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Post Nagorno-Karabakh wars: Hegemonic reconfiguration and geo-economic competition

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the 2020 and 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh wars as a strategic cycle of regional order transformation in the South Caucasus under conditions of declining hegemonic enforcement. It argues that Russia's reduced credibility as a guarantor of the post-Soviet status quo enabled revisionist action by Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey. The conflict reflects a shift from mediation-based order management to power enforcement, alongside a transition toward geoeconomic competition. The 2026 escalation between the United States and Iran, including the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, further increases the strategic relevance of the South Caucasus as an alternative corridor while heightening its exposure to broader conflict dynamics within an unbalanced multipolar system.

Keywords:

Nagorno-Karabakh, regional balance of power, geoeconomic corridors, US-Iran conflict; unbalanced multipolarity.

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Introduction and contextualization

The South Caucasus is a region of high strategic importance located at the intersection between Europe and Asia, delimited by the Black and Caspian Seas. Its geographical configuration simultaneously makes it a corridor of energy connectivity and a space of geopolitical friction, historically acting as a security zone between Russia, the Middle East and external powers.

Figure 1: Regional map. Source: Author.



The origin of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict dates back to the Soviet period, when the region was integrated into the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic despite its Armenian majority, generating latent tensions that emerged with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The 1991-1994 war culminated in Armenian military victory and the consolidation of a *de facto* enclave under Armenian control, without international recognition, known as the Republic of Artsakh¹.

Since the mid-1990s, the conflict has remained frozen under a scheme of Armenian military superiority and Russian hegemonic power. Moscow acted as a mediator, security provider and coercive actor, maintaining an unstable balance that prioritized containment over conflict resolution. This order depended on Russia's credibility as a guarantor and its willingness to limit substantive changes on the ground.

¹ José Luis Cabello Rodríguez, "El Caucasus," in *Panorama geopolítico de los conflictos 2017*, coord. María José Izquierdo Alberca (Madrid: Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017), 85–110.

The wars of 2020 and 2023 should be interpreted as a single strategic cycle of change in the regional order. The first meant the breakdown of the then frozen order, characterized by Azerbaijan's arms superiority, while the second, marked by the defeat of Armenia, consolidated the transformation of the conflict through the elimination of territorial ambiguity in Nagorno-Karabakh. This event marked a new regional hierarchy characterized by Russia's progressive loss of hegemonic capacity, an Armenia closer to the West promoted by Nikol Pashinyan—a strategy that would cost it its security, as Russian protection would be reduced—and a growing Turkish influence in the region, taking advantage of a new permissive environment for revisionist action².

Background to the conflict

Before 2020, the balance of power in the South Caucasus was characterized by its structural fragility, mainly underpinned by Russia's hegemonic power and, to a lesser extent, by the growing influence of regional powers such as Turkey and Iran. The area functioned as a weakly institutionalized subsystem, where stability depended more on asymmetrical power relations than on formal mechanisms. Russia played a central role as a guarantor of order, maintaining simultaneous influence over Armenia and Azerbaijan through a strategy that combined mediation, provision of weapons and military presence, and thus preserving a controlled balance without resolving the conflict. This approach limited the strategic autonomy of both actors and ensured Moscow's regional relevance³.

Geopolitical competition was indirectly articulated—both Russia and Turkey sought to increase their hegemonic influence in the South Caucasus. While Russia backed Armenia, Turkey consolidated itself as Azerbaijan's main ally, configuring a pattern of proxy alignments without direct confrontation. Armenia was configured as a dependent ally in terms of security, supported by the Russian military presence and close political-strategic ties. Azerbaijan, for its part, lacked the capacity to reverse the *status quo* for decades, although its position progressively evolved thanks to its energy resources and its growing relevance as a geo-economic corridor. This trend began to be evident in the Four-Day War of April 2016, which highlighted the erosion of Armenian military advantage

² Hrant Mikaelian y Jeronim Perović, *Geopolitical Echoes of the Karabakh Conflict*, CSS Analyses in Security Policy, no. 334 (Zúrich: ETH Zurich, diciembre de 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000645876>

³ Nicolás Martín Alesso, "Post Unfinished Cold War: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian-Azeri Conflict and Russia, Turkey and Iran's Position and Interests in the Region," Dialnet, 2019, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7253841>.

and the improvement of Azerbaijani operational capabilities⁴.

