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Abstract

This thesis investigates how the South Caucasus - comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia - functions as a strategic microregion at the intersection of competing global powers. While often portrayed as a peripheral zone, the region has demonstrated a surprising degree of agency in navigating shifting geopolitical dynamics since the end of the Cold War. Through a multidimensional analytical framework combining International Relations and Global Studies, this study explores how small states recalibrate their foreign policies and deploy discursive strategies in response to systemic global transformations.

Employing a qualitative, comparative case study approach, the thesis examines how each state has adjusted its foreign policy amid recent disruptions, particularly the 2020 Second Karabakh War and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Drawing on small state theory, neoclassical realism, constructivism, and global-local agency frameworks, it analyzes both the strategic behaviors and the legitimizing narratives articulated by political elites.

Findings indicate that despite structural constraints, South Caucasus states have adopted distinct strategies to assert agency within a competitive geopolitical environment: Georgia has persisted in its Euro-Atlantic orientation amid declining Western engagement; Azerbaijan has leveraged energy diplomacy and deepened its alignment with Turkey; and Armenia has initiated a cautious reorientation away from exclusive dependence on Russia. These variations reveal how small states can both adapt to and influence broader global and regional dynamics.

By focusing on the interplay between domestic political constraints, perceived threats, and external pressures, the thesis contributes to Global Studies and International Relations literature on small state agency, regionalism, and global power transitions. It demonstrates how transitional regions at the margins of global power structures actively participate in-and sometimes reshape-emerging geopolitical orders through strategic recalibration and normative framing.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Dissertation untersucht, wie der Südkaukasus – bestehend aus Armenien, Aserbaidschan und Georgien – als strategische Mikroregion am Schnittpunkt konkurrierender globaler Mächte fungiert. Obwohl die Region oft als peripher dargestellt wird, hat sie seit dem Ende des Kalten Krieges ein überraschendes Maß an Handlungsmacht bei der Navigation durch sich wandelnde geopolitische Dynamiken gezeigt. Mithilfe eines multidimensionalen analytischen Rahmens, der Internationale Beziehungen und Global Studies kombiniert, untersucht diese Studie, wie Kleinstaaten ihre Außenpolitik neu kalibrieren und diskursive Strategien einsetzen, um auf systemische globale Transformationen zu reagieren.

Unter Anwendung eines qualitativen, vergleichenden Fallstudienansatzes analysiert die Dissertation, wie jeder Staat seine Außenpolitik angesichts jüngster Störungen angepasst hat, insbesondere des Zweiten Karabach-Krieges 2020 und der Invasion Russlands in der Ukraine. Unter Bezugnahme auf Kleinstaatentheorie, neoklassischen Realismus, Konstruktivismus und Global-Local-Agency-Frameworks werden sowohl strategische Verhaltensweisen als auch die legitimierenden Narrative untersucht, die von politischen Eliten artikuliert werden.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Staaten des Südkaukasus trotz struktureller Zwänge unterschiedliche Strategien übernommen haben, um Handlungsmacht innerhalb eines wettbewerbsintensiven geopolitischen Umfelds geltend zu machen: Georgien hat seine euro-atlantische Orientierung trotz abnehmenden westlichen Engagements beibehalten; Aserbaidschan hat die Energiediplomatie genutzt und seine Ausrichtung an der Türkei vertieft; und Armenien hat eine vorsichtige Neuorientierung weg von der ausschließlichen Abhängigkeit von Russland eingeleitet. Diese Unterschiede verdeutlichen, wie Kleinstaaten sowohl auf breitere globale und regionale Dynamiken reagieren als auch diese beeinflussen können.

Indem der Fokus auf das Zusammenspiel zwischen innenpolitischen Zwängen, wahrgenommenen Bedrohungen und externem Druck gelegt wird, leistet die Dissertation einen Beitrag zur Literatur der Global Studies und der internationalen Beziehungen über Handlungsmacht von Kleinstaaten, Regionalismus und globale Machttransformationen. Sie zeigt auf, wie Übergangsregionen am Rand globaler Machtstrukturen aktiv an entstehenden geopolitischen Ordnungen teilnehmen – und diese manchmal sogar durch strategische Neukalibrierung und normative Rahmensetzung mitgestalten.

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Abbreviations

BTC - Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan

BTE - Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum

CEPA - Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement

CIS - Commonwealth of Independent States

CSTO - Collective Security Treaty Organization

DCFTA - Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area

EU - European Union

EIB - European Investment Bank

EXIM - Export-Import Bank

FPA - Framework Partnership Agreement

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

IR - International Relations

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,

MEP - Main Export Pipeline

MAP - Membership Action Plan

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OPIC - Overseas Private Investment Corporation

OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

TRIPP - TRACECA Road Transport International Project

TANAP - Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline

UNM - United National Movement

US - United States of America

USSR - Union of Soviet Socialist Republic

Introduction

The South Caucasus, located immediately south of the Caucasus Mountains at the intersection of Western Asia and Eastern Europe and comprising Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, has grown in importance in the context of shifting global geopolitics since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. This strategically important microregion¹, which sits at the meeting point of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, is increasingly being influenced by the conflicting goals of powerful foreign actors such as the Russia, US, the EU, Turkey and, more lately, China and Iran. The region's position on the border of conflicting political and security domains and its function as a transit hub for energy lines highlight its geopolitical significance.

While much of the existing literature emphasizes the impact of external powers on the South Caucasus, this thesis instead interrogates the state agency of the region's countries in recalibrating their foreign policies. It explores how these states have actively adjusted their international strategies in the changing international environment. In particular, the study examines how Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan have navigated in shifting global dynamics marked by transition in multipolarity, the resurgence of regional rivalries, and a series regional conflicts, especially the 2020 Second Karabakh War, and the ongoing war in Ukraine since 2022.

The central aim of this thesis is to explore how South Caucasus states exercise agency in global politics through two key mechanisms. The first is policy recalibration, reflecting their strategic foreign policy choices in navigating external pressures. The second is discursive adaptation, referring to how political elites frame national goals through global normative languages, such as democracy, sovereignty, and development - to legitimize policies and shape international perceptions.

This paper conceptualizes the South Caucasus as a “microregion at the crossroads” to explore how small states exercise agency amid heightened uncertainty and external pressures. It

¹ Klaus Roth, “What’s in a Region? Southeast European Regions Between Globalization, EU-Integration and Marginalization,” in *Region, Regional Identity and Regionalism in Southeastern Europe*, ed. Klaus Roth and Ulf Brunnbauer (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2007), pg-20. URL: <https://vdoc.pub/download/region-regional-identity-and-regionalism-in-southeastern-europe-ethnologia-balkanica-1en9ro5h6p6o>.

investigates both the strategic foreign policy choices and the discursive practices of political elites, highlighting the ways these states maneuver within a challenging geopolitical environment. Grounded in the concept of small-state agency, the study draws on a combination of theoretical perspectives, small state theories, neoclassical and structural realism, the structure-agency debate, constructivism, and the global-local framework. Through this multidimensional approach, the research analyzes how South Caucasus states navigate complex regional and global dynamics. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader debates in Global Studies and International Relations by shedding light on how peripheral and transitional regions adapt to, and respond within, ongoing systemic transformations in world politics.

1.1 Research Question

The South Caucasus represents a compelling case for exploring how small states operate within contested and rapidly changing global environments. This study therefore asks: *How have South Caucasus states recalibrated their foreign policies in response to global geopolitical shifts since 2020, and what does this reveal about the agency of small states in contested and transitional regions?* This question is relevant to Global Studies as it connects local strategies to broader global transformations, while critically engaging with debates on regionalism, power asymmetry, and the role of small states in the international system.

1.1.1 Sub Research Questions

This study explores the ways in which Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan have adjusted their foreign policies in response to recent geopolitical changes. To achieve this, four related sub-questions guide the analysis, focusing on the interaction between internal political factors, external influences, and the role of elite narratives. These questions help to reveal how these small states exercise agencies and manage structural limitations within the shifting geopolitical landscape.

- How do domestic political factors, such as regime type, leadership orientation, and internal stability, influence the foreign policy recalibrations of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan?

- In what ways do external geopolitical pressures from major powers, including Russia, Turkey, the European Union, and the United States, shape the strategic foreign policy choices of the three states?
- How do political elites in each country employ discursive strategies, including appeals to democracy, sovereignty, development and strategic autonomy to legitimize foreign policy shifts and influence both domestic and international audiences?
- What similarities and differences emerge across Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan in their approaches to navigating the complex interplay between domestic constraints and global power dynamics since 2020?

1.2 Hypotheses

Although the study is primarily exploratory and qualitative, it is based on research paradigms such as interpretivism, where sensitizing notions, guiding assumptions, or premises are used in place of a tested prediction.

The development of the hypothesis was informed by both theoretical insights on international relations, foreign policy, the global-local nexus, and discursive analysis, as well as empirical findings from the changing dynamics of South Caucasus geopolitics. By integrating both perspectives, it became apparent that foreign policy recalibrations in the South Caucasus since 2020 are shaped by the dynamic interplay of domestic political conditions, including regime type, leadership orientations, and the degree of political stability, with external geopolitical pressures exerted by regional and global powers. Simultaneously, political elites engage in discursive adaptation, drawing on global normative languages such as democracy, sovereignty, development, and strategic autonomy to frame and legitimize their strategies at both the domestic and international levels. These interacting factors generate distinct and divergent foreign policy trajectories across Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, reflecting each state's particular balance of internal constraints and external opportunities.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This thesis investigates how the South Caucasus has recalibrated its foreign policy strategies in response to major global geopolitical shifts since dissolution of the Soviet Union. Positioned as microregion at the intersection of competing global interests, the South Caucasus offers a rich case for analyzing how small states navigate systemic changes, great power rivalries, and regional instability. While this thesis situates the South Caucasus within the broader trajectory of global geopolitical shifts since 1991, its primary analytical focus is the period after 2020. This juncture is chosen because the Second Karabakh War of 2020 and the ongoing war in Ukraine since 2022 marked decisive turning points, reshaping the region's geopolitical landscape and accelerating processes of foreign policy recalibration and discursive adaptation.

For assess how global and regional power dynamics, particularly involving Russia, the West and Turkey have influenced their strategic orientations and to analyze how domestic political factors such as regime type, leadership, and internal political developments mediate these external pressures. The research also seeks to contribute to theoretical debates on small-state theories, agency structure debate, foreign policy recalibration / strategic adaptation through structural and neoclassical realism and discursive adaptation & global norms through constructivism approaches and global-local agency framework. Finally, it aims to provide empirically grounded insights for scholars and policymakers concerned with regionalism, diplomacy, and the shifting architecture of the global order. The study contributes both to theoretical debates on small-state agency and to practical understandings of how peripheral microregions navigate systemic transformations in world politics.

1.4 Significance for Global Studies and International Relations

This study contributes to the field of Global Studies by highlighting the interconnectedness between local actors and global structures, and by revealing how regional dynamics both reflect and influence systemic shifts in world politics. The South Caucasus provides a compelling lens through which to study the interaction between microregional agency and macrostructural forces. In terms of International Relations, the research engages with small-state theory, neoclassical & structural realism, and foreign policy analysis, thereby bridging global and regional analytical frameworks. The thesis challenges deterministic narratives that portray

small states as passive actors and instead emphasize their strategic adaptability and maneuvering in a fluid geopolitical environment.

1.5 Scope and Limitations

This study conducts a comparative analysis of the three South Caucasus states, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, each with distinct political systems, security environments, and external alignments. It examines how these states have adjusted their foreign policies in response to common systemic pressures, highlighting both convergent patterns and key divergences. This comparative lens provides insight into the factors shaping small-state agencies within a contested geopolitical landscape.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative design, drawing on academic literature, policy papers, reports from research organizations, documents from state and international institutions, official government statements, speeches by political elites, and reputable regional and international media. These sources provide insight into both strategic choices and the discursive framing employed by political elites and other influential societal actors.

A key methodological limitation of this study is its desk-based design, which restricts direct observation of domestic political processes and engagement with perspectives from non-elite actors across various sectors of society. However, being a native Georgian speaker with proficiency in Russian allows the researcher to access a broader range of primary and secondary sources, including those not available in English, mitigating some of the constraints associated with source availability. Despite these limitations, the approach provides a robust framework for analyzing elite discourse, societal narratives, and comparative patterns in South Caucasus foreign policy.

2 Theoretical framework and concepts

2.1 Definitions of terms

In this study, the South Caucasus countries are conceptualized as small states within international relations and global politics. These states are incapable of ensuring their own

survival due to their low military capabilities, limited economic and diplomatic clout, and limited material capabilities (Vital, 1967). As a result, they frequently use international bodies, alliances, and legal systems as tactical instruments to safeguard their interests. A fundamental conundrum confronts small states: should they remain independent or join forces with superpowers? (Keohane, 1969). However, as Katzenstein (1985) and Thorhallsson & Wivel (2006) argue, they are not merely passive actors. By strategically leveraging institutions, alliances, and diplomatic flexibility, small states can amplify their agency. Thorhallsson (2012) goes on to highlight that small states can successfully navigate the international system despite structural limitations by participating in multilateral platforms, forming strategic alliances, and using disproportionate diplomatic influence. This will help them overcome limitations and improve their strategic autonomy.

According to this thesis, tiny states' intentional policy changes in response to shifting internal and external circumstances are referred to as policy recalibration. Following Hill (2003), foreign policy is not static but constantly reoriented as states seek to adapt to systemic and regional pressures. For small states in particular, recalibration reflects an exercise of agency within structural constraints (Katzenstein, 1985); (Wivel, 2006). For maintaining the state's relevance and efficacy in the international arena, this adjustment attempts to better match its activities with the changing reality. This process frequently follows major changes in international alliances, new security challenges, or geopolitical developments. Such changes have been seen in the South Caucasus in Azerbaijan's balancing tactics between Russia and Turkey, Armenia's post-2020 security reorientation, and Georgia's alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions (Cornell S. E., 2017); (MacFarlane, 2017). The term is often directly used by various scholars to understand foreign policy strategy (Ra Mason, 2015) (Jentleson, 2014) (Lami, 2018).

The following paper examines state agencies from the viewpoints of global studies and international relations (IR). State agency in international relations refers to a state's ability to make deliberate decisions and affect global outcomes despite structural limitations like power imbalances or dependency (Carlsnaes, 1992); (Clapham, 1996). Classic approaches highlight that even small or peripheral states, despite limited material capabilities (Vital, 1967); (Keohane, 1969), retain room for maneuver through strategic flexibility and alliances (Katzenstein, 1985); (Wivel, 2006).

From the standpoint of global studies, state agency encompasses more than just actual power; it also refers to how states negotiate and reframe international norms, discourses, and interdependencies. Therefore, it highlights how governments place themselves within transnational frameworks and justify their actions by incorporating them into global discourses like democracy, sovereignty, or development (Sassen, 2006); (Acharya, 2014).

Taken together, this study defines state agency as the ability of South Caucasus states to recalibrate their foreign policies and adapt global discourses to advance their national interests within an environment of both structural constraint and evolving global interconnections.

2.2 Small-state theories

Small-state theories provide a useful lens for understanding how Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, despite their limited capabilities, navigate a complex and competitive geopolitical environment. Early foundational work by Vital (1967) defined small states primarily in terms of their constrained capabilities and limited ability to shape international outcomes. However, more recent scholarship challenges the view of small states as passive actors. Scholars such as Katzenstein (1985) argue that by flexibly responding to outside forces, especially through multilateral diplomacy, alignment tactics, and involvement in international organizations, small states can exercise strategic agencies.

Thorhallsson (2006) emphasizes how small states address their inherent vulnerabilities in the international system by strategically utilizing foreign policy tools such as balancing, bandwagoning, hedging, and niche diplomacy. By using such approaches, small states can protect their sovereignty while also increasing their exposure and influence on a regional and international level. In the South Caucasus, where there are notable power disparities and numerous external entities vie for regional influence, this analytical paradigm is especially relevant. Interestingly, the nations of this region, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, all use different approaches that are influenced by their own historical paths, geopolitical environments, and reactions to changing regional and international circumstances. Variations in their approaches are influenced by factors such as conflicts, security challenges, and changing alignments with external powers, which affect both the selection and efficacy of specific foreign

policy tools. Expanding on this, (Thorhallsson, 2018)“shelter theory” provides a lens to understand how small states seek political, institutional, or security shelters, not as indicators of dependency, but as deliberate mechanisms to enhance resilience, exert influence, and navigate a complex international environment. This perspective highlights that small states are active, strategic actors capable of adapting their foreign policies to their circumstances and constraints.

In an earlier and widely cited contribution, Keohane (1969) contends that smallness is not solely determined by objective material power but also by perceived limitations in shaping global outcomes. His idea of the “Lilliputian dilemma” encapsulates the conflict tiny states have between maintaining their independence and depending on institutions and alliances to be viable and have a say in global affairs. In areas like the South Caucasus, where small governments function at the nexus of big power rivalry, this conundrum is especially pressing.

2.3 State Agency and Structure - Agency Debate

While small-state theories highlight the strategies available to weaker states, understanding why and how these strategies are chosen requires examining the interplay between state agency and structural constraints, one of the central debates to contemporary IR scholarship also in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). This debate centers on a core question: to what degree is state behavior the outcome of independent decision-making by actors (agency), and to what degree is it conditioned or limited by wider systemic and structural forces (structure)?

Two prominent scholars contributing to this debate are Walter Carlsnaes (1992) and Alexander Wendt (1999). Carlsnaes provides a comprehensive paradigm that unites structural limitations with agency-centered viewpoints. He contends that although state actors operate within structural contexts, defined by institutions, norms, and material realities, they make decisions based on their perceptions, strategic calculations, and domestic priorities. For Carlsnaes (1992), foreign policy is shaped by the dynamic interplay between systemic pressures and actor-level interpretations, meaning that neither level can be analyzed in isolation.

In *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999) Alexander Wendt advances a constructivist

critique of neorealism by underscoring that international structures are socially constructed. His famous statement that “anarchy is what states make of it” exemplifies the idea that shared meanings, identities, and roles that states assign to themselves and others, in addition to actual circumstances, influence state behavior. According to this viewpoint, states are agents that can understand, replicate, and occasionally change the very structures in which they function rather than being solely subject to structural factors.

All these perspectives aid in the explanation of small nations’ ability to take strategic action while adhering to structural constraints in this study. These viewpoints emphasize how important it is to look at both material and conceptual aspects when analyzing governments’ foreign policy decisions, particularly in the South Caucasus’ complicated and contentious geopolitical environments.

2.4 Foreign Policy Recalibration / Strategic Adaptation

Building on the agency-structure framework, neoclassical realism provides a practical lens for understanding how systemic pressures are filtered through domestic-level variables, shaping small states’ strategic choices and policy recalibrations. For understanding and analyzing foreign policy recalibration and strategic adaptation of small states Neoclassical Realism² gives explanation of how states recalibrate policies under systemic, as well as domestic constraints. Neoclassical realism explains why states decide on alignment, balancing, or bandwagoning based on elite calculations and internal perceptions by bridging the gap between domestic political factors and realism’s systemic restrictions. It is frequently used to examine changes in the foreign policy of small states. Neoclassical realism, developed by scholars like Gideon Rose (1998) and Steven Lobell (2009), integrates the systemic pressures of international politics with domestic-level variables such as leadership perceptions, state capacity, and regime type. This approach is invaluable for this research as it explains how external geopolitical shifts, like the changing balance of power in the post-Soviet space, are filtered through the domestic political structures and elite decision-making of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. It thus accounts for the variation in foreign policy recalibrations across the three states, highlighting the mediating role of internal factors in shaping responses to great power competition

² Neoclassical realism, as a distinct theory in international relations, was first developed by Gideon Rose (1998), who integrated systemic pressures with domestic-level variables to explain state foreign policy.

(Taliaferro, 2006).

Within structural realism, bandwagoning - aligning with more powerful nations and balancing -countering them by building or joining opposition coalitions are also fundamental alignment tactics that provide a framework for understanding how small states react to pressure from external actors. These concepts are grounded in the work of Kenneth N. Waltz (1979), who, in developing the balance of power theory, argued that states in an anarchic international system adjust their alignments primarily in response to shifts in the distribution of capabilities. And Second one is Stephen M. Walt (1987) refined this approach through his balance of threat theory, which emphasizes that states' alignment choices depend not only on power but also on perceived intentions, geographic proximity, and offensive capabilities of others. Smaller states, according to this view, may either seek protection through bandwagoning or resist domination through counterbalancing coalitions.

While structural realism explains systemic constraints, Gideon Rose (1998) introduced neoclassical realism to address its limitations. Neoclassical realism contends that domestic-level factors including leaders' perceptions, state institutions, and societal constraints filter out systemic pressures, which are insufficient to properly explain foreign policy behaviour. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding how small states interpret and respond to shifts in the international system, as it integrates both structural constraints and domestic political dynamics into foreign policy analysis.

