in the statements of the Azerbaijani side following the collapse of the separatist regime in the Karabakh region. Baku started to emphasize the importance of regional solutions to regional problems, in reaction, in particular, to France's decision to militarize Armenia: "France's biased actions and militarization policy... seriously undermine regional peace and stability in the South Caucasus and put at risk [the] European Union's overall policy towards the region", said Hikmet Hajiyev, foreign policy advisor to President Aliyev.³² This played a critical role in Baku's refusal to attend the EU-mediated meeting of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan together with the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz, and President of the European Council, Charles Michel, in Granada, Spain, on October 5. The Azerbaijani Press Agency reported that "Baku does not see the need to discuss the problems of the region with countries far from the region. Baku believes that these issues can be discussed and resolved in a regional framework".³³

Thus, the rise of the 'regional solutions by regional actors' approach in the South Caucasus takes place in parallel with the decay of the Russia-dominated regional security order. This may constitute a new security order in the region; an order that is not dominated by any other extra-regional actor and with stronger agency of the local states. In this order, the interests and concerns of the three surrounding powers, namely Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, would be prioritized over those of other powers that are not from the region. The success of this approach would be critical to prevent a military escalation in the South Caucasus that is expected by some observers due to the erosion of the Russia-dominated

31 YouTube Channel of Anadolu Agency, *President Erdogan talked to the reporters prior to his visit to the USA*, (translation from Turkish), September 16, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55HBFoGSJZ4&ab_channel=AnadoluAjans%C4%B1 (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

32 X page of Hikmet Hajiyev, "Azerbaijan supports the tripartite Brussels process and the regional peace agenda in the format of the European Union, Azerbaijan and Armenia...", October 5, 2023, 4:24 AM, Available at: <https://x.com/HikmetHajiyev/status/1709892377324724646> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

33 Apa.az, *Reasons for Azerbaijan's refusal to attend the Granada meeting revealed*, October 4, 2023, Available at: <https://en.apa.az/social/reasons-for-azerbaijans-refusal-to-attend-the-granada-meeting-revealed-exclusive-413407> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

order and the ‘intervention’ of non-regional players.

The convening of the second meeting of the 3+3 format after almost two years of delay on October 23, 2023, and the expression of intent to hold the next meeting in the near future, can be interpreted as a supporting argument in this context. It is worth recalling that this configuration was introduced by the leaders of Azerbaijan and Türkiye following the 44-Day War in December 2020. The initiative involves the three countries of the South Caucasus plus three neighbouring powers (Russia, Iran, and Türkiye). Currently, Georgia has opted to abstain from participating due to its territorial conflict with Russia. The initiative, even in the “2+3” format (without Georgia), has faced a number of challenges, including Iran’s increasingly aggressive policies in the region.³⁴ Hence, the sides could not come together again for almost two years after the initial gathering of deputy foreign ministers in Moscow in December 2021.³⁵

This time, the sides came together at the level of foreign ministers on October 23. They stressed the “importance of platforms like the Consultative Regional Platform ‘3+3’ in providing opportunities for constructive dialogue and establishing mutually beneficial cooperation between the countries of the region”.³⁶ The ministers agreed that the next meeting will be held in Türkiye on a date to be specified later. They also confirmed that the platform remains open to Georgia’s participation, though Tbilisi has not indicated any willingness to join.

If the new order in the region takes hold and Georgia continues to uphold a balanced approach in its foreign policy, some breakthrough toward Tbilisi’s participation in the 3+3 format and eventually breaking the deadlock over the Georgia–Russia territorial conflict may be expected. This situation would diminish the geopolitical dimension³⁷ of

34 Huseynov, V., “Regional Tensions Loom Over Multilateral Initiatives in South Caucasus”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 20, No. 61, April 2023, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/regional-tensions-loom-over-multilateral-initiatives-in-south-caucasus/> (Accessed: November 15, 2023)

35 Mfa.ir, *Joint Communique of the Second Meeting of the “3+3” Regional Platform*, October 23, 2023, Available at: <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/732343/Joint-Communique-of-the-Second-Meeting-of-the-%E2%80%9C3-3-Regional-Platform> (Accessed: October 23, 2023).

36 Ibid.

37 Huseynov, V. “Vicious Circle of the South Caucasus: Intra-regional Conflicts and Geopolitical Heterogeneity”, *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 2020. Available at: <https://cspjournal.az/post/vicious-circle-of-the-south-caucasus-intra->

this conflict by making it less a matter of the West–Russia rivalry and hence make Russia more interested in substantial talks for the resolution of this conflict. Overall, the geopolitics of the South Caucasus is passing through a period of transformation and promises more political dividends and prosperity for the regional countries if they manage to tackle this process successfully and with no hostilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the South Caucasus finds itself at a pivotal moment in its geopolitical history, characterized by a shifting landscape of power and influence. The long-standing Russia-dominated security order in the region, which has persisted since the end of the Soviet Union, is now showing signs of decay. The geopolitical repercussions of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, coupled with Moscow’s unexpected military setbacks and economic challenges, have created an environment in which the balance of power is undergoing significant changes.

This transformation is particularly evident in the changing dynamics between Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The involvement of external actors, notably the EU and the USA, in the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace negotiations, as well as Armenia’s recognition of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity including the Karabakh region, represent a departure from the previously entrenched Russian influence in the region. Azerbaijan, by gradually restoring its territorial integrity and pursuing a balanced foreign policy, has emerged as a more assertive regional player.

Simultaneously, Georgia, the only country in the South Caucasus with a territorial conflict with Russia, is reevaluating its foreign policy stance and seeking a more balanced approach to navigate the changing geopolitical currents. The country’s efforts to diversify its foreign policy, increase trade with Russia, and maintain its own stability are indicative of the broader shifts taking place.

These developments underscore the waning dominance of Russia in the South Caucasus and the emergence of a more multi-polar security

regional-conflicts-and-geopolitical-heterogeneity-418 (Accessed: 15 November 2023).

order. The concept of ‘regional solutions by regional actors’ is gaining traction, with countries like Russia, Iran, and Türkiye advocating for the primacy of their interests and concerns in the region. This approach promotes the idea that local actors should play a central role in resolving regional issues, minimizing the involvement of external powers.

The success of this new security order hinges on the ability of the South Caucasus countries and their neighbours to navigate these changes without resorting to hostilities. It offers an opportunity for greater independence and prosperity for the region, provided that all stakeholders can effectively manage this transition period.