At the same time, Turkey deepened its partnership with Azerbaijan on the basis of political affinities, energy cooperation and military assistance, framed in a strategy of regional projection in the Caucasus-Caspian axis and summarized in the formula of "two states, one nation".⁵ However, its margin of maneuver remained conditioned by Russian primacy and the need to avoid a direct confrontation with Moscow. Iran, on the other hand, adopted a pragmatic strategy, combining the use of religious affinities as an instrument of influence with strengthening its relations with Armenia to ensure regional connectivity, especially through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).⁶

Finally, in 2020, this fragility became apparent. As Russia's strategic attention shifted to other theaters, particularly following its invasion of Ukraine, restrictions that previously limited Azerbaijani action weakened significantly. This created a permissive environment for revisionist action, allowing Azerbaijan to launch a full-scale military offensive in 2020 and ultimately regain full control of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023⁷.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Wars of 2020 and 2023

Although the conflict remained frozen for decades under Russian management and Armenian military superiority, by 2020 the strategic environment had undergone a substantial transformation. The offensive launched by Azerbaijan was rather a revisionist action designed to disrupt the *status quo* of 1994 and test Russia's limits of power imposition.

The 2020 war evidenced a clear material asymmetry in favor of Azerbaijan. Turkey's support, in the form of training, intelligence, and weapons—especially in the field of air and drone warfare⁸—significantly increased its operational effectiveness. In a context in which Russia had its strategic attention partially shifted, Armenia lost control of much of

⁴ María Baldeón González, "Russia And Turkey In Nagorno-Karabakh, Between Militarization And Diplomacy," Dialnet, 2021, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8068790>.

⁵ Alesso, "Post Unfinished Cold War: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian-Azeri Conflict and Russia, Turkey and Iran's Position and Interests in the Region," 2019.

⁶ Natalie Sabanadze, "How Russia, Turkey and Iran Are Reshaping the Caucasus - Kalam," Kalam, June 3, 2026, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/how-russia-turkey-and-iran-are-reshaping-the-caucasus/>.

⁷ Elcano Royal Institute. "Nagorno-Karabakh: The Local War and Regional and Global Rivalries," September 25, 2023. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/nagorno-karabaj-la-guerra-local-y-las-rivalidades-regionales-y-globales/>.

⁸ Shaan Shaikh y Wes Rumbaugh, "The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 17 de noviembre de 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense>

the territory in a period of 44 days. Russia's response reflected an erosion of its capacity as a guarantor of regional stability. Although it acted as a mediator of the ceasefire and deployed peacekeepers, its non-intervention during hostilities deteriorated its credibility as a guarantor of order, resulting in an alteration of the military but not political balance, with an equally ambiguous territorial situation⁹.

The main consequence of this limited war was to demonstrate the loss of effectiveness of mediation mechanisms without coercive backing, generating the conditions for a second phase of the conflict and marking the definitive rupture of the post-Soviet order in the South Caucasus. In 2023, Azerbaijani forces — in a day-long operation — captured areas still under Armenian control, forcing the surrender of Armenian authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh, hundreds of deaths, and thousands of evacuations¹⁰. This outcome confirmed the effectiveness of the Turkey-Azerbaijan axis as a functioning coalition based on converging interests rather than formal institutional structures¹¹.

Armenia had neither the capacity to resist militarily, nor the possibility of escalating the conflict in search of external support, precisely because of the rapprochement with the West and consequent separation from Russia, which resulted in limited resistance. The marginalization of Russian peacekeepers during the operation further underscored the decline in Moscow's taxing capacity¹². The inability to prevent Azerbaijani action confirmed the transformation of the regional order and accelerated Armenia's strategic reorientation. At the same time, the mediation of external actors, such as the United States and the European Union, had a reactive character, subordinated to changes of power that had already been consummated¹³.

Beyond conventional confrontation, Azerbaijan combined the use of force with low-intensity coercive instruments, especially through control of the Lachin corridor and restriction of humanitarian access, which facilitated the achievement of political objectives

⁹ Center for Security Studies. "Geopolitical Echoes of the Karabakh Conflict," July 12, 2023. <https://css.ethz.ch/en/center/CSS-news/2023/12/geopolitical-echoes-of-the-karabakh-conflict.html>.