2.5 Discursive Adaptation & Global Norms

Beyond material and strategic considerations, small states also navigate the international system through ideational channels³. The global-local agency framework and norm theory demonstrate how states actively shape, adapt, or resist global norms, complementing the strategic approaches described in the previous section. The global-local agency framework, informed by scholars such as Jennifer Sterling-Folker (2013) and Amitav Acharya (2014), emphasizes the interaction between global systemic forces and local actors' capacity to influence their environments. By highlighting how small nations and microregions actively perceive and respond to foreign forces depending on their historical and political conditions,

³ The notion of "ideational channels" draws on constructivist insights, which highlight the influence of ideas, norms, and identities on state behavior.

this approach challenges deterministic globalist perspectives. According to this theory, South Caucasus governments exercise agency in a competitive and multipolar regional context by continuously adjusting their foreign policy to accommodate both local interests and global trends. The Local-Global Agency Framework emphasizes that peripheral countries actively modify and influence international norms to meet their own requirements rather than passively adopting them. This dynamic is best shown by Azerbaijan, which has established itself as an energy hub connecting Europe and Asia and has used its oil and gas resources to strengthen its economic independence while also affecting its political relations with the US, Russia, the EU, and other regional actors.

In their 1998 study, Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink examine the formation, dissemination, and internalization of international standards in world politics. They draw attention to the function of “norm entrepreneurs” in advancing novel concepts and the mechanisms by which these norms spread throughout states until they are generally acknowledged as valid rules of conduct (Sikkink, 1998). Their paradigm illustrates how norms have the power to both permit and prohibit state action, affecting what is considered appropriate or practical. This perspective makes it easier to understand how elites in small states frame their policies within prevailing discourses of democracy, development, and sovereignty to gain acceptance and support internationally.

Building on this foundation, Amitav Acharya (2014) criticizes one way view of norm diffusion and introduces concept of “Norm localization” and “Norm Subsidiarity”. The final one is concentrating on weaker states, which develops substitute norms to oppose, enhance, and/or challenge standards that are centered on or dominated by the West. Both ideas emphasize how smaller, weaker, and more powerful states can influence the global normative system. This demonstrates how these governments actively participate in the development of international norms and discourses. That work represents strong foundation for understanding how peripheral states, such as Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan adapt global discourse about democracy and development, for better illustration Georgia has recently moved toward sovereignty and non-interference narratives to disassociate itself from Western demands, after previously localizing Western democracy promotion to fortify its Euro-Atlantic identity. This dynamic is demonstrated by Azerbaijan, which reframes sovereignty and non-interference as fundamental ideals and uses them to both limit Russian dominance in its vicinity and oppose Western political conditionality. Armenia maintains legitimacy in a divided internal and external environment by striking a balance

between Western and Russian-led norms.

If Acharya focuses more on norms that are adapted and generated by the state, Saskia Sassen (2006) in *“Territory, Authority, Rights: From medieval to global assemblages”*, is more focused on integrating policies into transnational discourses in order to establish legitimacy, particularly on how state authority is being rebuilt rather than undermined by the selective adoption of transnational norms, practices, and discourses. By selectively using international discourses on democracy and development to legitimate policies internationally and fortify control within its borders, Azerbaijan serves as an example of how political elites, particularly the president, position the nation to influence world politics while solidifying domestic authority.

3 Review of Existing Empirical Work

This chapter reviews empirical studies on the South Caucasus’ geopolitical role since 1991, with particular attention to microregional dynamics in the context of shifting global power relations. It synthesizes findings from existing research that examine political developments, foreign policy strategies, and patterns of regional interaction, identifying where scholarly coverage has been strong and where significant gaps remain. By mapping how international and regional transformations have influenced the political trajectories of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, this review provides the necessary historical and factual background for the subsequent analysis. The discussion situates this study within the broader body of empirical scholarship on post-Soviet geopolitics, thereby clarifying its contribution to ongoing debates on the region’s evolving significance.

3.1 Foreign Policy Trajectories of South Caucasus States Since 1991

The dissolution of the USSR is a complex and multifaceted subject examined across disciplines such as Soviet and post-Soviet studies, decolonial studies, international relations, political science, and global studies. Given the USSR’s extensive influence across political, economic, social, and cultural domains, its collapse continues to shape scholarly debates and remains central to understanding both regional transformations and broader global dynamics.

Within this broad field, the South Caucasus occupies a particularly critical position. The framework adopted in this thesis finds strong resonance in the work of Hunter and colleague (2017) in *The New Geopolitics of the South Caucasus*. This volume provides a detailed historical and chronological overview of the South Caucasus, examining not only the period

following the collapse of the Soviet Union but also earlier historical trajectories and imperial orders in the region. It then analyzes the Soviet Union's collapse, situating the region within broader post-Cold War geopolitical dynamics. It examines key events such as the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and the influence of external actors like Russia, Turkey, and Western powers. By emphasizing the interaction between unresolved conflicts, energy politics, and great-power competition, the work provides a useful framework for understanding the strategic decisions of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. This historical context is crucial for framing the present study's analysis of post-2020 foreign policy recalibrations and discursive strategies.

Complementing the historical perspective, Gayane Novikova (2015) investigates how regional players handle the intricate relationship between Western and Russian influence. Because it emphasizes the ability of small South Caucasian states, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to adjust their foreign policy in response to both systemic factors and internal concerns. Novikova demonstrates that these states actively strike a balance between engagement with external powers to optimize national interests, rather than merely responding to outside influences. She places particular emphasis on Azerbaijan's energy diplomacy as an example of pragmatic balancing. Armenia is portrayed as an instance of dual alignment, navigating strategic adaptation between Russia and the West, whereas Georgia's efforts to integrate into Western institutions are framed as an example of "agency within constraints", however this article provides valuable insight into how regional actors navigate the system and manage their relationships with external powers.

Abrahamyan's *Small States, Russia and the West: Polarity, Constellations and Heterogeneity in the Geopolitics of the Caucasus* (2025) advances this discussion by providing a conceptual framework to explain why these foreign policy trajectories diverge. He argues that key geopolitical shocks, including Russia's intervention in Georgia (2008), the annexation of Crimea (2014), and the escalation of the war in Ukraine (2022), have compelled the South Caucasus states to recalibrate their strategic orientations. Through the concept of "geopolitical heterogeneity," Abrahamyan stresses that the region cannot be understood as a uniform bloc: Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan follow distinct foreign policy logics shaped by their historical experiences, structural vulnerabilities, and asymmetric relations with external powers. This approach not only problematizes homogenizing interpretations but also underscores the agency and constraints of small states in managing great-power rivalries.

3.2 Post-2020 Geopolitical Turning Points

Several scholarly works offer useful viewpoints for periodizing this subject, which helps to clarify the importance of concentrating on the Karabakh War after 2020. The international community's normative discourse on peace, sovereignty, and regional stability is reflected in the large body of reports generated by the OSCE Minsk Group. These documents are crucial for analyzing how external actors sought to frame the South Caucasus through multilateral mediation and confidence-building measures. However, as Meister (2021) argues in *OSCE and Shifting Geopolitical Realities in the South Caucasus*, the Minsk Group's⁴ effectiveness gradually eroded due to Russia's growing assertiveness, Turkey's rising influence, the EU's limited leverage, and the declining involvement of the United States. Taken together, the OSCE reports, and Meister's analysis illustrate both the persistence and decline of institutional mediation in the region, highlighting how Armenia and Azerbaijan were compelled to recalibrate their foreign policies and discursive strategies after the 2020 Karabakh War.

Complementing this, Neset et al. (2023) in their report *Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry* offer a consensus-based professional evaluation of how the conflict altered the geopolitical landscape of the area. The paper evaluates the risks of rekindled competition and opportunities for regional collaboration while highlighting the changed power dynamics, especially the expanded roles of Russia and Turkey. This analysis is especially pertinent to the current study because it provides an empirical basis for comprehending how Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia adjust their discursive strategies and foreign policies to the post-2020 geopolitical environment. The analysis focuses on three interrelated processes. First, Azerbaijan's strategic flexibility was greatly enhanced by Turkey's increasing regional role after the Karabakh war, which allowed Baku to solidify its position and pursue a more assertive foreign policy. Second, while sending peacekeepers to bolster its presence at first, Russia's reputation as a security guarantee quickly deteriorated. This was most clearly demonstrated by its inability to prevent

⁴ The OSCE Minsk Group, founded in 1992 to manage the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, effectively stopped its activities during the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the group's activities came to a complete halt, significantly diminishing its influence after the war. The Minsk Group has not been in action since then, although having a formal existence.

military operations and clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as to ensure uninterrupted passage along the Lachin corridor, raising questions about Russia's effectiveness as a regional security guarantor, especially for Armenia. These shortcomings not only eroded Armenia's confidence in Moscow but also revealed the limits of Russian regional influence at a time when its strategic attention was largely absorbed by the war in Ukraine. Third, Georgia's path is presented as more unclear: although its long-standing goal of Euro-Atlantic integration remained, Georgia's foreign policy underwent hesitations and recalibrations due to internal political changes and external pressures from the conflict in Ukraine, casting doubt on its capacity to maintain a steady Western orientation.

3.3 Small-State Agency in Practice: Policy Recalibration

The current empirical analyses of foreign policy changes in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan after the 2020 Karabakh War are examined in this subchapter, with an emphasis on commonalities and differences among the three nations. The interaction of internal political processes, external geopolitical influences, and changing security concerns is identified by experts as being crucial in determining strategic choices in all the situations.

Empirical studies highlight growing constraints on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic trajectory. Amiran Kavazze (2020) shows how internal political polarization and diminishing Western engagement weakened the coherence of Georgia's pro-Western orientation, providing context for adaptations to regional crises such as the Second Karabakh War and shifting Russian-Turkish dynamics. Similarly, Korneli Kakachia (2022) uses elite interviews and policy documents to demonstrate that uncertainty in transatlantic support led to inconsistent foreign policy messaging between 2017 and 2022, with Georgia seeking to balance relations between Russia and the West.

In *Georgia's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: Challenges for a Small State* (2022), Kakachia, German, and Jones examine post-2020 foreign policy shifts across Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. For Georgia, the study emphasizes three key themes: Geopolitical Realignment, with efforts to balance Western and regional relations; domestic political dynamics, including polarization and criticism of democratic backsliding; and the cautious post-

2008 shift toward closer engagement with Russia, reflecting a significant recalibration of foreign policy priorities.

Azerbaijan's post-2020 foreign policy recalibration has been closely linked to its energy diplomacy and strategic balancing between Eastern and Western powers. Meyer and Bayramov (2025) examine Baku's adjustments following key crises such as the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the war in Ukraine, showing how crises act as catalysts for foreign policy shifts and enhance Azerbaijan's role in regional and global geopolitics. Sahin (2024), through an EU policy review, explores how Azerbaijan's partnerships with the EU, Turkey, and Russia have evolved into tools of regional leverage and post-war consolidation, underscoring the use of energy resources as a central instrument of foreign policy.

In Armenia, empirical contributions focus on the state's gradual distancing from Russia amid a perceived decline in Moscow's reliability as a security guarantor. Sukiasyan (2024), drawing on parliamentary debates and foreign policy documents, outlines the tension between Armenia's strategic ambitions and practical constraints in diversifying alliances. Poghosyan's (2025) *Armenia's Foreign Policy after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: Diversification in the Post-Unipolar World* similarly examines Armenia's efforts to expand ties beyond Russia, driven by the changing global order and regional security challenges.

Collectively, these studies deepen understanding of how small and peripheral states in the South Caucasus recalibrate their foreign policy strategies in response to changing regional dynamics after the 2020 Karabakh War. They also provide empirical grounding for analyzing small-state agencies under conditions of geopolitical flux, a core focus of this research.

3.4 Unaddressed Questions in Literature

The literature on the South Caucasus is extensive and covers a wide range of important aspects when considered individually. Existing scholarship has made significant contributions to the analysis of issues such as the involvement of external actors, their interests in the region, the strategic importance of the South Caucasus, and the shaping of its historical context. One of the main challenges of this thesis was to synthesize this diverse body of literature, since its primary objective was to examine state agency - an endeavor that required engaging with and drawing from multiple strands of scholarship. A central aim of the research was to address the gap in the study of agency within the South Caucasus, as much of the existing literature on the region's

geopolitics has predominantly focused on the influence of external powers, while devoting comparatively less attention to how the states themselves recalibrated their foreign policies. One of the main contributions of this research is that it fills an imbalance in small-state scholarship that frequently ignores ideational or discursive techniques by incorporating the concepts of norm entrepreneurship and localization.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach to examine how Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan have recalibrated their foreign policies in response to global geopolitical shifts. A qualitative design allows for in-depth exploration of complex political behaviors and state agency in diverse contexts.

4.2 Unit(s) of Analysis

The three South Caucasus states of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan serve as the main analytical units. These countries are perfect for comparative examination of small-state agencies because they offer a common historical and regional background while displaying unique political structures, security issues, and foreign linkages.

In addition, this study focuses not only on foreign policy decisions but also on political elites' rhetorical activities. It looks at how state actors – leaders create and convey national interests by referencing international standards like democracy, sovereignty, and progress. Both strategic acts and legitimizing narratives that influence foreign policy behavior are captured by this discourse analysis.

4.3 Data Collection and analysis

This study relies on qualitative data from secondary sources, including academic literature, policy papers, official statements, reports from international organizations, and reputable regional and international media. These materials provide both empirical evidence of foreign policy recalibrations and discursive content for analyzing how political elites frame national strategies. Priority is given to credible, peer-reviewed, and authoritative sources to ensure reliability and analytical depth.

Thematic analysis, process tracing, content analysis, and discourse analysis are all combined in data analysis. While process tracing reveals causal relationships between significant geopolitical events and policy changes, thematic analysis finds recurrent patterns in foreign policy conduct. To assess how states formulate strategic decisions, content analysis is used on speeches, official documents, media stories, and social media posts. To understand how state actors create, convey, and justify foreign policy decisions in both local and international contexts, discourse analysis focuses on political elite narratives. When combined, these approaches offer a methodical framework for comprehending the communication practices and strategic moves that support foreign policy recalibrations in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

4.4 Research Paradigm

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm (Lincoln, 1994) which emphasizes the contextual and subjective nature of political behavior, privileging meaning-making by actors over universal generalizations. Although interpretivist research and qualitative research are sometimes used as synonyms, interpretivist research is distinguished as a paradigm by the shared beliefs and consensus among scientists regarding the best way to understand and approach challenges (Khun, 1970). Unlike positivist approaches, interpretivism focuses on understanding how state actors perceive and respond to their geopolitical environment. The interpretivist lens allows for an analysis of how small states exercise agency and interpret external pressures, acknowledging the impact of domestic politics, leadership perceptions, and historical legacies on foreign policy decisions. This lens is applied to this thesis, which looks at foreign policy recalibrations by Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan since 1991.

This paradigm justifies the use of qualitative methods, particularly comparative case studies,

process tracing, and discourse analysis, as appropriate tools for exploring complex, evolving strategies in a contested regional context.

5 From Post-Soviet Independence to Geopolitical Turbulence: Drivers of Foreign Policy Recalibration - Structural Shocks and Domestic Constraints

This chapter identifies and analyzes the primary catalysts behind the foreign policy recalibration processes observed in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia following major geopolitical disruptions. It begins by situating these developments within the longer historical arc of the South Caucasus, tracing the legacy of Soviet-era political structures and security arrangements, as well as the turbulence of the immediate post-Soviet period, marked by state-building challenges, economic collapse, and unresolved conflicts. It then assesses how systemic shocks, particularly the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War interacted with domestic political variables such as regime type, leadership changes, and state capacity. By framing the South Caucasus microregion within a shifting international order, the chapter explores how external pressures and internal dynamics co-produced divergent foreign policy adjustments. This analysis lays the empirical foundation for understanding subsequent strategic and discursive responses.

5.1 Historical Legacies and Post-Soviet State Building

By the late 1980s, Gorbachev's⁵ reforms opened the South Caucasus to Western cultural influences, which expanded further after the USSR's dissolution. Due to Moscow's central management of the region's foreign policy during Soviet administration, the republics lacked expertise in diplomacy, statehood, institutionalism, and resisting pressure to become a nation. Centuries of Russian imperial and Soviet control hindered the development of national identities and cultures. However, a strong national consciousness, supported by the three-year experience of independence and state-building in the early 20th century, (while region was

⁵ Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev (1931–2022) – Last leader of the USSR, introduced perestroika and glasnost, reforms that contributed to the Soviet Union's collapse.

freed from Russian control during the revolutions⁶ and civil unrest in Russia, which were directed against Tsarist regime) played a significant role in inspiring the construction of the post-Soviet state, as well as the declared desire to build a modern, democratic state and society. In the case of Georgia, its first constitution after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, adopted in 1995⁷, was based on the fundamental text and ideology of the 1921 Constitution of the First Republic⁸. Independence gained in 1991 left these states in an ideological vacuum, attracting competing influence from international and regional actors seeking to shape their political, economic, and cultural orientations. The Soviet collapse, a gradual process from 1988 to 1991, was marked by leadership struggles that intensified internal divisions and fueled interethnic conflicts – notably the Nagorno-Karabakh war⁹ of early 1990s and secessionist movements in Abkhazia and Samachablo¹⁰. In a way, that was driven by the diversity of ethnicities, languages, and religions that have left behind the tumultuous history of empire domination spanning centuries (T.Hunter, 2017).

After 1991 Soviet dissolution Nagorno-Karabakh war was escalated few times, first full-scale War which stayed ongoing until 1994¹¹, the 2016 April war¹² and 2020 Second full scale

⁶ The 1917 Russian Revolutions consisted of the February Revolution, which ended the Tsarist monarchy and set up a provisional government, and the October Revolution, in which the Bolsheviks seized power and established Soviet rule.

⁷ The 1995 Constitution of Georgia established the country as a democratic republic, guaranteeing human rights, separation of powers, and national sovereignty after independence from the Soviet Union; URL: <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/Georgia%20Constitution.pdf>

⁸ The 1921 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia established the country's first modern legal framework following its declaration of independence in 1918. It laid out principles of parliamentary democracy, fundamental rights, and national sovereignty. The constitution emphasized Georgia's commitment to democracy and rule of law before Soviet occupation later that year; URL:

https://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/bitstream/1234/282962/1/Constitution_Of_Georgia.pdf

⁹ Nagorno-Karabakh – A region in the South Caucasus, internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, predominantly inhabited by ethnic Armenians until 2023; and the subject of armed conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1988–1994, 2020, and 2023.

¹⁰ Abkhazia and Samachablo – Regions of Georgia under Russian occupation; Abkhazia since the early 1990s and Samachablo (historical Georgian name for the Tskhinvali region) since 2008.

¹¹ The First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994) was a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. It ended with Armenian control of the area and a ceasefire, but the dispute remained unresolved.

¹² The April 2016 conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was a short, intense flare-up between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. After several days of fighting and losses on both sides, a ceasefire was reached without significant

Nagorno-Karabakh War¹³, intermittent clashes occurred in the period following the Second Karabakh War, culminating in a major military offensive in September 2023. In a related regional context, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 resulted in Russia establishing de facto control over South Ossetia (historically known as Samachablo), following its earlier occupation of Abkhazia in the 1990s.¹⁴ These conflicts have hindered economic and political progress after independence, and the internal divisions within South Caucasus countries have often increased their susceptibility to outside influence and interference (T.Hunter, 2017).

The South Caucasus is a region marked by a complex historical legacy and significant cultural diversity, encompassing a variety of languages, religions, and ethnic groups. These factors have fostered strong communal identities and collective memories, which in turn shape local perceptions of neighbors and outsiders, sometimes generating suspicion or rivalry, and at other times reinforcing shared cultural ties. Over centuries, the region has been influenced by successive empires, including the Persian, Ottoman, Russian, and Soviet (Baumer, 2021), as well as by shifting political borders, all of which have profoundly affected societal structures and interactions. Linguistic diversity remains a defining characteristic, with Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani as predominant languages, alongside numerous minority languages (T.Hunter, 2017).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, societies in the South Caucasus exhibited divergent geopolitical orientations, with some leaning toward the West and others toward Russia. During the 1990s, Russia's influence in the region diminished due to domestic political and economic crises. Political instability in Russia and the breakdown of the state and its institutions, which resulted in the loss of 14 of its member states, were the two main causes of the political crisis. Added which the Chechen conflict, and the rise of Islamic extremism in the North Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya and Dagestan, which took up a large part of military resources. In addition, the economic crisis that followed the demise of the Soviet Union was characterized by a general breakdown of the planned economy, hyperinflation, depreciation of the currency,

changes to the frontlines.