¹⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," *Global Conflict Tracker*, actualizado el 18 de febrero de 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>

¹¹ "Geopolitical Echoes of the Karabakh Conflict."

¹² Foreign Policy Research Institute. "A 'Frozen Conflict' Boils Over: Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 and Future Implications - Foreign Policy Research Institute," n.d. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/01/a-frozen-conflict-boils-over-nagorno-karabakh-in-2023-and-future-implications/>.

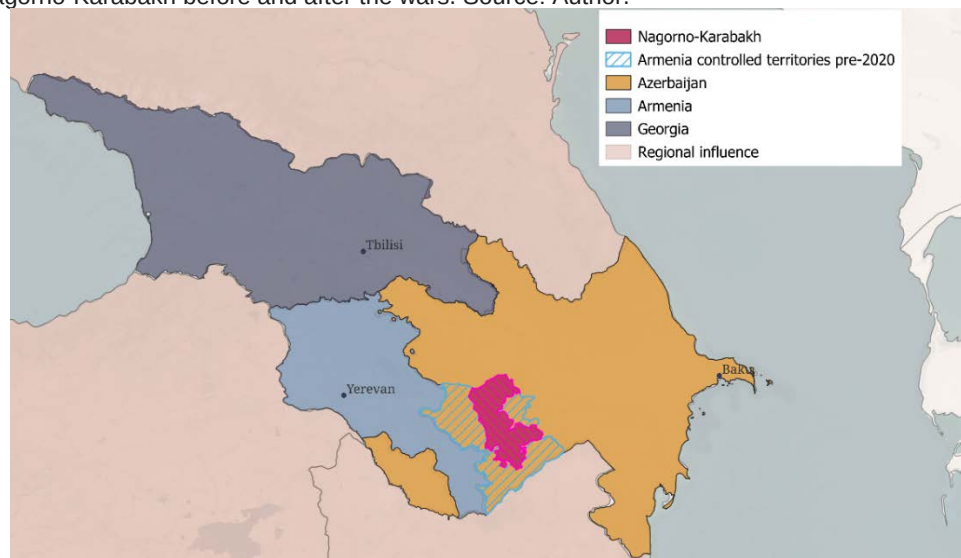
¹³ "Armenia and Azerbaijan: The Hard Road to a Lasting Peace." *International Crisis Group*, September 4, 2025. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenian-azerbaijani-conflict/98-armenia-and-azerbaijan-hard-road-lasting-peace>.

without the need for a protracted confrontation¹⁴. It should be noted that Russian peacekeepers, who had taken control and guaranteed the security of the corridor under the 2020 agreements, allowed the Azerbaijani blockade and did nothing to prevent it¹⁵. This could be seen as a response by Russia to President Pashinyan's increasing strategic reorientation towards the West¹⁶. The end result was the removal of territorial ambiguity, the dissolution of *de facto* Armenian political structures, and mass displacement.

Azerbaijan emerged as the clear victor, while Russia's role as hegemonic guarantor was significantly weakened, with only the current presence of troops at the 102nd Russian military base in Gyumri¹⁷. The breakdown of the old *status quo* gave way to an Ankara-Baku axis, with direct influence on regional geopolitics.

The 2023 war represents the closing of a cycle of regional power: the imposition of power replaced mediation, and the imposed order replaced the institutional one.

Figure 2. Nagorno-Karabakh before and after the wars. Source: Author.



Although the surrender of the Armenian forces ended the military confrontation, the conflict as such did not end – it simply began a new stage for the South Caucasus. With

¹⁴ The Institute for the Study of Conflict, Analysis, and Future (ICAF), "A War Too Small to Matter? The Global Cost of Overlooking Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," 3 de julio de 2025, <https://theicaf.org/icaf/2025/07/03/a-war-too-small-to-matter-the-global-cost-of-overlooking-nagorno-karabakh-conflict/>

¹⁵ Krivosheev, Kirill. "Russian Peacekeepers Find Themselves Sidelined in Nagorno-Karabakh." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 15, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2022/12/russian-peacekeepers-find-themselves-sidelined-in-nagorno-karabakh>.

¹⁶ Thomas De Waal, "There Is No Shortcut for Europe in Armenia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 30, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2026/04/there-is-no-shortcut-for-europe-in-armenia>

¹⁷ "Russian Foreign Ministry. Russian Military Base 102 in Gyumri Is the Only Guarantee of Armenia's Sovereignty - Sardarabad," n.d. <https://www.sardarabad.com.ar/armenia7663/7663-la-base-militar-rusa-102-en-gyumri-es-la-unica-garantia-de-la-soberania-de-armenia>.

the territorial dispute finally resolved, the axis of competition shifted from the military to the geo-economic sphere, focused on the control of trade routes and strategic corridors. Since Russia is no longer the only dominant power, other actors have begun to occupy that space.

Reconfiguration of regional power relations after the conflict

Wars have transformed the power structure in the South Caucasus, giving rise to a scenario of diffuse multipolarity in which no one actor exercises clear hegemonic control. Russia's relative withdrawal has created a power vacuum that has been partially filled by regional actors¹⁸. The Turkey-Azerbaijan axis emerges as the main beneficiary of the new order, capable of altering the regional correlation of forces, but without ensuring lasting stability, as the resulting order is largely based on coercion and consolidated asymmetry. Armenia, in this context, has begun a process of strategic reorientation, diversifying its alliances towards Western actors, although it maintains certain ties with Russia. Despite the end of open hostilities, the risk of instability persists due to the absence of fully consolidated security mechanisms.

On August 8, 2025, under U.S. mediation, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a joint declaration on an Agreement on Peace and Interstate Relations, which included commitments on "non-use of force," mutual territorial recognition, and the closure of the OSCE Minsk Group process. This agreement responds largely to economic incentives, such as the opening of communications through Nakhchivan through Armenia, within the framework of the TRIPP project ("*Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity*").¹⁹ However, the involvement of external actors introduces new dynamics of competition, especially between the United States, Russia, Turkey and Iran.

In this already unstable context, the escalation of the US-Iran conflict in 2026 and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz²⁰ have added a new layer of strategic pressure on the South Caucasus. The region has increased both its strategic value and its exposure to domino-effect dynamics. Episodes such as the drone attacks in Nakhchivan show that

¹⁸ Natalie Sabanadze, "How Russia, Turkey and Iran Are Reshaping the Caucasus," *Chatham House – Kalam*, 24 de julio de 2025, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/how-russia-turkey-and-iran-are-reshaping-the-caucasus/>

¹⁹ John Cookson, "How Trump's 'TRIPP' Triumph Can Advance US Interests in the South Caucasus," *Atlantic Council*, 20 de enero de 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/how-trumps-tripp-triumph-can-advance-us-interests-in-the-south-caucasus/>

²⁰ International Crisis Group, "The State of the Strait: The Role of Hormuz in the Middle East War so Far", International Crisis Group, 29 de mayo de 2026, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/visual-explainers/hormuz/>

the war is not limited to the Gulf, as it is beginning to be projected over the Caucasian region, directly affecting regional security.

Turkey continues to consolidate its regional projection, mainly through a land corridor—the Zangezur corridor—direct to Azerbaijan and Central Asia, which, if materialized, would significantly strengthen its regional influence. This project acquires additional relevance in the context of the disruption of the Gulf's energy routes, by reinforcing the value of the Transcaucasian axis as a partial alternative for Eurasian connectivity.

Iran's position was clear: against foreign intervention and support for Armenian integrity, a traditional ally united by its confrontation with Azerbaijan, although its own integrity is affected by the West's influence in the region. However, the open conflict with the United States modifies its margin of action, intensifying its sensitivity to any corridor project that could strategically isolate it or facilitate the Western presence on its northern border. So much so that on March 5 Iran launched an offensive against the strategic enclave of Nakhchivan²¹, an essential energy node for the TRIPP project.

Israel plays an essential role in the region, historically providing military support to Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and currently increasing economic, technological and diplomatic cooperation. This is in addition to the already existing oil trade relationship²², and united by their clear position against Iran.

Azerbaijan benefits from an increase in its strategic relevance as an energy and transit node in a context of crisis in the Gulf, but at the same time its vulnerability is increased by being located at the intersection between opposing actors, particularly given its relationship with Israel and its geographical proximity to Iran. Armenia, in parallel, is acquiring renewed geopolitical importance as a space of alternative connectivity, although it is also exposed to greater risks arising from its proximity to the Iranian conflict and the fragility of its strategic position.