¹³ The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war was a major conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed region. After six weeks of fighting, Azerbaijan reclaimed significant territories. The conflict concluded with a ceasefire agreement mediated by Russia in November 2020.

¹⁴ The War in Abkhazia (1992–1993) was fought between Georgian forces and separatists backed by Russia. After the conflict, Russian-backed forces occupied Abkhazia, a situation not recognized internationally,

poverty, debt, a drop in industrial production, and declining oil prices.

Meanwhile, the West, emerging as the dominant power after the Cold War, appeared as a model for many in the region, who aspired to integrate with its institutions and participate in the broader Western community (T.Hunter, 2017).

Armenia took a different path from its South Caucasus neighbors by joining the CSTO¹⁵ in 1994, thereby formalizing its security dependence on Russia. As part of this arrangement, Armenia integrated the Russian 102nd Military Base¹⁶ in Gyumri into its broader defense framework, an agreement later extended in 2010 until 2044¹⁷. In the immediate post, Cold War context, both international and regional conditions left Armenia with no viable alternative but to turn to Russia to ensure its security (T.Hunter, 2017). The First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994) proved to be the most decisive turning point for Armenia’s external alignments. At the time, Russia was the only major power capable of providing Yerevan with immediate military support, while Turkey’s firm backing of Azerbaijan led to the closure of the Turkish Armenian border in 1993, effectively cutting Armenia off from regional trade networks and direct access to NATO territory. Georgia, simultaneously, was experiencing severe domestic political instability, and Iran, Armenia’s other southern neighbor, remained constrained by international sanctions, which further narrowed Armenia’s foreign policy and economic options (Giragosian, *Twenty-Five Years On: Armenia's Difficult Period of State Building*, 2017). Western states, while offering humanitarian and limited economic support, existing power conflict between West and Russia, as well as Turkish - Russia rivalry (Moscow seeking to retain its traditional influence through military presence and alliances, and Ankara expanding ties with Azerbaijan and Georgia, competing over energy routes, political influence, and alignment in regional conflicts such as Nagorno-Karabakh), as well as Turkish border closure for Armenia in 1993, one the one hand for solidarity with Azerbaijan in Karabakh War and as a means of applying political and economic constraints; Added to this, Iran’s international sanctions and relative isolation further influenced Armenia’s orientation, leaving it to rely primarily on Russia

¹⁵ CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organization, established in 1992, is an intergovernmental military alliance of several former Soviet states, focused on collective defense and security, with Russia serving as its primary leader and dominant influencer.

¹⁶ The base, located in Gyumri, was established in the early 1990s following Armenia’s independence and operates under agreements between Yerevan and Moscow.

¹⁷ “Russia secures military presence in Armenia until 2044”. URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-secures-military-presence-in-armenia-until-2044>.

for its security, a relationship often described as a ‘strategic partnership’ (Giragosian, Twenty-Five Years On: Armenia's Difficult Period of State Building, 2017).

In the same year, Azerbaijan, under the leadership of Heydar Aliyev, signed the “Contract of the Century”, a landmark oil agreement with a ‘consortium of Western oil companies’, including United Kingdom, United states, Norway, as well as Russia, Saudi Arabia, Japan and Turkey. That consolidated the country’s role as a significant international actor through the strategic use of its energy resources and geographic position. This development provided the foundation for Baku’s adoption of a multi-vector foreign policy, enabling it to cultivate pragmatic relations with diverse partners - most notably by balancing its ties with Russia, the West, and Iran. Under Aliyev’s rule, Azerbaijan’s foreign policy trajectory shifted away from the earlier nationalist and pan-Azerbaijani vision, which had been marked by anti-Russian and anti-Iranian rhetoric, and instead moved toward a more pragmatic approach to state-building and regional diplomacy (Mamedov, 2017).

Following the presidency of Abulfaz Elchibey, Azerbaijan under the leadership of the Aliyevs shifted its focus toward economic development and the consolidation of its international position, particularly through energy diplomacy and a careful balancing of relations with major powers. Russia was regarded as a key regional actor and thus indispensable for ensuring security and stability. It remained one of Azerbaijan’s largest partners in non-energy trade, a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, which, however, became largely inactive after 2022 due to the breakdown of political cooperation between Russia and the other co-chairs, and maintained a military base in Armenia, all of which compelled Baku to sustain a pragmatic relationship with Moscow. The West, by contrast, was primarily viewed as an economic and investment partner, especially in the energy sector, which was critical for reinforcing Azerbaijan’s independence and external partnerships (Mamedov, 2017).

From the moment of independence, Georgia distinguished itself from Armenia and Azerbaijan by adopting a distinctly pro-Western orientation, with the explicit objective of eventual integration into Euro-Atlantic political, economic, and security institutions. Yet the country’s early post-Soviet trajectory was marked by profound instability. The overthrow of Georgia’s first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, combined with civil unrest, the absence of functioning state institutions, and acute economic and social crises, produced a fragile security environment that significantly constrained its strategic options. Although Georgia faced

challenges similar to those of other newly independent post-Soviet states, its overall position was comparatively weaker. Indeed, with the exception of Tajikistan, whose independence was followed by violent civil conflict and state collapse, Georgia experienced the most severe crisis of governance and stability among the former Soviet republics (T.Hunter, 2017). Unlike Armenia, Georgia avoided formal military dependence on Russia and instead pursued closer relations with Western institutions, primarily NATO and the European Union to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity over the long term. President Eduard Shevardnadze declared a pivotal reorientation of Georgia's foreign policy toward the West, first expressing the country's aspiration to join NATO at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit and later reaffirmed to join NATO at the 2002¹⁸ NATO Prague summit. In addition, during a speech to the European Parliament, March 18, 2002¹⁹, he articulated Georgia's desire to pursue both NATO and EU membership. With the aim to strengthen state security, and in an effort to eliminate the weaknesses and insecurity that resulted from decades of Soviet and Russian dominance, which left Georgia politically unstable and enmeshed in civil war in the immediate post-Soviet era (Nodia, 2017).

The South Caucasus had some economic revival in the early 2000s, primarily due to Azerbaijan's development of its oil and gas resources and supported by foreign aid to Georgia and Armenia. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC)²⁰ pipeline's completion in 2005 marked a significant turning point, which significantly enhanced Azerbaijan's geopolitical standing by deepening its strategic partnerships with Turkey, the European Union, and the United States (Cornell S. F., 2005), while still maintaining a cautious relationship with Russia. Politically,

¹⁸ პრადის სამიტი და რადიო თავისუფლება/Prague Summit and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2002).

URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naASG6MdIVU>

¹⁹ Irakli Javakhishvili, "The European Idea in Foreign Policy Discourse of Georgia's Political Leadership: 1995–2012," *Oikonomia – Journal of Ethics & Social Sciences*, October 2023, URL:

<https://www.oikonomia.it/index.php/en/2023/ottobre?catid=130%3Aottobre-23&id=1256%3Athe-european-idea-in-foreign-policy-discourse-of-georgia-s-political-leadership-1995-2012&view=article>.

²⁰ The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) Pipeline is a 1,768 km oil export pipeline connecting Baku, Azerbaijan, to the Turkish port of Ceyhan via Tbilisi, Georgia. Operational since 2005, it was designed to diversify Azerbaijan's export routes away from Russia and Iran, enhancing its geopolitical leverage and positioning Georgia and Turkey as key transit states; Source: Starr, S. F., & Cornell, S. E. (Eds.). (2005). *The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline: Oil window to the West*. Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program. URL: <https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13143-the-baku-tbilisi-ceyhan-pipeline-oil-window-to-the-west.html>

however, Azerbaijan continued to operate under what Hunter (2017), characterizes as a highly centralized authoritarian system. Ilham Aliyev smoothly succeeded Heydar Aliyev as leader, guaranteeing regime continuity and facilitating the consolidation of authority over energy earnings, domestic political dynamics, and the nation's overall foreign policy stance.

The 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia²¹, it resulted in the election of Mikheil Saakashvili and the formation of a reformist government that placed a high priority on anti-corruption initiatives, institutional changes, and a pro-Western foreign policy stance. Georgia's relations with Russia became increasingly tense (Kavadze, 2020). In contrast, Armenia in the early 2000s was governed under a semi-authoritarian regime, dominated by the presidency of Robert Kocharyan until 2008 (Hunter, 2017). This combination of institutional configuration and geopolitical limitations informed Armenia's cautious engagement with Western actors. Initiatives such as the European Union's Neighborhood Policy²², launched in 2004, were primarily perceived as mechanisms for economic assistance, development support, and institutional modernization. At the same time, Russia, having recovered from the political and economic upheavals of the 1990s, used strategic political pressure and energy leverage to regain its regional dominance. When Moscow recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Samachablo/სამაჩაბდლო) and established a permanent military presence during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, this dynamic reached a critical juncture that solidified Georgia's westward orientation and strengthened Armenia's ongoing security dependence on Russia (Siri Neset, 2023).

The South Caucasus region became a more disputed geopolitical area after 2008. Although

²¹ The 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia led to the peaceful ousting of President Eduard Shevardnadze.

Triggered by widespread protests over disputed parliamentary elections, the movement was spearheaded by opposition leaders Mikheil Saakashvili, Nino Burjanadze, and Zurab Zhvania. The demonstrators, notably the youth-led Kmara (კმარა) movement, utilized nonviolent tactics to demand electoral reforms and greater democratic governance. The revolution culminated in Shevardnadze's resignation on November 23, 2003, and the subsequent rise of the United National Movement to power. Source: Fairbanks, C. H. (2004). *Georgia's Rose Revolution*. *Journal of Democracy*, 15(2), 110–124. URL:

<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/georgias-rose-revolution/>

²² The European Union's Neighborhood Policy (ENP), initiated in 2004, aims to enhance stability, security, and prosperity in countries neighboring the EU. In the South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have engaged with the ENP primarily to access economic assistance, support for institutional reforms, and closer ties with the European Union. URL: <https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/en?utm>

each nation participated differently, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were given the chance to further their political and economic integration through the EU's Eastern Partnership program, which was introduced in 2009. Georgia signed an Association Agreement and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA)²³ in 2014, cementing its European trajectory. Leadership transitions, UNM²⁴ lost in the 2012 parliamentary election and the departure of Mikheil Saakashvili in 2013 and the rise of the Georgian Dream coalition, introduced a more pragmatic stance²⁵ (as described by GD politicians) toward Russia while continuing European engagement. Azerbaijan, without entering binding political agreements, bolstered its energy cooperation with the EU, particularly through the Southern Gas Corridor. This project transports natural gas from the Caspian region, mainly from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz field to Europe via Georgia, Turkey, and the Balkans, reducing Europe's reliance on Russian gas, diversifying its supply, and enhancing overall energy security (Siri Neset, 2023).

After first negotiating an Association Agreement, Armenia changed its mind in 2013 in response to pressure from Russia and joined the Eurasian Economic Union²⁶ in 2015, reflecting persistent security and economic dependence. Leadership shifts, particularly the 2018 Velvet Revolution that brought Nikol Pashinyan to power, indicated potential for changes in governance and foreign policy orientation. Simultaneously, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014²⁷ and its military activities in Ukraine heightened regional security concerns, spurred

²³ The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) is a trade agreement between the European Union and partner countries, such as Georgia, Ukraine, or Moldova, that goes beyond traditional free trade arrangements. It seeks to integrate the partner's economy with the EU single market, reduce tariffs and trade barriers on goods and services, align domestic regulations and standards with EU norms, and promote investment, economic modernization, and sustainable development. URL: <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/eu-georgia-dcfta>.

²⁴ The United National Movement (UNM) is a political party in Georgia, founded in 2001 by Mikheil Saakashvili and his allies. It played a central role in the 2003 Rose Revolution, after which Saakashvili became president.

²⁵ "We pursue a pragmatic policy" - Irakli Kobakhidze. URL: <https://publika.ge/chven-vatarebt-pragmatul-politikas-amis-gamokhatuleba-rusetis-dghevandeli-gadawyvetileba-kobakhidze/>

²⁶ The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), founded in 2015, is a regional economic organization that includes Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. Its primary objective is to facilitate economic integration by creating a unified market for goods, services, capital, and labor, alongside harmonizing trade, customs, and regulatory policies, thereby enhancing economic cooperation among its members. URL: <https://www.eaeunion.org/?lang=en&utm>

²⁷ COUNCIL DECISION 2014/386/CFSP, 23 June 2014; "Concerning restrictions on goods originating in

increased Western involvement in Georgia and Azerbaijan, and reinforced Armenia's dependence on Moscow. The South Caucasus had become a highly complex geopolitical region by the start of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, with state structures, leadership dynamics, resource distribution, and security configurations continuously shaped and limited by almost thirty years of internal unrest and external forces (Siri Neset, 2023).

5.2 Geopolitical Shocks: Wars and Regional Conflicts

2020 full scale War in Karabakh, as well as Russia Invasion in Ukraine 2022 are catalysts for strategic recalibration of South Caucasus. Those occurrences represent a distinct periodization in the study of South Caucasus foreign policy, because they constitute systemic shocks that disrupted the post-2008 regional order and exposed the limitations of existing security and alliance structures. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war marked a significant break from the post-1994 Bishkek ceasefire²⁸ status quo. Lasting 44 days, the conflict enabled Azerbaijan to reclaim substantial territories previously lost in the early 1990s, including Shusha, Jabrayil, Fuzuli, Zangilan, Qubadli, Agdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin districts. The hostilities concluded with a Russian-brokered ceasefire, which not only underscored Armenia's continued security reliance on Moscow but also led to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the remaining Armenian-controlled areas, all of which are internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan²⁹, especially

Crimea or Sevastopol, in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol". URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A32014D0386&utm>.

Council of the EU – "Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol: EU renews restrictive measures until 23 June 2026"; URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/06/16/russia-s-illegal-annexation-of-crimea-and-the-city-of-sevastopol-eu-renews-restrictive-measures-until-23-june-2026/?utm>.

²⁸ The Bishkek Ceasefire Agreement, concluded in May 1994 in Kyrgyzstan, formally ended active fighting in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Following the ceasefire, Armenian forces retained control over Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent Azerbaijani districts, Lachin, Kelbajar, Agdam, Fizuli, Jabrayil, Zangilan, and Gubadli, establishing a buffer zone separating Nagorno-Karabakh from the rest of Azerbaijan. These territorial arrangements maintained a frozen conflict for more than twenty years. Source: Askerov, A. (2020). *The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: The Beginning of the Soviet End*. In S. Brooks & L. Tchantouridze (Eds.), *Post-Soviet Conflicts: The Thirty Years Crisis* (pp. 55–78). Lexington Books.

²⁹ Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. See UN Security Council Resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884 (1993), which reaffirm Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and call for the withdrawal of occupying forces

Lachin Corridor (The only land link territorially Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh), and selected areas of Nagorno Karabakh constrained Armenia's capacity to act independently and increase Moscow's leverage over Yerevan and Azerbaijani as well. That was first time after thirty years of the withdrawal first Nagorno-Karabakh War, the forces which had been stationed in the region during the Soviet Union, notably Soviet 4th Army, with major bases in Baku, Ganja and Nakhichevan, last Russian military units were withdrawn from Azerbaijani territory by May 1993. In general Russia strengthen its position as a main security actor in the south Caucasus through peacekeeping operations framed under CIS agreements, although these deployments were not sanctioned by a broader international mandate such as the United Nations for instance.

Established under Russian leadership soon after the Soviet Union's disintegration in December 1991, the CIS is and remains a regional organization. Its goal was to formally award the former Soviet republics independence while keeping them in Russia's political, economic, and security umbrella. Georgia ceased its membership after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war in August, finalized in 2009, while Azerbaijan and Armenia remain members. As a result, CIS accords have given Russia the chance to engage in legal and political disputes, including the right to sustain a military presence while presenting it as a peacekeeping operation. Tools like the Tashkent Treaty / Collective Security Treaty (CST) (15 May 1992)³⁰, the Protocol on the Status of CIS Collective Peacekeeping Forces (Tashkent, 10 February 1995)³¹, the Agreement on Groups of Military Observers and Collective Peacekeeping Forces (Minsk, 24 September 1993)³², and other bilateral CIS-endorsed mandates have made this possible.

As Russia took on a more direct and operational role in ceasefire enforcement and conflict management, overshadowing the efforts of other co-chairs, the 2020 war resulted in a reorganization of the mediation structure, which had previously been controlled by the OSCE

³⁰ Treaty on Collective Security, concluded at Tashkent on 15 May 1992, United Nations Treaty Series, Vol. 1894, No. 32307; URL: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201894/volume-1894-I-32307-English.pdf>.

³¹ Konstantin Korkelia, The CIS Peace-Keeping Operations in the Context of International Legal Order: Final Report (Abstract), Foreign Policies of the CIS States: A Comprehensive Reference (1997-1999), pg-6; URL: <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/97%2D99/korkelia.pdf>

³² Konstantin Korkelia, The CIS Peace-Keeping Operations in the Context of International Legal Order: Final Report (Abstract), Foreign Policies of the CIS States: A Comprehensive Reference (1997-1999), pg-30; URL: <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/97%2D99/korkelia.pdf>.

Minsk Group. As of present, no peace deal has been signed. Following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Turkey significantly expanded its influence in the South Caucasus, building on its longstanding partnership with Azerbaijan. It provided military support during the conflict, particularly through drone technology (Bayraktar TB2 Armed Drones), Satellite and signals intelligence (SIGINT) and advisory assistance, which enhanced Azerbaijan's operational capabilities. Azerbaijan's position in the region was strengthened in the post-war era by Turkey's increased strategic, economic, and energy cooperation with Azerbaijan, which included cooperative infrastructure projects and regional trade routes. This collaboration was formalized through the June 2021 Shusha Declaration³³, which further augmented Ankara's strategic influence in the South Caucasus. Concurrently, Turkey engaged in diplomatic and peacebuilding efforts, consolidating its political leverage while invoking a shared Turkic identity to strengthen cultural and symbolic ties. Collectively, these measures exemplify Turkey's multi-dimensional strategy to assert its presence in a region historically dominated by Russia (Siri Neset, 2023).

Prior to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Georgia functioned as a neutral facilitator in South Caucasus diplomacy, hosting several informal trilateral meetings between 2012 and 2018 and offering to mediate peace talks. Following the 2020 conflict, Georgia was excluded from the negotiation format, leaving only Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia at the table. Since then, Russia has deployed "peacekeeping" forces in Nagorno-Karabakh and expanded its military presence along key transport corridors. These moves, together with Russia's prior control of Abkhazia and Samachablo (South Ossetia), territories it seized after the 2008 war with Georgia, pose a significant security concern. This situation reflects both Georgia's historical experiences and its broader geopolitical vulnerabilities. In this context, the 2020 war functioned as a regional stress test, revealing the interactions between resource endowments, military capabilities, alliance structures, regime stability, and leadership decision-making under conditions of heightened pressure (Siri Neset, 2023).

³³ The Shusha Declaration, signed on June 15, 2021, in the city of Shusha (Nagorno-Karabakh, under Azerbaijani control following the 2020 conflict), is a bilateral agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkey. It consolidates and formalizes their strategic partnership across several areas: security and defense cooperation, political coordination, economic and energy collaboration, and cultural and symbolic ties. *URL:* <https://coe.mfa.gov.az/en/news/shusha-declaration-on-allied-relations-between-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-and-the-republic-of-turkey?utm>.

Scholars such as Siri Neset and Mustafa Aydın (2023) observe that Western engagement during and after the conflict, including that of the European Union and the United States, was largely limited in influence. Diplomatic mechanisms, particularly the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by the U.S. and France in coordination with Russia, were similarly ineffective in producing meaningful stabilization following the first Karabakh war (1988-1994). Despite making a public commitment to resolving disputes and restoring regional harmony, the Biden administration struggled to produce meaningful outcomes, and the European Union also had difficulty making a big difference. However, both parties made diplomatic attempts to reach out to Armenia and Azerbaijan, urging a truce and stressing respect for international law.

In the post-conflict period, they also provided substantial humanitarian assistance, with the European Union allocating €38.4³⁴ million and the United States \$28 million³⁵ to support reconstruction and promote social and economic stabilization in the affected areas since 2020.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 constituted a second, even broader systemic shock, on this stage when war is still ongoing reverberating across the South Caucasus and destabilizing the strategic assumptions underpinning the regional order. Moscow's military overextension, combined with unprecedented Western sanctions, reduced its capacity to act as the primary security arbiter in the region. While EU took a position in the bilateral negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. US has also begun direct involvement in negotiations between the two states since 1 May 2023, when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken convened a trilateral meeting in Washington, D.C.,³⁶ with Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov, representing a notable instance of direct U.S. engagement aimed at enhancing regional security and facilitating the normalization of bilateral relations. The U.S. played a mediating role in subsequent discussions, leading to a landmark summit on August 8, 2025³⁷, at the White House, where President Donald

³⁴ European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations; URL: https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/europe/armenia-and-azerbaijan_en.

³⁵ Psaledakis, D. (2023, November 21). US to provide over \$4 million in aid for those affected by Nagorno-Karabakh crisis. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-provide-over-4-million-aid-those-affected-by-nagorno-karabakh-crisis-2023-11-21/>.

³⁶ "Press Release on the meeting between the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia held Arlington, Virginia"; URL: <https://losangeles.mfa.gov.az/en/news/press-release-on-the-meeting-between-the-foreign-ministers-of-azerbaijan-and-armenia-held-arlington-virginia?>

³⁷ "Joint Declaration signed on meeting between President of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister of Armenia held in Washington"; URL: <https://nairobi.mfa.gov.az/en/news/joint-declaration-signed-on-meeting-between-president->

Trump hosted Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, this is direct US involvement outside the Minsk group framework. The leaders endorsed a joint declaration committing to a ceasefire, the establishment of diplomatic relations, and mutual respect for territorial integrity. The U.S.-mediated agreement has been characterized as a strategic success for Washington, diminishing Russian and Iranian influence in the region³⁸. As part of a U.S.-mediated peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) corridor, also referred to as the TRIPP corridor, was created in the White House on August 8, 2025. By building the Zangezur corridor, which would connect mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave via southern Armenian territory, this deal seeks to end the protracted Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenian law governs the corridor, which is operated by a U.S. consortium under a 99-year lease agreement (Broers, 2025). This issue has long been discussed in Azerbaijani political circles, with officials arguing that Armenia's self-isolation can only be overcome through regional transportation corridors (Ergun, 2023). President Ilham Aliyev highlighted this point in his April 9, 2025, speech at the international forum "*Facing the New World Order*" at ADA University, stressing the strategic importance of regional connectivity³⁹.

Together, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 demonstrated how internal political, leadership, and state capacity factors influence a state's capacity to adjust to significant foreign shocks. The quickness and adaptability of foreign policy responses were influenced by the type of regime.

5.3 Domestic Political Structures and Leadership Dynamics

Azerbaijan's centralized presidential system with strong executive power, demonstrated rapid military and diplomatic mobilization post 2020. This dynamic means that the executive branch, under the leadership of the president, dominates the other branches of government, including the parliament, the judiciary, and various state institutions, as well as local governments. Over

of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-of-armenia-held-in-washington?

³⁸ Russia's waning influence in the South Caucasus by Stefan Hedlund, 20 August 2025; GIS Reports. URL: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/armenia-azerbaijan-russia/?utm>.

³⁹ International Forum themed "Facing the New World Order" was held at ADA University with participation of Ilham Aliyev, 9 April 2025; URL: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/68514>.

the years, this dominance has been further entrenched by Ilham Aliyev's policy of "carbonization" - a governance model heavily reliant on hydrocarbon revenues, which created a form of resource-dependent authoritarianism, also called as 'Petro-Authoritarianism' by Gubad Ibadoghlu (2023), Azerbaijani economist and political analyst. State revenues from natural resources reduce the need for taxation and, consequently, the incentive to broaden political participation or accountability. According to Freedom House⁴⁰, Azerbaijan is classified as Not Free and functions as a 'consolidated authoritarian' regime with little inclination toward implementing meaningful democratic reforms. The assessment notes the limited effectiveness of the legislature and local governments, including municipalities, alongside a lack of meritocracy and the prevalence of nepotism, clientelism, and corruption⁴¹. It also draws attention to the systematic suppression of independent media and the harsh limitations on political discourse. The state continues to have strict control over electoral procedures, and opposition parties are regularly suppressed. It is practically illegal to oppose the ruling class, which strengthens administrative authority and reduces political accountability. Collectively, these factors show how Azerbaijan's authoritarian rule is becoming more entrenched and how there are structural barriers to democratization.

In addition to fortifying the state structure, the return to oil and gas revenue growth increased the president's hold on political and economic power. Rapid military resource mobilization, including drones and intelligence provided in part through Turkish cooperation, was shaped and made possible by this centralized structure, limited pluralism, resource-backed patronage networks, and restricted civil society. It also facilitated quick diplomatic initiatives, such as using the post-war settlement to strengthen international recognition of territorial gains. This institutional concentration allowed the government to translate battlefield success into domestic political consolidation, reinforcing the presidency's authority while expanding regional influence⁴². In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Azerbaijani regime has actively sought to maneuver in foreign policy. Under the centralized leadership of the Aliyev administration, Azerbaijan has managed to balance its relations with multiple actors, notably

⁴⁰ 'Last Year's Democracy Percentage & Status' -Azerbaijan; Nations in Transit 2023, 2024, 2025 Report, Freedom House; URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/nations-transit/2023>; Global Freedom Score Overview, Freedom House; URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan?>

⁴¹ Guliyev, Farid (2012) "Political Elites in Azerbaijan". In Andreas Heinrich and Heiko Pleines (eds.) Challenges of the Caspian Resource Boom. Domestic Elites and Policy making (Palgrave Macmillan), pg-118. URL: <http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=509796>.

demonstrating support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and providing humanitarian assistance (Ergun, 2023). This approach reflects a calculated effort to navigate complex regional and international dynamics while maintaining the regime's strategic interests.

By contrast, Armenia's pluralistic but institutionally fragile political system has historically constrained swift decision-making. Since the post-2018 Velvet Revolution, Armenia has been classified as a parliamentary democracy, where the executive authority is concentrated in the office of the Prime Minister, who is accountable to the parliament. While the 2018 political transformation enhanced political pluralism and civil accountability, the influence of oligarchs and corruption remains significant hurdles to achieving a fully democratic government. Despite the positive changes that have taken place in Armenia in recent years, including improvements in political pluralism, the regime continues to face significant challenges such as procedural complexities that slowed critical decision-making during times of crisis.

Coordination among the Prime Minister, military leadership, and legislative bodies proved more cumbersome than in centralized systems, delaying strategic responses and operational adjustments on the battlefield. Although democratic debate and pluralism provided legitimacy to policymaking, they also impeded rapid post-war strategic recalibration, particularly following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Domestic protests and political instability challenged the government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, as criticism over territorial losses further constrained decision-making capacity. Consequently, Armenia faced limitations in effectively negotiating with external actors and responding promptly to emerging regional security challenges (Giragosian, 2023).

Georgia is formally regarded as a parliamentary democracy⁴³. Following the constitutional reforms of 2017–2018, executive authority was significantly restructured, with power shifted from the presidency to the office of the prime minister (Kakhishvili, 2020). The president is no longer directly elected by direct voting but instead chosen indirectly by an electoral college composed of representatives from national, regional, and local legislatures, thereby reducing the presidency to largely ceremonial head of state functions⁴⁴. The parliament, however,

⁴³ Levan Kakhishvili, From a Presidential to a Parliamentary Government in Georgia, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 114 (2020): 10–14; URL: <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/87258>.

⁴⁴ Freedom House Reports 2025-Freedom in the World; Political Rights – Electoral Process, Georgia 55/100; URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2025>.

remains dominated by the ruling party, which limits the effectiveness of political pluralism; the opposition has little meaningful influence over legislative processes. According to Freedom House, oligarchic influence continues to shape Georgia's political affairs, while opposition figures have at times been subjected to physical attacks. Corruption within government remains a persistent problem, and media freedom is undermined through intimidation and pressure directed against journalists⁴⁵.

In recent years, political crises have further weakened parliamentary participation, as many opposition parties have boycotted legislative activity in protesting the country's shifting political trajectory and what they view as growing authoritarian tendencies, reflected in signs of democratic backsliding⁴⁶.

In terms of foreign policy, Georgia has maintained neutrality about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, limiting its involvement to calls for dialogue and offering itself as a venue for negotiations⁴⁷. Georgia has taken a cautious approach to the Russia-Ukraine War, influenced by security concerns and its objective of gradual rapprochement with Russia.

Georgia's pluralistic but fragmented system translates into strategic caution and a reliance on multilateral institutions as compared to Armenia's post-2018 parliamentary system and Azerbaijan's highly centralized presidential regime.

Changes and continuity in leadership also turned out to be relevant. The post-war political crisis in Armenia put Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's ability to maintain legitimacy in the face of mounting popular discontent and security reliance on Russia to the test. Through Armenia's "Velvet Revolution," Nikol Pashinyan took office in 2018 with promises of increased transparency, democratic reforms, and anti-corruption measures. He is regarded as

⁴⁵ Freedom in the World 2025; 'Georgia holds regular competitive elections and hosts lively media and civil society sectors. However, oligarchic influence affects the country's political affairs, and opposition figures have faced physical attacks. Corruption in government persists and media freedom is undermined by intimidation and pressure against journalists. URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia>.

⁴⁶ European Parliament, 'Parliament deplores the democratic backsliding and repression in Georgia', 9 July 2025; URL: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250704IPR29451/parliament-deplores-the-democratic-backsliding-and-repression-in-georgia>.

⁴⁷ Lepoix, M. (2023, July). From neutrality to negotiation: Examining Georgia's mediation role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Rondeli Foundation. URL: <https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/pdf/Eng--3539.pdf>.

independent-minded and prepared to take on established elites, including those who have traditionally supported Moscow. Pashinyan has consistently pursued a policy of balancing Armenia's relations with Russia, Western states, and regional actors, a stance that became particularly evident in the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh war and Armenia's subsequent withdrawal from the region in 2023. This period was accompanied by Pashinyan's criticism of Russian peacekeeping efforts and mediation, which he perceived as insufficient in safeguarding Armenia's security. Consequently, Pashinyan's leadership is increasingly regarded as undesirable from Moscow's perspective, as it poses a challenge to Russia's traditional influence in Armenia (Siri Neset, 2023).

Georgia's ability to react to significant external shocks is shaped by its internal political systems, elite competitiveness, democratic backsliding, and limited governmental capacity. The government's ability to quickly adjust to security changes, control the impact of regional transit routes, and interact with Western partners, such as the United States and the European Union, has been severely limited, especially under the Georgian Dream party's rule, by democratic erosion, political polarization, and weak judicial institutions. The domestic and foreign policies of the Georgian Dream government have faced persistent criticism, manifesting over time in widespread public protests. Key issues include delays in the EU integration process, electoral irregularities, judicial dependence, and politically motivated repression. The Law on Foreign Agents⁴⁸ first announced the draft in December 2022. It was sent to the Parliament in February 2023 and adopted at the first reading in March. Public outcry, particularly from the civil sector, quickly escalated into civil protests, which led to the suspension of the law's consideration. Despite widespread criticism in Georgia, the law, often referred to as the „Russian law”, was reintroduced on March 3, 2024, and on April 17, it was adopted by the Georgian Parliament at its first reading. Law has drawn scrutiny for constraining civil society, weakening media independence, and complicating international relations. In response, the European Union froze financial aid and suspended Georgia's EU integration efforts, citing threats to democratic standards, while the United States enacted the MEGOBARI Act⁴⁹ introduced on 3 January 2025,

⁴⁸ Enacted in March 2023, Georgia's Law on Foreign Agents is primarily aimed at overseeing and controlling foreign influence within the country's domestic politics. Practically, it obliges organizations, media outlets, and individuals who receive substantial foreign funding to register as "foreign agents," thereby disclosing their external support. URL: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10047>.

⁴⁹ Megobari Act; 119th congress 1st Session; URL: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/36/text/ih>.

conditioning assistance and cooperation on progress in democratic governance and accountability.

Azerbaijan has used military victories under Ilham Aliyev to strengthen its negotiating position abroad, support nationalist propaganda, and bolster executive power. Extensive family networks and the concentration of important economic sectors, especially the hydrocarbon industry, under state-aligned elites, resulting in a patron-client structure, support the regime's stability. The intertwining of political and economic interests incentivizes elites to maintain the status quo, as their material prosperity is closely linked to the continuity of the administration. This alignment contributes to the regime's durability, with patronage systems financed by energy revenues further reinforcing elite loyalty and domestic cohesion⁵⁰.

With hydrocarbons often making up more than 90% of exports and more than half of state revenue, Azerbaijan's vast energy resources have been a key tool of Aliyev's governance. These funds were purposefully used to improve security and defense capabilities and to fortify the bureaucracy. Oil exports through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and later massive gas projects like the Southern Gas Corridor were the main drivers of Azerbaijan's double-digit GDP growth in the 2000s. Ilham Aliyev leveraged this economic boom to consolidate state capacity while avoiding political liberalization, framing the period of growth as a direct outcome of his leadership and thereby linking national prosperity to the continuity of his presidency (Mamedov, 2017).

Aliyev's domestic legitimacy was further strengthened by the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, which portrayed him as the leader who gave Azerbaijan back control of lost regions. This tendency was further supported by the military operation in 2023 that solidified Azerbaijan's dominance in the area. On the international stage, Azerbaijan has positioned itself as a strategic energy corridor between Europe and Asia, leveraging its geographic and economic assets to enhance regional influence (Ergun, 2023). The regime's combination of selective repression and controlled reforms has maintained domestic stability; however, the reliance on resource-based legitimacy exposes the state to vulnerabilities during periods of economic slowdown.

⁵⁰ Guliyev, Farid. "Political Elites in Azerbaijan." In *Challenges of the Caspian Resource Boom: Domestic Elites and Policymaking*, edited by Andreas Heinrich and Heiko Pleines, Chapter 9. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339415817_The_Nagorno_Karabakh_Conflict-The_Beginning_of_the_Soviet_End.

Following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, state capacity proved pivotal in shaping the scope of foreign policy maneuverability across the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan, strengthened by its military victory and resource-backed fiscal stability, capitalized on its enhanced position to deepen strategic partnerships with Turkey and the EU while maintaining pragmatic channels with Russia. Armenia, in contrast, emerged from the conflict militarily weakened and more reliant on Russian security guarantees, after the Russian peacekeepers withdrew from Nagorno-Karabakh and the military forces vacated the territory and disillusioned with Russia, its strategic orientation toward the West gained significantly in prominence. Georgia, though uninvolved militarily, confronted heightened security concerns and sought to leverage its transit hub status to attract trade, even as domestic political polarization undermined institutional stability. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine reinforced these dynamics: Azerbaijan's role as a priority alternative energy supplier for the EU expanded; Armenia, particularly after its defeat in the war and realizing that Russia could not provide the security guarantees it sought, shifted toward a multi-vector foreign policy and reached a peace agreement with Azerbaijan, enhancing its potential to increase regional transit significance; and Georgia's balancing act between alignment with the West and pragmatic engagement with Moscow became more pronounced. In all three countries, the interplay of economic resilience, institutional coherence, and military capacity in the face of systemic shocks has reshaped alliance structures, highlighting both vulnerabilities and strategic opportunities in an increasingly contested regional environment.

6 Strategic Recalibration as Agency: Patterns of Alignment, Hedging, and Adaptation

This chapter investigates the strategic dimensions of foreign policy recalibration by examining the specific tools and trajectories employed by the three South Caucasus states. It analyzes how Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan have repositioned themselves vis-à-vis major global and regional powers, namely Russia, the EU, USA, Turkey, and China, through strategies such as balancing, hedging, and selective alignment. The chapter conceptualizes recalibration as a manifestation of small-state agency under constraint and evaluates variation in foreign policy behavior through a comparative lens. Emphasis is placed on timing, sequencing, and the material and ideational resources leveraged to navigate structural asymmetries.

In regions like the South Caucasus, the intersection of structural constraints, domestic

capacities, and historical legacies offers a rich case for understanding how small states navigate periods of systemic upheaval, from the post-Soviet transition to the post-2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the post-2022 shifts following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

6.1 Assertive Multi-Vector Diplomacy

6.1.1 Post-War Consolidation and Strategic Confidence

Azerbaijan emerged from the 2020 war with strengthened strategic confidence and enhanced international legitimacy. The successful recapture of territories in Nagorno-Karabakh reinforced domestic political consolidation under President Ilham Aliyev and enabled Azerbaijan to leverage its military and diplomatic achievements in regional negotiations. This period also allowed Baku to assert greater influence over energy transit routes, reinforcing its role as a critical partner for European energy security, while simultaneously maintaining pragmatic relations with both Russia and Turkey. The war thus exemplified Azerbaijan's continued adherence to a multi-vector foreign policy, balancing assertive regional action with careful management of great power interests (Mamedov, 2017).

The 2020 war significantly altered Azerbaijan's perception in both regional security and cooperation contexts. Unlike the strategy pursued during the first conflict, Azerbaijan began actively engaging in diplomatic language and international involvement. For instance, it initiated the development of diplomatic relations at various stages. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's perception of regional security shifted. Whereas Russia had previously been the region's sole influential actor, the 2020 war elevated Turkey to the status of a key regional power, providing both military and political support that contributed to Azerbaijan's dominance in the conflict. Turkey provided drone, especially TB2 drones, intelligence and military training to Azerbaijan during the War. In addition, since the 1990s, Turkey has acted as a diplomatic supporter of Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict, expressing political backing for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, particularly within international organizations and forums (Ergun, 2023).

6.1.2 Energy Diplomacy and Regional Connectivity

Turkish Azerbaijani relations have deeper historical roots. They were established well before recent decades, during the period of Azerbaijan's First Republic, founded in 1918. At that time,

Azerbaijan articulated its identity based on Turkism and Pan-Turkism⁵¹, largely associated with then-President Muhammad Amin Rasulzade⁵². Consolidating Azerbaijan's independence and bolstering national identity were the main goals, which were backed by Turkish societies and envisioned within the larger Turkish cultural-linguistic family to strengthen the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan. Turkey has been a key partner of Azerbaijan since the latter's independence in 1991, besides providing political backing, diplomatic support in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a significant role in their cooperation energy and infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, the South Caucasus gas pipeline, so-called Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE), and Trans-Anatolian Natural gas Pipeline (TANAP) (Siri Neset, 2023).

BTC, also considered as Main Export Pipeline (MEP) pipeline emerged from the deepening Turkish Azerbaijani partnership, especially in economic and commercial ties, which expanded after Azerbaijan's independence and gained momentum in 1994. That year, Turkey's state oil company (SOCAR) joined the Azerbaijan International Operating Company, a consortium of foreign firms, which went on to sign a multibillion-dollar deal with SOCAR to develop three Caspian Sea oil fields. Turkey's main interest lay in securing future oil supplies from Central Asia, particularly from the Caspian Sea (Balat, 2006). The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline spans approximately 1,040 miles, running from Baku through Georgia to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. This route allows Caspian oil to bypass the increasingly congested Bosphorus Strait, avoiding reliance on Russian and Iranian transit corridors, and primarily serves global markets, especially Europe and the United States. Western involvement in the project was substantial. The British company BP led the consortium of international operators in Azerbaijan, alongside major partners including Chevron, ExxonMobil, and the Norwegian company Statoil. These firms contributed financial investment, advanced technology, and expertise in engineering, construction, and project management (Balat, 2006).

Financial support also came from international institutions such as the World Bank, the

⁵¹ Pan-Turkism – a political and cultural ideology promoting the cohesion and solidarity of Turkic peoples beyond national boundaries, grounded in common language, culture, and historical traditions; first advanced by İsmail Gasprinski in the late 19th century and later elaborated by Ziya Gökalp in early 20th-century Turkey.

⁵² Muhammad Amin Rasulzade – Azerbaijani political leader and thinker, founder of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918–1920), and a prominent advocate of Azerbaijani nationalism, who promoted national sovereignty, cultural identity, and the political and cultural cohesion of Turkic peoples.

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the European Investment Bank (EIB), and U.S. agencies including the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and the Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM), together with commercial banks. This support enabled the West to gain secure access to Caspian energy resources while reducing dependence on Russian and Iranian oil and gas, and facilitated a stronger Western presence in the South Caucasus, shaping regional energy flows and political dynamics (Balat, 2006).

The project transformed the region into a major energy hub, expanding Azerbaijan's role as an important external energy supplier to Europe through the Southern Gas Corridor, particularly to Southeastern Europe and Italy. Georgia benefited economically and strategically as a transit country, collecting transit fees and enhancing its geopolitical significance. Overall, the BTC pipeline strengthened regional connectivity, fostering links between the South Caucasus and the Western world in terms of energy, trade, and transportation, laying the groundwork for continued cooperation in the post-2020 geopolitical landscape. The rise of Azerbaijan's geostrategic significance, as well as the scope of its cooperation with Turkey, is not limited solely to oil. Azerbaijan has also developed natural gas infrastructure, notably the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum (BTE) pipeline, also known as the South Caucasus Pipeline, which began operations in 2006. Its primary function is to transport natural gas from the Shah Deniz field in the Caspian Sea toward Turkey and subsequently to the European market (Mamedov, 2017).