More clearly: power in the South Caucasus is currently distributed among multiple actors: Russia, still present but weakened; the Turkey-Azerbaijan axis as an ascendant bloc; Armenia in the process of strategic reorientation; Iran defending its position; and external

²¹ Emil Avdaliani, "Will Iran Torch the South Caucasus?" *Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)*, 10 de marzo de 2026, <https://cepa.org/article/iran-tensions-in-the-caucuses/>

²² The Observatory of Economic Complexity. "Azerbaijan (AZE) and Israel (ISR) Trade | the Observatory of Economic Complexity," n.d. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/aze/partner/isr>.

powers such as the United States, the European Union, Israel and China participating selectively.

Geo-economic reconfiguration

With Azerbaijan in full control of the territory and the main transport axes, the Caucasus is emerging as a key corridor between Europe and Asia, especially in a context of European energy diversification vis-à-vis Russia, and as an alternative to the Hormuz crisis marked by tensions between Israel, the US and Iran. Infrastructure such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline—as Ceyhan overlooks the Mediterranean coast, with easy access to the port of Ashkelon—and the *Southern Gas Corridor* ('SGC') reinforce Azerbaijan's role as a strategic node connecting Central Asia, the Caspian and the Black Sea with Europe²³.

Azerbaijan, in coordination with Turkey, controls the east-west energy axis, while the north-south routes promoted by Russia have lost relative weight. The disruption in the Gulf introduces a new logic of competition because the control of existing routes and also the ability to offer viable and safe alternatives are at stake.

The development of the Zangezur corridor, which was later redefined by Trump as TRIPP, although still uncertain, could consolidate this dynamic by directly connecting Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan. However, this project generates reluctance in Armenia and Iran, which perceive strategic risks associated with its implementation. For Tehran, in particular, the consolidation of an east-west corridor under Turkish-Azeri influence could aggravate its isolation at a time of direct confrontation with the United States, increasing its opposition to any reconfiguration that reduces its regional connectivity²⁴.

Russia is trying to compensate for the loss of control over key routes by boosting the International North-South Corridor (INSTC) alongside Iran. However, regional instability and Iranian involvement in larger-scale conflicts threaten the viability of this axis, and thus weaken Russia's geo-economic projection in the Eurasian space. Although Azerbaijan has moved closer to the West and Turkey on energy, it remains a pragmatic partner in

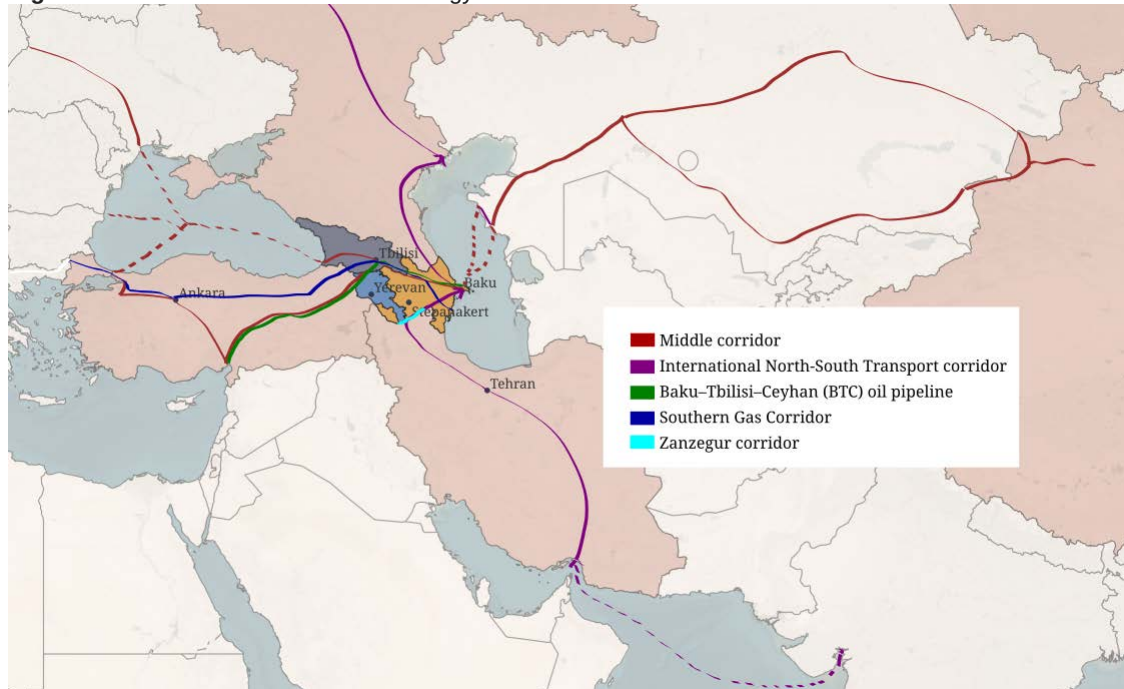
²³ Felipe Sánchez Tapia, "The Caucasus in the European Energy Decoupling Strategy," CESEDEN, 2023, <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/el-caucaso-en-la-estrategia-europea-de-desacoplamiento-energetico>