Building on the BTE pipeline, the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), which became operational in 2018, carries Azerbaijani gas across Turkey to its western border, where it connects with the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) to supply European markets⁵³. Unlike the BTE, which primarily facilitated regional transit to Turkey, TANAP represents a strategic advancement that enhances Azerbaijan's geopolitical influence, elevates Turkey's role as a key energy transit hub, diversifies Europe's energy sources away from Russian supplies and Iran as well, and strengthens both economic and political linkages across the South Caucasus and Europe. Beyond the longstanding cultural, economic, and political interconnections between Turkey and Azerbaijan, the energy projects, implemented with Western support and financial assistance, highlight the dynamics of bilateral cooperation. Alignment with Turkey strengthens Azerbaijan's security, diplomatic leverage, and regional positioning. While these initiatives are

⁵³ TANAP pipeline key to Europe's energy security: Turkish Energy Minister, 3 April 2025; URL:

<https://www.turkiyetoday.com/business/tanap-pipeline-key-to-europes-energy-security-turkish-energy-minister-139842/>.

primarily driven by economic and energy considerations, they also serve Western strategic interests in the region (Siri Neset, 2023). On one hand, they ensure the secure supply of Caspian energy and contribute to the diversification of Europe's energy sources; on the other hand, a stable Azerbaijan presents fewer security challenges. This is particularly significant given Azerbaijan's dual role: it is both a key state in the South Caucasus, where stability and a Western presence help counterbalance other regional powers, and a geopolitically sensitive country with direct access to the Middle East. During his second term, President Donald Trump pursued an assertive foreign policy focused on deal-making and strategic partnerships, including initiatives in the South Caucasus aimed at counterbalancing Russian and Iranian influence. On August 8, 2025, a landmark agreement was signed in Washington between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, mediated by Trump, calling for mutual respect of territorial integrity, abandonment of territorial claims, and refraining from the use of force. The agreement opens the possibility for a transport corridor linking Azerbaijan and Armenia via the Nakhchivan exclave, reducing dependence on Russia and Iran, enhancing regional connectivity, and potentially advancing US-Azerbaijan energy cooperation⁵⁴.

Following the Second Karabakh War, the West responded diplomatically, calling for a ceasefire and urging that the conflict be resolved through negotiation, including proposals under the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group, with particular emphasis on humanitarian concerns. Western actors stressed the importance of preventing regional destabilization. Nevertheless, strategic relations with both parties were maintained, especially with Azerbaijan, which holds significant energy and geopolitical importance for the West. In the case of the European Union, these relations are formalized under the Eastern Partnership framework⁵⁵, where Azerbaijan continues to pursue policies of economic and energy cooperation with the EU while maintaining a multi-vector foreign policy. Considering Azerbaijan's leadership and political regime, the country remains largely passive regarding reforms and democratization, using its EU engagement as a tool to balance relations with the West alongside strategic ties with Russia and Turkey (Ergun, 2023).

⁵⁴ 'US intervention opens new page in Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks but challenges remain' written by Laurence Broers, 13 August 2025. Chatham House; URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/08/us-intervention-opens-new-page-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-talks-challenges-remain>.

⁵⁵ The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a diplomatic initiative of the European Union (EU) aimed at strengthening relations between the EU and six Eastern European and South Caucasus countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Regarding Azerbaijan's relations with Russia, following the Karabakh War, Russia initially maintained leverage over Azerbaijan, particularly through the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, who were stationed there until November 2025. However, in the context of global shocks such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war, Azerbaijan undertook a rapid military operation in September 2023, which resulted in full control over Nagorno-Karabakh. This operation included dismantling the remaining separatist infrastructure as the Azerbaijani side stated, effectively blocking the Lachin Corridor, the only land connection between Armenia and the de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh, indirectly pressuring Armenia to accept Baku's terms for full reintegration and cutting off vital resources for the Armenian population living in the region. Ultimately, Azerbaijan fully reintegrated Karabakh, triggering the displacement of most ethnic Armenians (Siri Neset, 2023).

The military operations also resulted in the deaths of Russian peacekeepers, according to Al Arabiya⁵⁶, six servicemen from the Russian peacekeeping mission (Nagorno-Karabakh received 380 vehicles, 90 armored personnel carriers, 1,960 armed soldiers, and specialized equipment⁵⁷) died in Nagorno-Karabakh as a result of the Azerbaijani military operation on September 19, 2023, undermining the legitimacy and operational role of Russian forces, whose mandate was to oversee the truce and guarantee safe passage along the Lachin Corridor. This corridor had previously provided local Armenians with a measure of security, with Russia positioned as their protector. The blockade imposed by Azerbaijan left the peacekeepers unable to intervene effectively. Following these developments, discussions on the early withdrawal of Russian forces were initiated, and President Putin confirmed their removal at the CIS Bishkek Summit in October 2023. The withdrawal of the peacekeeping forces was completed in June 2024⁵⁸. Azerbaijan's relations with Russia are primarily guided by strategic calculations. Its

⁵⁶ Al Arabiya. (2023, September 21). Azerbaijan says six Russian peacekeepers killed during Karabakh offensive. URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2023/09/21/Azerbaijan-says-six-Russian-peacekeepers-killed-during-Karabakh-offensive>

⁵⁷ Fact Investigation Platform. (2024, June 17). *The Russian peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh: beginning and end*. URL: <https://fip.am/en/25234>.

⁵⁸ 'Why they left: The causes and implications of the Russian peacekeepers' withdrawal from Karabakh', Analysis, written by Rusif Huseynov, Murad Muradov, May 30, 2024; URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/why-they-left-causes-and-implications-russian-peacekeepers-withdrawal-karabakh?>

multi-vector foreign policy, which seeks to balance ties with Russia, the West, and regional actors, has remained consistent even after the Karabakh conflict. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war reinforced Turkey's position as both a regional power and a strategic partner for Azerbaijan. Concurrently, Russia's preoccupation with the conflict in Ukraine has curtailed its influence in the South Caucasus, limiting its capacity to exert leverage over Azerbaijan as it had previously. Moreover, scholars and analysts frequently highlight the longstanding tensions between Azerbaijan and Russia. While Azerbaijan remains willing to maintain a partnership with Russia, it is increasingly determined to prevent Moscow from exerting undue pressure on the formulation of its domestic and foreign policy⁵⁹. Despite these shifts, the energy sector continues to serve as the primary domain of cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan, complemented by collaboration in trade, transport connectivity, and security.

6.1.3 North-South Transport Corridor and Regional Economic Leverage

Another important channel for bilateral economic cooperation is the North-South transportation corridor. As a transit point, Azerbaijan plays a crucial role in connecting Iran with Russia and, consequently, Europe. The Astara railway connection, a vital link between Iran and Azerbaijan, is a crucial component of this network. By leveraging this corridor, Baku sustains its multi-vector foreign policy, maintaining pragmatic economic and trade ties with both Moscow, as well as Tehran. This strategy not only reinforces Azerbaijan's geopolitical leverage but also increases its influence in negotiations, particularly with Russia (Siri Neset, 2023). The strategic value of the route has grown markedly for Moscow in the wake of the Ukraine war, as Western sanctions have compelled Russia to depend more heavily on alternative transit channels such as those passing through Azerbaijan. Although there were minor tensions in 2023, such as the downing of an Azerbaijani aircraft in Russian-controlled airspace and the tragic Azal aviation incident⁶⁰, which, according to Azerbaijani official

⁵⁹ 'Azerbaijan Tests Moscow's Limits Amid Rising Tensions' by Maxim Trudolyubov, 10 February 2025, Kenan Institute; URL: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/azerbaijan-tests-moscows-limits-amid-rising-tensions>.

⁶⁰ 'Russia and Azerbaijan's diplomatic freefall may be deeper than it appears' July 2, 2025, Turkey Today; URL: <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/region/russia-and-azerbaijans-diplomatic-freefall-may-be-deeper-than-it-appears-3203752#:~:text=O%20n%20earlier%20Wednesday%2C%20Russia%E2%80%99s%20Foreign%20Ministry%20issued,Soviet%20republics%20takes%20a%20sharp%20and%20public%20turn.>

statements, involved Russian military action, these events illustrate Russia's efforts to assert control and monitor Azerbaijani movements. At the same time, Azerbaijan carefully navigates this relationship to maintain independence and avoid direct provocation. In this way, Baku manages a calibrated, normalized engagement with Moscow, manoeuvring to protect its national interests while preserving strategic flexibility. Russia continues to view Azerbaijan, along with the broader South Caucasus and much of the post-Soviet space, as part of its "near abroad" - a zone where it seeks to maintain special influence and dominant positions. This encourages Moscow to oppose these nations' attempts to forge stronger relations with Western organizations, which it views as a challenge to Russian dominance in the region (Ergun, 2023).

Azerbaijan, by contrast, has generally maintained a more even-handed approach than Armenia. It has steered clear of formal membership in Russian-led organizations such as the CSTO and the EAEU, yet continues to engage Moscow on economic, transport, and security matters, including the purchase of Russian arms. Following Baku's military operations in Karabakh, which established full power over the region and led to the early withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers, previously seen as a means for Russia to restrict Azerbaijan's autonomous actions, Russian influence over Azerbaijan has further decreased. Turkey's backing and bolstered regional presence, which acts as a check on Moscow's influence, increase Azerbaijan's capacity to act independently in relation to Russia (Ergun, 2023).

Azerbaijan's foreign policy after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war clearly illustrates a hedging approach, a tactic employed by governments functioning under structural limits and geographical uncertainties (Goh, 2005; Koga, 2008). Instead of committing entirely to a single major power, Baku diversifies its relationships to protect strategic autonomy and reduce potential risks. This is demonstrated by its close military and political ties to Turkey, which were emphasized by the drones, intelligence, training, and diplomatic support given during the 2020 conflict. At the same time, Azerbaijan sustains pragmatic ties with Russia, cooperating on regional transport projects and avoiding direct confrontation despite existing tensions over Karabakh. Concurrently, engagement with the West through energy and infrastructure initiatives, such as the BTC, BTE, and TANAP pipelines, secures access to European markets and Western investment. By combining these strategies, Azerbaijan can balance assertive regional actions with careful management of great power interests, strengthen domestic political legitimacy, and enhance its position as a key regional player (Cornell S. E., 2017). Through these multiple partnerships, Baku effectively illustrates how hedging functions as a tool of

small-state agency in a complex geopolitical environment.

6.2 Hedging under Constraints

Armenia, bordered by Turkey to the west, Georgia to the north, Azerbaijan to the east, and Iran to the south, which has no access to the sea-landlocked country, has long faced a geopolitically sensitive environment shaped by its historical conflicts with both Azerbaijan and Turkey, its border has been closed since 1993, and despite minor diplomatic initiatives and efforts, for instance, with Turkey in 2009–2010, it remains effectively sealed. Armenia’s long-standing closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan have rendered Georgia the principal, and in practical terms, nearly exclusive, land corridor for the country’s imports and exports. While Iran offers an alternative route, its utility is limited due to infrastructural constraints, extended transit distances, and political and economic considerations. Consequently, Georgia functions as the main route for Armenia’s foreign trade through ports like Batumi and Poti, even though it is not technically Armenia’s only trading partner.

As Richard Giragosian notes in his article ‘*National Perspectives on the Changing Geopolitics*’ (2023), Armenia’s geopolitical environment has fostered the development of a “siege mentality,” which refers to a psychological and political concept describing a collective mindset in which a country, community, or group feels isolated, threatened, or under constant external pressure. Politically, this has manifested in Armenia’s emphasis on maintaining strong ties with Russia for security guarantees, while simultaneously recognizing the necessity of engaging with and cooperating with the West. Over the years, the dynamics of relations with its neighbors led Yerevan to develop a strong political and security alliance with Russia, exemplified by Armenia’s membership in the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the presence of Russian military bases on Armenian territory, most notably in Gyumri. This base, originally established during the Soviet period, was extended twice through bilateral agreements, most recently in 2010, prolonging its presence until 2044⁶¹.

⁶¹ ‘The Russian Military Base in Armenia at the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm’ written by Joshua Kucera, March 24, 2024, Radio Free Europe; URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-russian-base-gyumri-alliance-weakening-geopolitical-storm/32874563.html>.

Despite efforts to deepen diplomatic and economic ties with the West, Armenia is a member of the EU's Eastern Partnership and has signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU, which also remains its primary financial partner in infrastructure, education, and reform, the country's geopolitical position and proximity to Russia constrain closer integration with Western institutions⁶².

6.2.1 Diminishing Russian Security Guarantees and Structural Vulnerabilities

The dynamics shifted significantly after the Second Karabakh War. The foundation for Armenia's shift began in July 2018, when Russian forces near Panik conducted unannounced military exercises, prompting Prime Minister Pashinyan to criticize Russia for poor communication. Tensions escalated due to crimes attributed to Russian soldiers, including the 2018 Gyumri rape case and earlier incidents, which fueled local opposition.⁶³ In October 2018, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton signaled potential arms sales to Armenia, offering greater strategic flexibility and reduced dependence on Russia. In 2019, Armenia rejected the "Lavrov Plan," which proposed returning areas around Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan while deploying Russian forces, reflecting Armenia's cautious approach to balancing external pressures⁶⁴ Russia's credibility as Armenia's security guarantor weakened, particularly in the context of Azerbaijan's opening fire on Tavush province, which escalated into border clashes between the two sides, followed by Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin Corridor in December 2022⁶⁵. Subsequently, on September 19–20, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a military operation that brought the entirety of Nagorno-Karabakh under its control. Russia's involvement was largely restricted to coordinating humanitarian efforts and overseeing the evacuation of Armenian residents from the region. Moscow's focus on its war in Ukraine, which absorbed

⁶² Andreas Kellerhals, Tobias Baumgartner, and Fatlum Ademi, eds., *EU Enlargement and European Integration: Challenges and Perspectives: 14th Network Europe Conference, Stockholm, 14–15 September 2023* (Zurich: Schulthess, 2024). URL: <https://eizpublishing.ch/publikationen/eu-enlargement-and-european-integration-challenges-and-perspectives>.

⁶³ 'Russian Soldier Detained in Armenia Over Woman's Killing', December 11, 2018; URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-soldier-detained-in-armenia-over-woman-s-killing/29650086.html>.

⁶⁴ Benyamin Poghosyan, "Armenia's Foreign Policy after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: Diversification in the Post-Unipolar World," *Geopolitics and Foreign Policy*, June 11, 2025; URL: <https://apri.institute/armenias-foreign-policy-after-the-second-karabakh-war/>

⁶⁵ Felix Light, "What is the history of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan?" *Reuters*, March 13, 2025; URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/what-is-history-conflict-between-armenia-azerbaijan-2025-03-13/>

military, diplomatic, and financial resources, further eroded its role in the South Caucasus. In this context, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan increasingly criticized the CSTO for its failure to assist Armenia during Azerbaijani attacks in 2021- 2022 and later, framing Russia as either unwilling or unable to protect Armenia. This perception has marked a turning point in Armenia's relations with Moscow. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Armenia faces growing pressure to align with Moscow, yet it has largely avoided direct repercussions for two reasons. First, Armenia is not militarily involved in the war and has so far avoided Western sanctions, though it risks secondary sanctions if used to bypass restrictions on Russia. Second, its geographic distance from the conflict, with no shared border with Russia or Ukraine, provides additional insulation. Nevertheless, the war has underscored a perception of double standards: the strong Western response to Russian aggression contrasts with the limited reaction to Azerbaijan's actions in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war (Siri Neset, 2023). Concurrently, the biggest distinction is in international recognition: Nagorno-Karabakh has never been widely accepted as an independent state and is a part of Azerbaijan under international law, while Russia's attack on Ukraine is seen in the West as a breach of Ukraine's internationally recognized sovereignty and territorial integrity. The human and geopolitical consequences of both conflicts are severe; however, when considering their scale and global ramifications, the notion of "double standards," as suggested by Siri Neset, appears less convincing. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has produced profound economic and humanitarian repercussions worldwide, including substantial loss of life, with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reporting⁶⁶ over 70,000 military and more than 32,000 civilian fatalities⁶⁷, mass displacement of populations, comprising approximately 6.3 million refugees and over 3.5 million internally displaced persons⁶⁸. In contrast, casualties in the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War are estimated at around 7,000 military and civilian deaths combined, according to statements from the defense ministries of Armenia and Azerbaijan⁶⁹. The duration and intensity of the conflicts further underscore the disparity: the Second Karabakh War lasted

⁶⁶ UNHCR. (2025, February 18). After three years of war, Ukrainians need peace and aid. United Nations in Ukraine. URL: <https://ukraine.un.org/en/289506-unhcr-after-three-years-war-ukrainians-need-peace-and-aid>.

⁶⁷ United Nations. (2025, February 24). Security Council hears briefing on humanitarian situation in Ukraine, warns of rising threats to civilians, infrastructure. UN Press. URL: <https://press.un.org/en/2025/sc16006.doc.htm>

⁶⁸ United Nations Security Council. (2025, February 24). Noting Ukraine's people have endured three years of war, Security Council calls for peace and protection. URL: <https://press.un.org/en/2025/sc16006.doc.htm>.

⁶⁹ Karlinsky, A., & Torrisi, O. (2023). The casualties of war: An excess mortality estimate of lives lost in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 42(3), 41. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-023-09790-2>.

44 days (27 September – 10 November 2020), whereas the Russo-Ukrainian War has persisted for over three and a half years (since February 24, 2022). Beyond human costs, the war in Ukraine has had extensive global ramifications, including disruptions to food, energy, and nuclear security, triggering supply chain shocks, sharp increases in energy prices across Europe, obstruction of Ukrainian grain exports, and heightened concerns regarding the safety of nuclear facilities both within Ukraine and in the broader region⁷⁰⁷¹.

Armenia's official declaration in early 2024 of its decision to leave the CSTO⁷² could be further highlighted by Russia's waning influence as Armenia's only trustworthy security guarantor. Prime Minister Pashinyan also described continued membership as a potential threat to national security⁷³. Although politically Armenia seeks to distance itself from Russian involvement, Russia remains a key economic partner⁷⁴, particularly in energy imports, minerals, agricultural products, military hardware, and a critical security partner. It also plays a central role in Armenia's exports of manufactured goods, as well as in telecommunications, finance, and infrastructure sectors.

6.2.2 Multisector Diplomacy and Strategic Diversification

The necessity of overcoming its structural limitations through a complementarity strategy,

⁷⁰ Oli Brown, Antony Froggatt, Natalia Gozak, Nataliya Katser-Buchkovska, & Orysia Lutsevych, The consequences of Russia's war on Ukraine for climate action, food supply and energy security (Chatham House, 2023), pg-12-15; URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/2023-09-13-war-ukraine-consequences-climate-food-energy-brown-et-al.pdf>.

⁷¹ Caitlin Welsh, Russia, Ukraine, and Global Food Security: A Two-Year Assessment (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2024), URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-ukraine-and-global-food-security-two-year-assessment>.

⁷² Vali Kaleji, "Armenia Reaches 'Point of No Return' in Withdrawal From CSTO," Eurasia Daily Monitor, vol. 21, no. 118 (2024); URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/armenia-reaches-point-of-no-return-in-withdrawal-from-csto/>

⁷³ "The CSTO, instead of fulfilling its obligations to Armenia in the field of security, on the contrary, creates security problems. And this position, I say frankly, is a threat to the national security of Armenia", Matthew Stein, "Armenia Distances Itself from Instruments of Russian Security," Army University Press, February 2024, URL: <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/armenia-distances-itself-from-instruments-of-russian-security/>.

⁷⁴ Benyamin Poghosyan, Armenia–Russia Relations: What Next? (The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, May 17, 2025), URL: <https://mirrorspectator.com/2025/05/17/armenia-russia-relations-what-next/>.

which aims to balance major powers and expand strategic options, has influenced Armenia's foreign policy. This strategic shift toward a multivector policy, long pursued by Azerbaijan, began with the October defense cooperation agreement with France, in which the provision of military equipment represents a new, tangible level of European involvement in Armenia's defense sector, previously limited to diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian channels. In June 2024, the European Union also allocated, for the first time, €10 million in military-related assistance to Armenia under the European Peace Facility⁷⁵. While the country was once pressured into abandoning an Association Agreement with the EU in favor of joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, it later regained ground by concluding the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA)⁷⁶ with the EU, marking a significant diplomatic achievement, which aims to promote political dialogue, economic cooperation, and reforms, as well as rapprochement with the European Union, Armenia's progress cannot be considered a fully successful example of the implementation of this initiative, given the domestic challenges, ongoing conflict, and external pressures that have created significant obstacles (Giragosian, 2023). Nonetheless, progress has been made in terms of political dialogue with the EU, as well as in judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts.