²⁴ Isaac Holmberg, "Iran War Boosts Strategic Significance of South Caucasus," *Deutsche Welle*, 27 de marzo de 2026, <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-war-boosts-strategic-significance-of-south-caucasus/a-76518386>

this Russian-led initiative²⁵.

Finally, China has increased its interest through the Middle Corridor²⁶ (TITR), seeking an alternative to instability in the Gulf. This growing economic involvement consolidates the South Caucasus as a key player in the Eurasian connectivity promoted by Beijing, adding an additional global dimension.

Figure 3. International corridors and energy routes. Source: Author.



After the war, the Azerbaijani victory has made possible the materialization of a Transcaucasian corridor that further consolidates its regional and global influence, as it has the ability to redirect the flows of goods, energy and data in its favor²⁷. Conflicts are not limited to the territorial level and, although they may be considered low-intensity conflicts, they have significant effects on supply chains and energy security far beyond the region.

For the European Union and the West, it implies the acquisition of direct interests in the stability of the post-conflict order, despite not having been the main actors in imposing it. Connectivity translates into influence, and those who build and secure the corridors in the

²⁵ Paulo Aguiar, "The Zangezur Corridor: A Key Trade Link in the South Caucasus," *Geopolitical Monitor*, September 18, 2025, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-zangezur-corridor-a-key-trade-link-in-the-south-caucasus/>.

²⁶ Aguiar, "The Middle Corridor: A Route Born of the New Eurasian Geopolitics."

²⁷ Marion Messmer Foster, "How Russian Weakness in the South Caucasus Can Reward the West," *Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)*, 12 de noviembre de 2025, <https://cepa.org/article/how-russian-weakness-in-the-south-caucasus-can-reward-the-west/>

Caucasus will determine the dynamics of Eurasian trade and gain projection capacity from Europe to Asia.

Geopolitical and strategic relevance

The South Caucasus region has ceased to be an area under exclusive Russian domination but has become an open arena of strategic competition.

Azerbaijan is emerging as the main agent of change, strengthening its strategic autonomy and consolidating itself as a key node in Eurasian energy, infrastructure and connectivity. Its rapprochement with China, formalized in a strategic partnership in 2024²⁸, expands its room for maneuver and reduces its dependence on traditional actors – even by testing Azerbaijan's possible accession to the BRICS.²⁹ For Western actors, this poses challenges in terms of influence and standard-setting, given Azerbaijan's growing role as a link between Asia and Europe.

The region acquires relevance as a transit space and also as a platform for strategic projection³⁰. As Iran's direct neighbor, and with multiple antagonistic alliances with each other—such as the U.S., Israel, Turkey, Iran—it must find a way to balance its ambitions (not antagonize the West, but not confront Iran) and keep the tension created by its close relationship with Israel in check.

To preserve its autonomy in the absence of a reliable security guarantor, Armenia has responded by diversifying its alliances: strengthening energy cooperation with Iran, expanding defense collaboration with France and India³¹, and moving closer to the United States. Armenia is affected by the conflict in Iran, while 20% of its commercial operations transit through that region³², however, it maintains a fixed gas price³³ with Russia and

²⁸ Joint Declaration of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the People's Republic of China on the establishment of a strategic partnership was adopted in Astana » Official web-site of President of Azerbaijan Republic. (n.d.). <https://president.az/en/articles/view/66389>

²⁹ Teona Giuashvili, "The Changing Face of the South Caucasus", *London School of Economics and Political Science*, julio de 2025, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/strategic-updates/the-changing-face-of-the-south-caucasus>

³⁰ Beka Bajelidze, "Strategic Realignment for the South Caucasus," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)*, 17 de marzo de 2026, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/strategic-realignment-south-caucasus>