More recently, Armenia has adopted a forward-looking European strategy, focusing on closer ties with Germany and France⁷⁷, which has assumed a central geopolitical role, especially under President Macron's leadership in EU foreign and security policy. This dual approach reflects both Armenia's historical ties with these states and an attempt to position itself as a bridge between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union, through by maintaining stable relations with both parties. Following the Second Karabakh War, Armenia deepened its relations with the United States, a shift accelerated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United States has mostly restricted its involvement up until this point to diplomatic requests and humanitarian assistance. Beginning in 2022, the United States and the European Union actively supported

⁷⁵ Council of the EU, "European Peace Facility: Council Adopts the First Ever Assistance Measure in Support of the Armenian Armed Forces," press release, July 22, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/07/22/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-the-first-ever-assistance-measure-in-support-of-the-armenian-armed-forces/>.

⁷⁶ European Union External Action (EEAS), "Joint Press Release on the 6th Meeting of the EU-Armenia Partnership Committee," 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/armenia-joint-press-release-6th-meeting-eu-armenia-partnership-committee_en.

⁷⁷ Armenian News Agency (Armen press), "Armenian FM Lauds Dynamically Developing Ties with France," 2024; URL: <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1214410>.

peace efforts. In Washington, D.C., U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan⁷⁸, culminating in the signing of a Nuclear Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)⁷⁹. This agreement is strategically important for Armenia since it depends on the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant for energy security, modernization of nuclear safety, and lowering reliance on Rosatom, a Russian company that provides about 40% of Armenia's electricity. This was the first formal agreement between the United States and Armenia since the Karabakh war in 2020 (Siri Neset, 2023).

6.2.3 TRIPP Corridor and Implications for Regional Agency

In 2023, the US began to mediate peace more actively, holding ministerial-level gatherings in Arlington, Virginia, separate from the OSCE Minsk Group. Following Azerbaijan's military campaign that secured complete authority over Nagorno-Karabakh, the mediation process became more intense. In November 2023, the EU provided additional assistance to facilitate peace negotiations. By September 2024, the U.S. introduced a two-track negotiation framework designed to separate inter-state issues, such as border delimitation, mutual recognition, and normalization of diplomatic relations, from intra-state issues, which focused on the rights, security, and political status of the ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. This approach is aimed at streamline negotiations, prevent conflation of sovereignty with minority rights, and enable parallel discussions to enhance the prospects for a comprehensive agreement. U.S. diplomatic engagement, including high-level meetings in Washington, reinforced its role as a neutral mediator and paved the way for the peace agreement ultimately signed in August 2025⁸⁰.

The negotiations concluded on August 8, 2025, at the White House under President Trump's invitation, resulting in a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The accord established the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) strategic

⁷⁸ Euractiv, "US Hosts Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Talks," May 1, 2023; URL:

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/news/us-hosts-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-talks/>

⁷⁹ CivilNet, "Armenia, US Relaunch Strategic Dialogue, Sign Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement," 2023; UR: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/660352/armenia-us-relaunch-strategic-dialogue-sign-civil-nuclear-cooperation-agreement/>.

⁸⁰ Politico, "Trump Presides over Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Framework, Upstaging Russia," August 8, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/08/08/trump-peacemaker-azerbaijan-armenia-00501073>.

transportation route that gives the US 99 years of exclusive development rights. To improve commercial and energy connectivity between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Central Asia while avoiding Russia and Iran, this corridor connects Azerbaijan with its Nakhichevan exclave via Armenian territory⁸¹.

Control of this corridor gives the United States influence over regional trade, safe energy transportation, and strategic transit that affects military and economic logistics. U.S. peacekeepers will be sent to supervise implementation and maintain stability, according to the deal. Additionally, the deal effectively replaces the OSCE Minsk Group framework, previously co-chaired by Russia, France, and the U.S., increasing American influence in the region and limiting Russian involvement, which is preoccupied with the war in Ukraine. With the U.S. now leading the peace process independently, it assumes the role of the primary mediator. The TRIPP corridor is primarily viewed by Armenia as an economic opportunity, with possible advantages including increased trade opportunities, transit fees, and infrastructure investment. It is expected to generate employment and facilitate the development of new trade routes. TRIPP improves Armenia's international standing and enhances its ties with the US and other Western allies from a diplomatic standpoint. Moreover, the agreement provides a structured framework to address the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, contributing to prospects for internal political stability⁸².

Until 2010, Armenia pursued a hedging strategy, which entailed activating partnerships with the West while maintaining its traditional security dependence on Russia. During this period, Armenia deepened its economic and reform-oriented ties with the European Union and became a member of the Eastern Partnership initiative in 2009. The signature of the CEPA agreement in 2017 further cemented Armenia's intention to improve ties with the West and mitigate risks, especially with regard to Russia, whose threat became more apparent during the 2008 conflict in Georgia, despite the fact that progress remained slow (Siri Neset, 2023).

Armenia's foreign policy has been highly active since attaining independence, influenced by both international events and its geopolitical environment. Armenia adopted an alignment and

⁸¹ Sossi Tatikyan, "U.S.-Brokered TRIPP in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Deal: Opportunities and Risks," 2025'; URL: <https://evnreport.com/politics/u-s-brokered-tripp-in-the-armenia-azerbaijan-deal-opportunities-and-risks/>.

⁸² Sossi Tatikyan, "U.S.-Brokered TRIPP in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Deal: Opportunities and Risks," 2025'; URL: <https://evnreport.com/politics/u-s-brokered-tripp-in-the-armenia-azerbaijan-deal-opportunities-and-risks/>.

bandwagon policy with Russia during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War and until the early 2000s, with Russia serving as its primary security guarantor.

This alignment was reinforced through the presence of Russian military bases, Armenia's membership in the CSTO, and increasing economic integration (Hunter, 2017). Armenia adopted a realignment strategy following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, especially considering Russia's conflict in Ukraine and Azerbaijan's progress in Karabakh. To lessen its historical dependency on Russia, the nation increased its international involvement and pursued multivector diplomacy, giving special consideration to Western allies. This included not only enhanced economic cooperation with the EU but also political engagement, such as hosting a civil observation mission to monitor developments. Additionally, Armenia and the United States formalized their relations through a Strategic Partnership Charter, marking a new phase in bilateral ties. The agreement provides for U.S. support to strengthen Armenia's border security and military capacity.

6.3 Western Alignment with Pragmatic Hedging

For Georgia, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, and particularly its aftermath marked by the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the region, was far from appealing. Russia is widely perceived as an existential threat to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, given that approximately 20% of Georgian territory remains under Russia's de facto control, specifically in the regions of Abkhazia and Samachablo (South Ossetia), located in the north and northwest of the country.

The ceasefire agreement between Georgia and Russia, which ended the 2008 war under the mediation of the European Union, did not halt Russia's continued expansionist activities along the border. Periodic advances and extensions of barbed wire and other fortifications from the occupied territories persist, reinforcing the perception of Russia as a concrete military threat to Georgia, the only openly opposed state in the South Caucasus (Siri Neset, 2023).

Beyond direct security concerns, the escalation of conflicts in the region and subsequent military actions pose significant challenges for Georgia, particularly to its economy. Regional

instability reduces the reliability of security guarantees and creates persistent tension along Georgia's borders. This is especially problematic given Georgia's need to coexist peacefully with both neighboring countries, neither of which had previously been involved in confrontations escalating into broader regional tensions.

The outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 introduced a new systemic shock across the South Caucasus. Armenia confronted renewed dilemmas regarding its reliance on Russia, as Moscow's preoccupation in Ukraine limited its capacity to act as an effective security guarantor in Nagorno-Karabakh. Simultaneously, the invasion created openings for Armenia to pursue diversified partnerships with the West and regional actors. For Azerbaijan, the Ukraine crisis reinforced its energy diplomacy significance, particularly in supplying natural gas to Europe, thereby expanding its geopolitical leverage. Georgia, meanwhile, faced heightened urgency to strengthen defense capabilities, deepen Western integration, and recalibrate its strategy vis-à-vis Russia, as the conflict in Ukraine highlighted the fragility of regional security arrangements.

Collectively, the post-2020 period demonstrates that South Caucasus states are actively recalibrating foreign policy in response to major systemic shocks. While Armenia's approach reflects cautious hedging between Russia and the West, Azerbaijan emphasizes assertive regional positioning and multi-vector diplomacy, and Georgia prioritizes consolidation of its Euro-Atlantic trajectory. These divergent strategies underscore the interplay between domestic political structures, leadership agency, resource endowments, and external pressures, illustrating how regional actors adapt to rapidly shifting geopolitical contexts.

6.3.1 Georgia's Pro-Western Foreign Policy (2003–2012)

Between 2003 and 2012, during Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency, Georgia's foreign policy strategy was characterized by a sharp alignment with the West. Although aspirations for closer ties and eventual integration with Western institutions had been articulated by his predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze, concrete steps were taken under Saakashvili's leadership and the parliamentary majority of the United National Movement (Kavadze, 2020).

The 2003 Rose Revolution sought not only to transform Georgia's domestic political landscape and modernize its economy but also had a distinctly pro-Western orientation.

Saakashvili's administration adopted Western integration, particularly accession to NATO and the European Union, as the central pillar of foreign policy (Kavadze, 2020). This commitment was further institutionalized in Georgia's Constitution: "Constitutional bodies shall take all measures within their competences to ensure Georgia's full integration into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."⁸³

Georgia became particularly close to NATO between 2004 and 2008. Particularly in Afghanistan, it rose to become one of the biggest non-NATO soldier suppliers. The Alliance announced during the NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008 that Georgia and Ukraine will eventually join, with a Membership Action Plan (MAP) being considered. However, France and Germany opposed immediate progress, limiting the final communiqué to a long-term perspective.

6.3.2 Russia's Strategic Messaging and the 2008 War

This shift toward the West occurred amid growing Russian assertiveness. The February 2007 Munich Security Conference illustrates this context, where Russian President Vladimir Putin openly criticized NATO's expansion into the post-Soviet space, framing it as a threat to Russia's national security. He argued that NATO's enlargement constituted a "serious provocation" and questioned previous assurances given to Russia regarding eastward expansion (Ronald, 2010).

The conditions for the 2008 war were more profound. It demonstrated Moscow's willingness to employ military force, which was hinted at in the 2007 Munich speech⁸⁴ and sent a message to Georgia and the post-Soviet world as well as to the entire West. Georgia served as a case study, signaling that the post-Soviet space remained a zone of special interest for Russia's "near abroad," where Western influence should not expand. Russia had, for years, increased its influence in the separatist regions by granting citizenship, financing local administrations, and providing military support. Consequently, these territories became levers for Russia to exert influence over the pro-Western administration of President Saakashvili (Starr, 2008)

⁸³ Constitution of Georgia, Article 78; URL: <https://parliament.ge/legislation/constitution/2050>.

⁸⁴ 'Putin's famous Munich Speech 2007', Munich Conference, 10 February; URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQ58Yv6kP44>.

6.3.3 Post-2008: NATO, EU, and Euro-Atlantic Integration

Following the war, Georgia received an assistance package from NATO, though its relationship with the Alliance shifted from immediate membership toward partnerships framed through political and strategic forums, joint exercises, and defense modernization (Kavadze, 2020).

Simultaneously, Georgia deepened relations with the European Union. It became a member of the Eastern Partnership initiative, aimed at harmonization and closer alignment with the EU. Within this framework, Georgia made progress in institutional development, rule of law, and anti-corruption efforts, though domestic political polarization remained a persistent challenge (Kavadze, 2020).

The major EU accomplishment was the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement in 2014, which gave Georgian exporters preferential access to EU markets while encouraging foreign investment and regulatory reforms, particularly for commodities like wine, minerals, and agricultural products. Strategically, the deal helped Georgia achieve its larger objective of Euro-Atlantic integration by allowing it to strengthen its links with the EU, diversify its trading partners, and lessen its reliance on Russia. Georgia thus became the only country in the South Caucasus to establish a full DCFTA with the EU. Visa liberalization in 2017 further reinforced Georgia's European orientation and encouraged continued domestic reforms, despite challenges and international criticism, which existed toward democracy and good governance, often reflected in social protests (Kavadze, 2020).

6.3.4 Balancing and Strategic Accommodation under Georgian Dream (2012–Present)

When Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party came to office in 2012, the new government sought to restore relations with Russia while reaffirming its commitment to NATO and the EU. This method represented a hedging tactic meant to prevent confrontation and lessen security threats.

The Georgian Dream government's stance became more pronounced during Russia's 2022 war in Ukraine. Georgia maintained an equidistant position between Kyiv and Moscow, refrained

from fully endorsing Western sanctions against Russia, and avoided overt condemnation of Russian actions. Moreover, this was often done indirectly by state leaders, who attributed the escalation of the war to the West, while framing Ukraine as the main catalyst for escalation⁸⁵. Georgian officials, including the current Prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, have frequently criticized the West, particularly Ukrainian representatives, including the President of Ukraine, who have pressured Georgia to open a “second front.”⁸⁶ Kobakhidze asserted that “there is a global war party whose goal is to drag Georgia into war,” a statement that mirrors the narrative propagated by Russia, which portrays the West as attempting to destabilize Georgia, interfere in its internal affairs, and provoke conflict with Russia. When compared with statements by Russian state media and reasoning articulated by Russian officials regarding Ukraine’s role in precipitating the war and the influence of Western policies, clear traces of the Russian narrative are evident within segments of the Georgian government discourse⁸⁷. Consequently, Georgia’s foreign policy reflects strategic accommodation, maintaining Western ties while cautiously aligning with certain Russian narratives to minimize security and economic risks (Kakachia K., 2023).

Russia is thus perceived as an indispensable regional power, while Georgia positions itself as a small state navigating Russian demands and potential security risks. Economically, Georgia has restored and expanded ties with Russia, increasing its dependence on the Russian market and tourism sector, which had been minimized following the 2008 war. The government reopened the Russian market to many Georgian products, which Russia had previously closed, and lifted travel restrictions to encourage Russian tourist inflows. This influx, particularly during the spring and summer of 2022, was also influenced by the war in Ukraine, as some Russian citizens sought safe and financial transaction channels in Georgia to circumvent

⁸⁵ Irakli Gharibashvili, former Prime minister of Georgia: “Even an attempt to stop the war is nowhere to be seen”, February 11, 2023; URL: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32266668.html>.

⁸⁶ Orbeladze, M. (2025, March 13). Irakli Kobakhidze: “A second front would seriously weaken Russia’s positions on the Ukrainian front, and this is against our interests, for our country – over two years – these interests are being undermined by the ‘global war party.’” iNews. URL: <https://imedinews.ge/ge/politika/338934/irakli-kobakhidze-meore-pronti-seriozulad-sheasustebda-rusetis-pozitsiebs-ukrainis-prontze-da-es-aris-interesi-risganats-chven-vitsavt-tsarmatebit-chvens-qvekanas--or-tselitsadze-metia--am-interesebis-ukan-dgas-globaluri-omis-partia>

⁸⁷ Sikharulidze, Vasil. 2025. “Russian Influence Operations in Georgia: A Threat to Democracy and Regional Stability.” Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 13. URL: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/russian-influence-operations-in-georgia-a-threat-to-democracy-and-regional-stability/>

sanctions imposed on Russia. In addition to gradually reestablishing relations with Russia, Georgia has expanded its strategic and commercial partnership with Turkey, covering energy transit, infrastructure, and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, a vital link that was further highlighted by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020. While cautiously navigating a difficult neighborhood, especially in light of Turkey’s enlarged regional position following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war (2023), Georgia seeks a practical cooperation with Turkey in order to secure strategic flexibility, improve regional connectivity, and boost economic growth. Through this relationship, Georgia can preserve its regional influence, diversify its economy, and manage its connections with other regional powers without being overly dependent on any one player. Examples of these projects include the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, energy transit corridors, and other transportation and infrastructure projects.

Georgia’s engagement with China and Iran reflects selective hedging. China provides long-term economic prospects, particularly via the 2017 Free Trade Agreement (FTA), granting Georgia preferential access to the Chinese market through tariff reductions on key goods and trade facilitation measures. This made Georgia the first country in the South Caucasus to achieve such direct access to the Chinese market and the Belt and Road Initiative through “Middle Corridor”⁸⁸ facilitating Chinese investment in transportation and logistical infrastructure, notably in the ports of Poti and Batumi as well as in Georgia’s railway systems. Moreover, on November 18, 2024, the Georgian government approved the government program “Towards Europe Only with Peace, Dignity, and Prosperity,” which states that Georgia’s strategic partnership with China is “of particular importance.” According to the program, the government will continue high-level visits to China to deepen relations, especially in the areas of economy and trade. In addition, according to the document, the government will continue efforts to obtain observer status for Georgia in the China-Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) cooperation format⁸⁹. Whereas Iran offers more limited regional connectivity opportunities. Georgia manages these relationships cautiously to preserve strategic

⁸⁸ The ‘Middle Corridor’ denotes the overland transport route linking China and Central Asia to Europe through the South Caucasus, bypassing Russia. It enhances Georgia’s strategic position as a transit hub, facilitating trade, investment, and regional connectivity within the framework of China’s Belt and Road Initiative

⁸⁹ Georgian Parliament. (2024, November 3). Government program for 2025–2028: “Only with Peace, Dignity, and Prosperity Towards Europe” (Bill Review Content No. 372665). *URL:* <https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillReviewContent/372665>.

commitments to other great powers⁹⁰.

6.3.5 Domestic Polarization and the Foreign Influence Law (2024)

On May 28, 2024, the Parliament of Georgia adopted the ‘Foreign Influence Transparency Law’ second time. Its first version was adopted on March 7, 2023, in the first reading, however, amid massive protests, on March 9, the leaders of the current government announced the cancellation of the law and its withdrawal from consideration. However, it was re-introduced in April 2024 and adopted in an accelerated manner in May, which was vetoed by the then-current President Salome Zurbashvili, although it was overturned on May 28. This law is requiring media outlets, Individuals or legal entities and NGOs receiving over 20% of their funding from abroad to register as foreign-influenced organization or agent. This sparked protests and strong international criticism. The law strained relations with the EU⁹¹, leading to the suspension of some programs and criticism from EU officials, including High Representative Josep Borrell, who described the law as a “very negative development” for Georgia and its citizens, warning that it “seriously harms Georgia’s relations with the EU.” The U.S. also expressed concern⁹², US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken’s⁹³ statement that “...so-called ‘foreign influence’ law, which is incompatible with democratic principles and Georgia’s stated goal of Euro-Atlantic integration.” Officials are also stating that the law undermines media freedom, civil society, and democratic development and urging Georgia’s government to revise or repeal the legislation. They also emphasized that the law could negatively affect its strategic partnership with the United States⁹⁴. The statements from the West were accompanied

⁹⁰ Nino, Javakhishvili. “The Impact of China–Georgia Free Trade Agreement on China–Georgia Import and Export Trade.” College of Economics and Management, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China, 2024; URL:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379365754_The_Impact_of_China_Georgia_Free_Trade_Agreement_on_China_Georgia_Import_and_Export_Trade.

⁹¹ Reuters, "EU to downgrade Georgia ties and mull finance freeze, Borrell says," Reuters, June 24, 2024; URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-downgrade-georgia-ties-mull-finance-freeze-borrell-says-2024-06-24/>.

⁹² Nathalie Tocci, “Georgia is on the Frontline of the Struggle Between Russia and the West. Will Its Democracy Survive?” The Guardian, July 15, 2024; URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/15/georgia-russia-west-democracy-elections-eu>.

⁹³ Blinken, A. (2024, July 31). Pausing U.S. assistance to the Georgian government. U.S. Department of State. URL: <https://www.state.gov/pausing-u-s-assistance-to-the-georgian-government/>.

⁹⁴ Nathalie Tocci, “Georgia is on the Frontline of the Struggle Between Russia and the West. Will Its Democracy

by warnings from the European Union institutions and the US State Department about sanctions, financial and visa restrictions. Nevertheless, the position of the Georgian government remained unchanged, considering the law, as chairman of Parliament- Shalva Papuashvili noted at an April 2024 press conference: “Georgia must be protected from any external political influence that threatens the country’s sovereignty.”

The enactment of the law significantly intensified Georgia’s domestic political polarization. On one side, factions favoring closer alignment with Moscow viewed the legislation as a mechanism to limit Western influence, while on the other, actors advocating continued integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions mobilized to defend Georgia’s Western-oriented trajectory, framing the law as a threat to democratic norms and institutional stability. Beyond its legal implications, the law constituted a major political and social event, reshaping public discourse, catalyzing protests, and influencing policymaking. Its passage not only shifted the domestic balance of power but also affected Georgia’s foreign policy, complicating relations with Western partners and raising broader questions about the country’s strategic positioning in a contested regional environment. Moreover, the law has been identified by Freedom House as a significant setback in Georgia’s democratic development⁹⁵.

6.3.6 Regional Role and Mediation Efforts

Georgia maintained a neutral stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, reflecting its role as both a transit corridor and potential mediator. Strategic ties with Azerbaijan and Turkey, including Caspian gas pipelines and transport networks, strengthened Georgia’s regional relevance. Relations with Armenia remained pragmatic, focusing on economic and neighborhood considerations.

High-level visits, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan (2024) and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (2023) illustrated Georgia’s role in regional dialogue. During visits to the Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili expressed his readiness to facilitate peace processes in the region and stated that:

Survive?” The Guardian, July 15, 2024; URL:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/15/georgia-russia-west-democracy-elections-eu>.

⁹⁵ 2025 Global Freedom Score Overview, Freedom House; URL:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2025>.

„Georgia supports stability and peaceful coexistence in the South Caucasus, and I would like to emphasize the importance of our joint efforts in addressing the challenges present in the region. Georgia welcomes the peace agreement process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and particularly the efforts of the Armenian authorities aimed at normalizing relations with neighboring countries. We are prepared to contribute to ensuring peace and stability in the region to the extent of our capabilities.”⁹⁶

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili also emphasized regional peace and South Caucasus autonomy during the meeting with Aliyev, the Georgian side expressed its readiness to use Tbilisi as a venue for peace negotiations to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and to ensure regional security for the populations of the South Caucasus. Two sides also discussed the expansion of economic and trade relations, as well as cooperation on energy and railway projects. There the Georgian Prime Minister also declared:

“The three countries of the South Caucasus should independently decide on the issues of the region and its future development.”⁹⁷

This statement sent an signal regarding the further development of regional cooperation and emphasized the South Caucasus as an independent actor. However, it was met with criticism from the Georgian opposition, argued that this stance risked weakening Georgia’s commitments to Western partners, previously positioned Georgia as a key supporter of Western engagement in the South Caucasus.

6.3.7 Broader Strategic Pattern: Alignment and Adaptation

Georgia has continuously sought alignment with the EU and NATO since 2008, presenting it as a normative commitment to Western values as well as a security need. Simultaneously, under the Georgian Dream government, Georgia has adapted by softening its stance toward Moscow to reduce immediate security threats and maintain access to economic channels. This dual

⁹⁶ ‘Garibashvili: The Karabakh War Was a Difficult Challenge, I Believe It Will Turn into a New Opportunity September 08, 2021; URL: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31449972.html>

⁹⁷ Ilham Aliyev's visit to Georgia- URL: <https://1tv.ge/video/ilham-alievis-viziti-saqartveloshi-2/>.

approach demonstrates how small states adjust their foreign policy in response to both internal and external demands by combining alignment and adaptation.

Overall, the post-2020 period in the South Caucasus has been characterized by systemic shocks that compelled states to recalibrate their foreign policies in response to evolving regional dynamics. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020 significantly altered the balance of power in the region. Yerevan was forced to consider more diverse alliances with the West and other regional players, and Armenia was confronted with new challenges about its dependence on Russia after Moscow's limited intervention exposed the weakness of conventional security guarantees (Poghosyan, 2025). For Azerbaijan, the conflict reinforced its assertive regional posture and highlighted the strategic value of its military and energy capabilities, enhancing its leverage in regional diplomacy, particularly through the decisive support of Turkey (Ergun, 2023). Georgia, in turn, confronted heightened urgency to strengthen its defense capabilities and recalibrate its foreign policy along a pragmatic, multi-vector, and hedging-oriented trajectory⁹⁸. Tbilisi aims to manage the demands of the West and Russia⁹⁹ while navigating regional players like China, Iran, and Turkey to reach a balance between security, economic, and geopolitical imperatives. The subsequent outbreak of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine further exposed the fragility of regional security arrangements, underscoring Georgia's vulnerability to Russian assertiveness and the limitations of Western guarantees, and reinforcing the necessity of a calibrated strategy that preserves autonomy while selectively engaging multiple partners. Collectively, these developments illustrate the varied responses of South Caucasus states to systemic shocks: Armenia pursues cautious hedging between Russia and the West, Azerbaijan emphasizes assertive multi-vector diplomacy bolstered by Turkish support, and Georgia seeks to maintain a pragmatic balance between relations with Russia and its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, which remain under considerable strain. These divergent strategies reflect the complex interplay of domestic political structures, leadership agency, resource endowments, and external pressures, demonstrating how regional actors adapt to rapidly shifting geopolitical contexts.

⁹⁸ Gulamirli, F. (2025). Strategic balancing in the South Caucasus: Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy and new actors. *Path of Science*, 11(8). URL: <https://pathofscience.org/index.php/ps/article/view/3622>.

⁹⁹ Per Ekman, *Foreign Policy After Empire: Explaining Georgia's and Ukraine's International Orientation from Independence until 2021* (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2024), pg-237-240; URL: <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2%3A1888235/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

7 Discursive Adaptation and Normative Framing: Localizing Global Scripts

This chapter turns to the ideational dimension of foreign policy transformation by analyzing how state elites in the South Caucasus have discursively framed their strategic choices. Drawing on discourse analysis of political speeches, foreign policy documents, and official statements, the chapter examines the localization of global norms such as democracy, sovereignty, development, and strategic autonomy. It interrogates the processes through which external narratives are appropriated, reframed, or resisted, and how these discursive strategies serve to legitimize recalibration both domestically and internationally. Particular attention is given to the performative role of language in constructing foreign policy identities and enabling agency in a contested normative environment.

7.1 Democracy

Since 2020, Georgia's political elite, particularly the ruling Georgian Dream party, have significantly reinterpreted global normative discourses on democracy, development, sovereignty, and strategic autonomy. This recalibration has been deeply shaped by the twin shocks of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which together heightened the salience of security and survival in the South Caucasus. The Georgian case demonstrates how small states adapt global languages of democracy and integration to local contexts of vulnerability, domestic contestation, and regime legitimation.

While democracy remains a central rhetorical theme, its meaning has shifted. The government frames democracy less as liberal pluralism aligned with EU conditionality and more as "order and sovereignty under stability." Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze captured this shift in November 2024, when he insisted that Georgia would not approach EU membership:

"By begging or standing on one foot, but rather to join it with dignity—through a well-

functioning democratic system and a strong economy.”¹⁰⁰

In the same speech, he criticized the European Union itself, suggesting that:

“Trends in the EU are troubling in terms of democracy, human rights, and the economy...there is regression.”¹⁰¹

After the adoption of the complex “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence”, which was accompanied by sharp criticism from the West both before and after, the Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia, Shalva Papuashvili, stated that:

“It is even shameful that in the 21st century we are directly told that the money that spent in Georgia should be hidden. We all see what a harmful effect this money has on Georgia, when we discover that radical political parties are financed from the EU budget... Let everyone abandon hypocrisy and be guided by the values that we stand for, all Europeans, Georgia stands as a European country”¹⁰²

which presents a clear illustration of how the representatives of the Georgian ruling political elite see democracy, even though this model of democracy they see, which they call European, has also become the object of criticism from European leaders. This specific statement was preceded by Weimar’s Joint statement of the Triangle countries on the possible suspension of Georgia’s EU membership perspective¹⁰³.

By reframing democracy as an internal achievement rather than compliance with external criteria, the ruling elite presented Georgia as an equal partner to Europe, rather than a subject of conditionality. This rhetorical shift highlights how the elite uses democracy to signal both

¹⁰⁰ ‘Georgian Dream does not want to open negotiations with the European Union until the end of 2028’, November 28, 2024; URL: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33219304.html>.

¹⁰² Georgian Dream does not want to open negotiations with the European Union until the end of 2028’, November 28, 2024; URL: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33219304.html>.

¹⁰³ French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. (2024, December 31). Georgia – Joint statement by the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany, and Poland. URL: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/georgia/news/article/georgia-joint-statement-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-france-germany-and-poland>.

domestic consolidation and parity with Europe, emphasizing internal governance over external compliance.

Georgian Dream presented a campaign called “Towards Europe with Dignity” for the previous parliamentary elections, which were held on October 26, 2024. Georgian Dream gained a complete advantage during the elections, while the opposition spectrum and the civil sector accused and continue to accuse them of election fraud. The shortcomings related to it are also reflected in the report of the OSCE ODIHR¹⁰⁴ international observation mission. Shortly after the elections, the Prime Minister announced at a press conference on November 18, 2024, that Georgia was suspending the European integration process until the end of 2028 and would not put the issue of membership on the agenda¹⁰⁵. In addition, the statement stated that Georgia was refusing all budgetary grants from the European Union during this time. This decision was followed by mass demonstrations in the capital, Tbilisi, because on the one hand, the situation contradicted the strategy of the country, which had obtained the status of candidate for the European Union a year earlier in December 2023, and on the other hand, it was unpopular with Georgian society, 89% of which, according to a 2023 survey by the International Republic Institute¹⁰⁶, support the policy of European integration and membership in the European Union. Irakli Kobakhidze, Prime Minister, in a statement dated November 28, 2024, said:

“Our goal is to protect the interests of our country with dignity, including gaining membership in the European Union with dignity, and our goal is to improve the well-being of our country. Dignity is the first and main guarantee that we will protect our national interests ...”

and

“Our goal, as has already been said, is to join the European Union by 2030. The European Union has its conditions, and we must take them into account from the very beginning.

¹⁰⁴ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). (2024, December 20). Georgia, Parliamentary elections, 26 October 2024: Final report. URL: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/6/584029_0.pdf.

¹⁰⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2024, November 28). Georgian Dream does not wish to open negotiations with the European Union until the end of 2028. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. URL: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33219304.html>.

¹⁰⁶ International Republican Institute. (2023, April 25). IRI Georgia poll finds support for EU accession high, weariness of Russian presence, lack of faith in political parties [Report]. International Republican Institute. URL: <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-georgia-poll-finds-support-for-eu-accession-high-weariness-of-russian-presence-lack-of-faith-in-political-parties/>

Naturally, we are ready to consider all those conditions that do not contradict the national interests of our country, and here the line is crossed, which is related to dignity again, and the European Union also must prove that they respect our dignity. When we talk about moving towards Europe in peace, the European Union must prove to us that it is also fundamentally important for it, our moving towards the European Union in peace. When we talk about moving towards the European Union with dignity, of course, here too it is important for the European Union to protect our national interests, our traditional values.”

Given European leaders’ assessments of Georgia’s European integration¹⁰⁷, the Georgian political spectrum’s perception of democracy diverges from that of the EU. While the Georgian Dream party formally endorses EU membership, this commitment contrasts with external evaluations of democratic consolidation. The political elite often treats democracy instrumentally and procedurally, enabling domestic power retention despite external pressures, resulting in a largely performative rather than substantive alignment with EU norms.

Parallel to this, democracy has been explicitly reframed in Armenian discourse as a strategy rather than a mere normative aspiration. Pashinyan emphasized in 2024 that “democracy is a strategy for us”¹⁰⁸ and called for expanded EU and US support to sustain reforms. Here, the global discourse of democracy is localized to legitimize a westward turn in foreign policy. By presenting democratic reforms as an existential choice linked to Armenia’s security, the leadership discursively tied internal legitimacy to external alignment with European and American partners. This narrative both responds to domestic demands for reform after the Velvet Revolution and justifies foreign policy diversification abroad. The reframing reflects how democracy can be instrumentalized as a tool of survival in contexts of vulnerability and external dependence.

While Aliyev maintains formal democratic structures, post-2020 rhetoric highlights national

¹⁰⁷ European Parliament. (2025, July 9). Parliament deplores the democratic backsliding and repression in Georgia. European Parliament. URL: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250704IPR29451/parliament-deplores-the-democratic-backsliding-and-repression-in-georgia>.

¹⁰⁸ “Democracy for Armenia is a strategy, not a given,” says Pashinyan, JAMnews, Yerevan, 1 July 2024; URL: <https://jam-news.net/pashinyan-on-democracy-in-armenia/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CDemocracy%20for%20Armenia%20is%20a%20strategy%2C%20not%20a,continue%20its%20strategic%20course%20of%20democratizing%20the%20country>.

unity and stability over liberal democratic norms. Democracy is framed as a domestic achievement tied to societal consolidation rather than alignment with Western conditionality. He reinforces the notion of sovereign democracy and self-determination:

“There is a country, which follows its own national interests and does not say ‘Yes, sir’ to so-called big bosses.”¹⁰⁹

This framing positions Azerbaijan as an independent actor capable of pursuing its democratic model in accordance with national priorities rather than external prescriptions. Here, democracy functions as both legitimization of regime authority and a marker of sovereignty, demonstrating the interplay between internal order and external perception.

Across the three countries, democracy is strategically adapted but serves different purposes. Georgia emphasizes dignity and stability, Armenia frames it as a strategic tool for survival, and Azerbaijan uses it to legitimize strong presidential authority. These variations illustrate the flexibility of global norms, showing how small states actively redefine democracy to manage domestic legitimacy, external alignment, and security threats.

7.2 Sovereignty

Sovereignty became the master frame of political discourse after the Ukraine war. The Georgian leadership began to downplay Russia as an “occupant,” a term once common in elite rhetoric, and replaced it with new adversarial categories such as the “global war party” or the “deep state,” labels aimed at Western critics rather than Moscow. Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili defended the resumption of air traffic and trade with Russia by casting it not as capitulation but as sovereignty-preserving pragmatism:

“My priority is the preservation and protection of our country and the defense of the nations and its people’s interests.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ President Ilham Aliyev in International Forum “Facing the New World Order”, 18 April 2025; URL: <https://www.ada.edu.az/en/news/705-president-ilham-aliyev-in-international-forum-facing-the-new-world-order>.

¹¹⁰ Irakli Gharibashvili: Even an attempt to stop the war is nowhere to be seen, February 11, 2023; URL: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32266668.html>.

Party chairman Kobakhidze reinforced this logic by contrasting Georgia's restraint with Ukraine's experience, warning in 2022 that:

*"Until 2013, Ukraine was a country with territorial integrity and an economy worth 200 billion dollars. Today...20% of its territory is occupied, and tens of thousands have died. Who takes responsibility for this? No one. Therefore, the thing we must safeguard most is Georgia's independence."*¹¹¹

This demonstrates the elite's strategy of using sovereignty as both domestic legitimization and foreign policy hedging.

In the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War, Armenian officials reframed sovereignty from dependence on Russia to diversification and independence. Pashinyan stated:

*"Our strategy should be to try in this situation to maximally decrease our dependency on others. We want to have an independent country, a sovereign country ... There cannot be a case when Armenia becomes a 'proxy.' This is not permissible."*¹¹²

This discourse presents sovereignty as continuous agency rather than static status, reflecting the country's vulnerability to asymmetric power relations and external failures. Sovereignty is central to Azerbaijan's post-2020 political discourse. Aliyev consistently presents territorial integrity as both national will and international justice:

*"Today, the full restoration of territorial integrity and sovereignty is a demonstration, of not only the strong will of the Azerbaijani people, but also international justice."*¹¹³

¹¹¹ Kobakhidze on the war in Ukraine: How to end this war is difficult for everyone to talk about February 23, 2024; URL: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32832212.html>.

¹¹² We can't rely on Russia to protect us anymore, Armenian PM says
Once one of the Kremlin's closest allies, Armenia is now conducting joint drills with US soldiers; 13 September 2023; URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/we-cant-rely-russia-protect-us-anymore-nikol-pashinyan-armenia-pm>.

¹¹³ 'Aliyev considers Azerbaijan's experience in restoring territorial integrity unique', 2 October 2023; URL: <https://tass.com/world/1683401?>

He emphasizes resistance to external interference:

“...not at the expense of our interests, not with their continuous attempts to interfere in our internal affairs, finance different segments of our society, brainwash our young generation, and poison the brains of some people in our region.”¹¹⁴

Here, sovereignty is a tool of consolidation, regional leadership, and domestic legitimacy, aligning closely with post-war national identity narratives.

Georgia hedges and preserves, Armenia diversifies and recalibrates, and Azerbaijan consolidates and asserts. Each state selectively adapts global sovereignty norms to protect autonomy, manage risk, and reinforce domestic legitimacy, reflecting the interplay between local vulnerabilities and regional power structures.

7.3 Development

Development is increasingly narrated as the dividend of neutrality. The Georgian Dream government presents peace and avoidance of conflict as prerequisites for economic growth, a framing underscored by frequent comparisons to the devastation in Ukraine. This discourse positions development as dependent on insulating Georgia from regional wars, while simultaneously pursuing diversification, such as strengthening ties with China, without renouncing the European path. Economic pragmatism thus becomes part of the sovereignty narrative, portraying Georgia as capable of pursuing growth without succumbing to external pressures.

Development is interpreted through a lens of civic agency and state resilience. In 2025, Pashinyan stressed that:

“The future of Armenia depends on one person and that one person is you – individual effort is

¹¹⁴ President Ilham Aliyev in International Forum “Facing the New World Order”, 18 April 2025; URL:

<https://www.ada.edu.az/en/news/705-president-ilham-aliyev-in-international-forum-facing-the-new-world-order>.

a key condition for the development of the state.”¹¹⁵

Here, development is tied to responsibility, modernization, and collective resilience, drawing on global governance scripts while reflecting local vulnerabilities.

Economic development is increasingly connected to sovereignty, regional peace, and strategic positioning. Aliyev emphasizes Azerbaijan’s role in regional transit and connectivity:

“All the transit—whether it’s oil, gas, or cargo—from Azerbaijan goes through Georgia... We, in Georgia and in Azerbaijan, have provided all those facilities, which today help Europeans communicate with Central Asia—Georgian seaports, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad, the Azerbaijani seaport in Alat, Caspian shipping, which is instrumental in transportation.”¹¹⁶

Development is embedded in geopolitical strategy, presenting Azerbaijan as a regional bridge between the Global South and North.

Development across the three states is inseparable from security and strategic positioning: Georgia links it to peace, Armenia to resilience and civic agency, and Azerbaijan to regional connectivity and influence. Economic goals are thus instrumentalized as part of broader normative and security strategies.

7.4 Strategic Autonomy and Domestic Sovereignty

Georgia views strategic autonomy as defensive and focused on hedging. Georgia has continuously avoided any course that would result in any form of provocation with Russia, although claiming that the European and Euro-Atlantic path is its top foreign policy objective (Kakachia K. , 2023). For example, Georgia did not openly denounce Russian military activities against Ukraine following the Russian invasion of that country in 2022, nor did it fully support

¹¹⁵ The ideology of the Real Armenia- the statement of the Prime Minister in address to the nation, February 19, 2025, URL: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2025/02/19/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>

¹¹⁶ President Ilham Aliyev in International Forum “Facing the New World Order”, 18 April 2025; URL: <https://www.ada.edu.az/en/news/705-president-ilham-aliyev-in-international-forum-facing-the-new-world-order>.

Western sanctions against Russia. Government officials have also spoken about Russia's purposeful provocation to initiate a conflict¹¹⁷. This demonstrated Georgia's continued commitment to the West while preserving economic and security stability.

Georgia's elites invoke 'strategic autonomy' not only to hedge between EU/NATO integration and Russian sensitivities but also to justify domestic policies that promote conservative and anti-liberal values, such as the 2024 Law on Family Values. In this context, autonomy is both defensive in foreign policy and ideologically assertive in cultural terms. This reframing was especially evident in debates on LGBTQ+ rights. In 2024, Georgian Dream passed the Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors, which banned same-sex marriage, adoption, and media portrayal of LGBTQ+ people¹¹⁸. Bidzina Ivanishvili¹¹⁹ justified the legislation as defending cultural sovereignty¹²⁰. Here, autonomy reflects a procedural and instrumental vision of democracy and is both defensive in foreign policy and ideologically forceful in domestic governance.

Strategic autonomy is defined by Armenian elites as the capacity to take autonomous action and establish a number of alliances outside of Russia. The January 2025 Strategic Partnership Charter with the United States was characterized by Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan as:

*"A testament to our shared values and commitment to strengthening bilateral relations."*¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Sikharulidze, V. (2025, March 13). Russian influence operations in Georgia: A threat to democracy and regional stability. Foreign Policy Research Institute. URL: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/russian-influence-operations-in-georgia-a-threat-to-democracy-and-regional-stability/>

¹¹⁸ Georgia signs sweeping anti-LGBTQ+ bill into law, October 3, 2024; URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-signs-sweeping-anti-lgbtq-bill-into-law/>

¹¹⁹ Bidzina Ivanishvili (b. 1956) – Georgian billionaire businessman and politician. Founder of the Georgian Dream party served briefly as Prime Minister (2012–2013). Despite stepping down, he is widely regarded as the informal leader of Georgia due to his vast wealth, patronage networks, and dominant influence over the ruling party and state institutions.

¹²⁰ Bidzina Ivanishvili, Founder of Georgia Dream Party in Georgia – 'It is understandable why the opposition did not participate in the discussion of the law against LGBT propaganda, the public's faith in Christianity and traditions is so great that they did not dare to go against it'; 21 October, 2024; URL: <https://1tv.ge/news/bidzina-ivanishvili-gasagebia-ratom-ar-shevida-opozicia-lgbt-propagandis-winaaghmdg-kanonis-gankhilvaze-imdenad-didia-sazogadoebis-rwmena-qristianobis-tradiciebis-chveni-identobisadmi-sheeshin/>.

¹²¹ Statement by Foreign Minister of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan at the Signing Ceremony of Armenia - U.S.

*“We appreciate the US’s engagement in promoting a durable and lasting peace in the South Caucasus region. We believe that a stable and prosperous South Caucasus is in the interest of all regional actors and the broader international community.”*¹²²

Autonomy is thus values-based and pragmatic, linking external alignment with survival.

Strategic autonomy in Azerbaijan is framed as balancing relations with major powers while safeguarding national interests. Aliyev noted:

*“This is a very important milestone in our bilateral relations because having a strategic partnership format of cooperation with such a great country as China is of extreme importance for us... We built the largest seaport in the Caspian Sea.”*¹²³

Autonomy also includes regional leadership and peacebuilding initiatives, consolidating Azerbaijan’s sovereignty-first approach.

Georgia’s autonomy is hedging and defensive, Armenia’s is strategic and value-based, and Azerbaijan’s is assertive and integrative. Across the region, autonomy reflects the local reinterpretation of global norms to maximize agency under conditions of vulnerability and asymmetric power.

7.5 Foreign Policy Recalibration

The analysis of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan demonstrates that small states in the South Caucasus do not merely respond to material and strategic pressures, but actively navigate the international system through ideational channels, confirming the relevance of the global-local agency framework (Acharya, 2014) (Sterling-Folker, 2013) The empirical patterns show that

Strategic Partnership Charter; 14 January 2025; URL:

https://www.mfa.am/en/speeches/2025/01/14/Mirzoyan_Blinken/13031?

¹²² Statement by Foreign Minister of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan at the Signing Ceremony of Armenia - U.S.

Strategic Partnership Charter; 14 January 2025; URL:

https://www.mfa.am/en/speeches/2025/01/14/Mirzoyan_Blinken/13031?

¹²³ President Ilham Aliyev in International Forum “Facing the New World Order”, 18 April 2025; URL:

<https://www.ada.edu.az/en/news/705-president-ilham-aliyev-in-international-forum-facing-the-new-world-order>.

elites reinterpret global norms, democracy, sovereignty, development, and strategic autonomy, to align with domestic priorities and regional contingencies, exercising agency rather than passively internalizing international standards. This supports Acharya's (2014) concepts of norm localization and norm subsidiarity, illustrating how peripheral states can create alternative norms to challenge, supplement, or resist Western-centric expectations. Similarly, the role of norm entrepreneurship described by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) is evident, as political leaders selectively adopt, adapt, or instrumentalize global discourses to legitimize policies, consolidate authority, and secure external support.

At the same time, the findings extend Sassen's (2006) insights by showing how transnational discourses can be embedded not only to legitimize state authority internationally, but also to reconstitute domestic governance. For example, Azerbaijan uses sovereignty and non-interference as instruments to limit Russian influence and assert regional leadership, Georgia hedges its democratic and European integration narratives to maintain dignity while avoiding provocation, and Armenia balances Western and Russian-aligned norms to navigate vulnerability and maintain legitimacy. Collectively, these patterns illustrate that global norms are flexible resources rather than fixed prescriptions: states actively interpret, reframe, and operationalize them according to domestic imperatives and external constraints.

Comparatively, the South Caucasus illustrates both common patterns and distinctive national strategies in the local adaptation of global scripts. All three states prioritize sovereignty as the central lens for interpreting democracy, development, and autonomy, yet they operationalize this principle differently: Georgia hedges, Armenia diversifies, and Azerbaijan consolidates. Democracy, though universally valorized, is deployed in context-specific ways, such as dignity, strategy, or self-determination, demonstrating the plasticity of global norms under local pressures. Development is inseparable from security and political legitimacy, whether framed as neutrality, resilience, or regional influence. Strategic autonomy, similarly, reflects varying combinations of hedging, agency, and assertive balancing, showing that small states can creatively reinterpret normative concepts to navigate asymmetric power relations.

In sum, the discursive strategies of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan underscore a broader lesson for small states in contested normative environments: global norms are not static prescriptions but adaptable resources. By reinterpreting democracy, development, sovereignty, and strategic autonomy to align with local realities, South Caucasian elites simultaneously

legitimize domestic authority, manage external pressures, and navigate regional uncertainty. The post-2020 transformations in the region thus exemplify how normative flexibility, strategic hedging, and discursive agency are central to contemporary small-state foreign policy, offering a nuanced understanding of how ideas and language shape security, legitimacy, and survival in asymmetric geopolitical contexts.

8 Synthesis and Comparative Reflection: Agency, Structure, and the South Caucasus Microregion

This final chapter synthesizes the findings of the previous thematic analyses and provides a comparative reflection on the foreign policy strategies of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia in the post-2020 South Caucasus environment. By examining the interplay between domestic political structures, leadership agency, and regional systemic pressures, this chapter assesses how small states navigate structural constraints while pursuing strategic objectives. It further explores how global and regional transformations, such as Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the post-Karabakh settlement, and evolving Western engagement, are filtered through domestic institutions, economic capabilities, and normative frameworks. The chapter concludes by drawing theoretical and empirical implications for small-state agencies, recalibration strategies, and the broader study of contested geopolitical regions.

The South Caucasus republics' post-Soviet paths have a significant influence on their strategic conduct. With abundant hydrocarbon resources, Azerbaijan swiftly consolidated state capacity under Heydar Aliyev and then Ilham Aliyev, establishing an elite system closely entwined with the state bureaucracy and economy (Cornell S. E., 2017) (Bayramov, 2025). In contrast, Armenia's landlocked location, closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, and long-standing reliance on Russian security guarantees resulted in ongoing structural limitations (Novikova, 2015) (Narek Sukiasyan, 2024). Georgia's post-independence experience was shaped by domestic instability, Russian intervention, and a strong pro-Western orientation under the Saakashvili administration, particularly during the 2003 Rose Revolution and subsequent push for NATO and EU integration (Kakachia K. , 2023) (Hunter, 2017) These historical legacies directly inform the states' contemporary approaches to foreign policy recalibration, as each country leverages its structural strengths and mitigates vulnerabilities differently (Abrahamyan, 2025) (Thorhallsson, 2012).

Due to its hydrocarbon resources, Azerbaijan was able to engage in both international alliances and home consolidation, combining assertive regional activity with strategic hedging. A careful balancing act between hedging and multivector diplomacy was required because Armenia's historical reliance on Russia resulted in both security dependence and domestic vulnerability (Poghosyan, 2025) (Narek Sukiasyan, 2024). Despite its weaker military and vulnerable territory, Georgia has purposefully used its position as a transit hub, concentrating on formal Western integration and selective engagement with Russia to maintain sovereignty and economic power intertwined with political consolidation and strategic hedging (Kakachia K. , 2024) (Kavadze, 2020).

In the South Caucasus, leadership plays a major role in determining recalibration tactics. Ilham Aliyev's networks of patronage and power consolidation in Azerbaijan guarantee the allegiance of the elite and the continuity of foreign policy. The combination of domestic legitimacy, energy wealth, and military success, particularly in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the 2023 operation in the region, provided the Aliyev administration with significant leverage in regional negotiations and energy diplomacy. Azerbaijan's domestic political cohesion enables a highly assertive foreign policy while maintaining a multi-vector approach that balances relations with Russia, Turkey, Western actors, China, normalization is underway with Iran¹²⁴ (Mamedov, 2017) (Hunter, 2017).

Armenia's transition from traditional Russian alignment to multisector hedging is shown in the tenure of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Armenia's structural vulnerabilities were revealed by the Azerbaijani operation in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 and the failure of Russian security guarantees during border conflicts. This led to a reorientation toward more diverse partnerships with the West and regional actors. While mutual mistrust and delicate dynamics continue to shape the post-conflict relationship, the signing of a peace accord with Azerbaijan represented a historic turning point, opening a route toward normalization and cautious engagement between Baku and Yerevan. Pashinyan's leadership illustrates the capacity of domestic agency to influence foreign policy even under systemic constraints, leveraging diplomatic engagement and multilateral frameworks to expand strategic options (Poghosyan, 2025).

¹²⁴ 'Iranian president visits Azerbaijan as ties warm', 28 April 2025, France 24; URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250428-iranian-president-visits-azerbaijan-as-ties-warm>.

Georgia's internal leadership and institutional capabilities also influence its foreign policy. Georgia prioritized NATO and EU integration as part of its assertive Western alignment under the Saakashvili administration. The Georgian Dream government later adopted a more pragmatic approach, balancing Euro-Atlantic commitments with cautious engagement with Russia to mitigate security risks. Domestic political polarization, electoral controversies, and public protests influence Georgia's foreign policy, as the government seeks to maintain legitimacy while navigating structural pressures (Nodia, 2017) (Kavadze, 2020) (Kakachia K., 2023).

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and its aftermath significantly reconfigured regional security dynamics. Azerbaijan's military victory enhanced its strategic confidence and international legitimacy, enabling it to leverage military achievements in energy transit negotiations, assert regional influence, and maintain pragmatic relations with both Russia and Turkey. Turkey's enhanced role as a regional power during the conflict, particularly through drone support and military training, underscored the importance of bilateral partnerships in shaping the outcomes of local conflicts.

Armenia progressively adopted a hedging approach that varied its security and diplomatic alternatives due to military setbacks and the limitations of Russian guarantees. This strategy was strengthened by U.S. and EU participation in defense cooperation, infrastructure development, and peace talks, as demonstrated by the European Peace Facility's assistance to the Armenian Armed Forces and the Nuclear Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding that allowed for less reliance on Russian energy imports¹²⁵.

Georgia, while avoiding direct military engagement, as well as condemnatory statements against Russia, especially its government, faced heightened security risks from regional instability and Russian assertiveness. The ongoing occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, combined with the broader implications of the Ukraine war, reinforced the necessity of deepening defense capability, while Georgia government has started developing ties with regional powers and neighbours. Official diplomatic contacts, the deepening of Georgia's ties

¹²⁵ Council of the European Union. (2024, July 22). *European Peace Facility: Council adopts the first-ever assistance measure in support of the Armenian Armed Forces*. URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/07/22/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-the-first-ever-assistance-measure-in-support-of-the-armenian-armed-forces/>

with China, and discussions regarding its potential inclusion in the ‘3+3’ regional cooperation platform¹²⁶, which brings together Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Iran, and Russia, all reflect this strategy. The platform aims to advance both regional security and economic cooperation. This initiative underscores the delicate balancing act in Georgia’s foreign policy, given the country’s ongoing security challenges from Russia, including the continued occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, recurring border incidents, cyberattacks, political influence operations, and the broader destabilizing effects of the Russia-Ukraine war. Georgia’s strategic recalibration illustrates how small states employ hedging and selective alignment to navigate systemic shocks without direct confrontation (Vital, 1967) (Keohane, 1969) (Thorhallsson, 2006).

Economic leverage, particularly energy and transit infrastructure, constitutes a central component of South Caucasus strategic agency. Azerbaijan’s hydrocarbon resources underpin its assertive foreign policy, supporting both domestic consolidation and international partnerships. Projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline, and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) enhance Azerbaijan’s geopolitical influence, diversify European energy sources, and strengthen economic ties with Turkey and the West (Bayramov, 2025). These initiatives illustrate how economic infrastructure can function as both a tool of domestic legitimacy and a means of extending strategic autonomy.

Armenia’s economic constraints necessitate multivector diplomacy. While historically dependent on Russia for trade and energy, the post-2020 recalibration has sought greater engagement with Western actors, leveraging CEPA and U.S. cooperation to diversify economic and energy options. Georgia’s geographic position as a transit hub allows it to derive economic and strategic benefits from regional connectivity, particularly through Caspian gas pipelines, railway networks, and Belt and Road Initiative links with China (Tracey German, 2022). These economic tools reinforce political leverage, enhance soft power, and provide avenues for negotiating strategic interests with larger powers.

Foreign policy recalibration in the South Caucasus is shaped not only by material factors but

¹²⁶ Huseynov, V. (2022). 3+3 and the prospects for Pax Caucasia? *Baku Dialogues*, 5(3), 64–75. URL: <https://bakudialogues.idd.az/articles/33-and-the-prospects-for-pax-caucasia-11-04-2022>

also by normative and identity-based considerations. Azerbaijan employs a pan-Turkic narrative to reinforce domestic cohesion and regional partnerships (Siri Neset, 2023), while Armenia's historical siege mentality drives multivector diplomacy aimed at maximizing strategic options (Giragosian, 2023). Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation is closely tied to its post-Soviet identity and domestic expectations of Western alignment (Kavadze, 2020) under threat considering the international evaluations¹²⁷. Societal perceptions, protests, and political activism influence policy choices, particularly in Armenia and Georgia, where domestic legitimacy pressures necessitate balancing external engagements with internal demands for democratic accountability.

The comparative analysis of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia reveals distinct but overlapping recalibration strategies. Azerbaijan exhibits forceful regional positioning by pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy through elite cohesiveness, energy diplomacy, and military success (Ergun, 2023). Armenia uses careful hedging, expanding its coalitions to lessen its reliance on Russia while interacting with Western allies for financial and security assistance (Poghosyan, 2025). Georgia places a high value on practical balancing, appeasing Russia to lessen urgent security challenges while retaining Western alignment, although weakened (Kakachia K. , 2024). Across these cases, recalibration is influenced by domestic political structures, leadership agency, resource endowments, historical legacies, and external systemic shocks, illustrating how small states exercise agencies under structural constraints.

For IR theory, the South Caucasus experience offers valuable insights. The way that leadership agencies, domestic institutions, and state capability mediate reactions to external challenges is explained by neoclassical realism (Rose, 1998) (Lobell, 2009). Constructivist methods provide insight on how societal views, historical narratives, and identity influence strategic decisions (Wendt, 1999) (Katzenstein, 1985). The interaction of regional and extra-regional players is highlighted by global IR perspectives, which show how small governments manage intricate networks of influence while maintaining their independence (Acharya, 2014) (Sterling-Folker, 2013). The cases highlight how understanding small-state foreign policy in contested regions requires integrating material, ideational, and structural aspects (Vital, 1967).

¹²⁷ Politico. (2024, November 30). US suspends strategic partnership with Georgia after EU membership talks halted. Politico.URL: <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/30/us-suspends-partnership-georgia-00192044>.

The recalibration strategies of the South Caucasus states suggest several policy implications. For external actors, engagement must account for domestic politics, regional sensitivities, and the interplay of economic, military, and normative factors. Azerbaijan's assertive posture, Armenia's hedging, and Georgia's balancing illustrate that small states require flexible partnerships and adaptive strategies to manage systemic uncertainties (Keohane, 1969). Looking forward, regional trajectories will likely be shaped by continued Western engagement, Russia's evolving influence, Turkey's role as a strategic partner, and energy and transit developments (Narek Sukiasyan, 2024). Scenario planning suggests that states with diversified partnerships and robust domestic capacities will be better positioned to exploit strategic openings while mitigating vulnerabilities.

This chapter has integrated empirical findings from the South Caucasus to provide a comparative synthesis of small-state agency under structural constraints. By analyzing leadership, domestic politics, security dynamics, economic leverage, and normative considerations, it highlights the diversity of recalibration strategies across Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. The chapter underscores the interplay between agency and structure, demonstrating how small states navigate systemic shocks while seeking to maximize influence and preserve sovereignty. These insights contribute to theoretical debates in neoclassical realism, constructivism, and Global IR, and offer practical implications for policymakers and scholars studying contested geopolitical regions.

Conclusion

This study has examined the exercise of agency by small states in the South Caucasus, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, within the post-2020 regional security and geopolitical environment based on the anticipation of such shocks to the region as the second Karabakh war of 2020 and its subsequent developments, as well as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. The central research question guiding this inquiry was: "How do small states in the South Caucasus exercise agency in response to systemic shocks while negotiating domestic constraints and international expectations?" To operationalize this question, three sub-questions were posed: (1) how South Caucasian states localize global norms of democracy, sovereignty, development, and strategic autonomy; (2) the extent to which domestic political structures and leadership

agency shape foreign policy recalibration; and (3) how structural constraints, including geography, resource endowments, and security vulnerabilities, mediate strategic options. The study was premised on the hypothesis that small states in the South Caucasus exercise agency through strategic recalibration, which entails the localization of global norms, the strategic utilization of domestic resources, and multivector foreign policy engagement, thereby mitigating structural vulnerabilities and enhancing international legitimacy.

The empirical findings support the hypothesis. In all three cases, global norms were actively reinterpreted to serve domestic priorities and regional exigencies. In Georgia, democracy and strategic autonomy are rhetorically framed to consolidate internal authority and balance Euro-Atlantic integration with calibrated engagement with Russia. Western criticism and caution toward Russia have coincided with efforts to maintain stable regional relations and expand partnerships, including with other South Caucasus states, Turkey, China, and through normalized ties with Iran. Armenia frames democracy and sovereignty as instruments of survival, linking domestic legitimacy to multivector diplomacy while reducing reliance on Russian security guarantees, a pattern highlighted by the ineffectiveness of Russian peacekeeping during Azerbaijan's 2023 September operations, which led to the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan leverages democracy, sovereignty, and development to consolidate elite authority, reinforce territorial integrity, and assert regional leadership. Its influence expanded through Turkish support during the Nagorno-Karabakh war, securing victory and full control over the region, thereby enhancing independent maneuvering and its strategic significance as an energy power.

Structural conditions play a decisive role in shaping the scope and form of recalibration. Georgia's limited military capabilities and strategic location as a transit hub necessitate careful hedging; Armenia's landlocked geography and dependency on external security guarantees demand multivector diplomacy; and Azerbaijan's abundant energy resources and military capacity permit assertive regional strategies. Leadership agency functions as a critical mediator, as evidenced by the discursive and strategic practices of Kobakhidze (whereas Ivanishvili retains *de facto* authority over key political decisions), Pashinyan, and Aliyev, demonstrating the capacity of political elites to translate structural opportunities into purposeful action.

The study demonstrates that small-state agency in the South Caucasus operates simultaneously across material, normative, and discursive dimensions. Democracy, sovereignty, development,

and strategic autonomy are leveraged as flexible instruments to reconcile domestic legitimacy with international positioning. Comparative analysis reveals differentiated yet overlapping strategies: Georgia pursues defensive hedging, Armenia engages in strategic diversification, and Azerbaijan consolidates and projects influence. This underscores the adaptability of small states in translating global norms into locally coherent strategies, confirming that normative and discursive flexibility is central to contemporary foreign policy in asymmetric contexts.

Theoretically, the findings contribute to multiple strands of International Relations scholarship. Neoclassical realism is extended by illustrating how domestic institutions, elite cohesion, and resource endowments mediate responses to structural pressures (Rose, 1998) (Lobell, 2009) (Taliaferro, 2006). Constructivist insights are reinforced by evidencing how identity, historical narratives, and normative discourses shape strategic calculations (Wendt, 1999) (Sikkink, 1998) (Acharya, 2014). The study also advances Global IR perspectives by demonstrating that peripheral states possess the capacity to reinterpret and operationalize global norms in ways that enhance agency, challenge Western-centric expectations, and navigate asymmetric power relations (Acharya, 2014) (Sassen, 2006) (Sterling-Folker, 2013).

Finally, this study highlights how South Caucasian small states use a dynamic interplay between structure and agency, utilizing material, strategic, and discursive resources to protect sovereignty, navigate systemic shocks, and increase regional leverage. The findings substantiate the central hypothesis, address the research and sub-questions, and provide both empirical and theoretical contributions to the study of small-state behavior in contested geopolitical environments. The post-2020 South Caucasus exemplifies the nuanced mechanisms through which peripheral states actively shape their international trajectories, offering a model for understanding small-state agency in other micro-regional and asymmetric contexts.

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