³¹ Com, D. (2025, December 26). Armenia's military and economic cooperation with France and India. *Defence24.com*. <https://defence24.com/defence-policy/armenias-military-and-economic-cooperation-with-france-and-india>

³² Armenak Tokmajyan, "The Gulf Conflict and the South Caucasus," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 18 de marzo de 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2026/03/the-gulf-conflict-and-the-south-caucasus>

³³ Moscow Times, "Russia Threatens to Rip up Natural Gas Deal With Armenia Over Its EU Ambitions," *The Moscow Times*, July 12, 2026, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/05/27/russia-threatens-to-rip-up-natural-gas-deal-with-armenia-over-its-eu-ambitions-a92864>.

diversifies routes to trade oil through Azerbaijan.

The countries of the South Caucasus, especially Armenia and Azerbaijan, would suffer the ravages of a humanitarian refugee crisis, if the conflict in Iran were to escalate, which would disrupt economic growth by cutting off trade with the latter, and jeopardize the construction of the TRIPP project.

Turkey's active policy in the Caucasus is part of a broader strategy of regional projection in the Turkish space and the Islamic world. China regards the stability of the Caucasus as a key element for the development of the TITR within its Eurasian connectivity initiative, progressively increasing its economic presence in the region³⁴.

Iran, for its part, is intensifying its involvement in the face of the risk of strategic isolation. The conflict with the United States and Israel reinforces their perception of the South Caucasus as a critical space for their peripheral security, especially regarding the preservation of their regional access and the containment of corridors that could facilitate their isolation or the penetration of hostile actors on their northern border³⁵.

Israel plays an increasingly important role in this balance, not only as a supplier of military capabilities to Azerbaijan³⁶, but as a strategic partner in a relationship that combines security, energy and intelligence interests. This cooperation reinforces Baku's strategic autonomy and projects the Iran-Israel rivalry onto the South Caucasus.

For the United States and Europe, the South Caucasus represents both an opportunity and a challenge. The decline in Russian influence opens room for greater diplomatic involvement, albeit without direct security engagement. Their role is mainly limited to that of actors interested in stability and economic access, rather than that of guarantors of order³⁷. However, the crisis in the Gulf increases Western interest in the region, both for its energy value and for its strategic role in the Eurasian connectivity architecture.

The absence of a dominant actor and the interaction of multiple powers have caused an evident reconfiguration of the regional order that transcends the local sphere and has

³⁴ Giuashvili, "The Changing Face of the South Caucasus".

³⁵ Foster, "How Russian Weakness in the South Caucasus Can Reward the West."

³⁶ A. Chikhaoui, "The Stakes of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and the Strategic Alliances Mapping", Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESA), 2023, <https://nesa-center.org/the-stakes-of-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-and-the-strategic-alliances-mapping/>

³⁷ The German Marshall Fund of the United States, "Who Will Fill the Strategic Gap in the South Caucasus?," GMFUS, n.d., <https://www.gmfus.org/news/who-will-fill-strategic-gap-south-caucasus>.

direct consequences on global dynamics.

Conclusions

The evolution of the situation in the South Caucasus clearly reflects the challenges of the current international order. We are faced with constant shifts in power dynamics, from the West to the East.

The Nagorno-Karabakh wars of 2020 and 2023 show that regional orders sustained by mechanisms of imposition of external power can quickly crumble when hegemonic credibility is eroded. Russia's inability (or unwillingness) to enforce the post-Soviet *status quo* created a permissive environment that allowed revisionist actors to pursue strategic objectives through limited war. The conflict confirms that war continues to be a central instrument for changing the regional order in contexts of hegemonic decline.

Beyond the military sphere, the resolution of the territorial dispute has reoriented the strategic logic of the South Caucasus towards geo-economic competition. Control of transport corridors, energy routes and connectivity infrastructures has established itself as a main source of power, transforming economic access into geopolitical influence. In a context where Europe is seeking to diversify its energy sources, China is promoting TITR and regional actors are adopting access-oriented strategies, the region has become fully integrated into Eurasian competition.

The escalation of the US-Israeli conflict with Iran in 2026 and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz reinforce this trend. The disruption of one of the main global energy *chokepoints* increases the strategic value of alternative routes, consolidating the South Caucasus as a key corridor between Asia and Europe. However, this greater relevance also implies greater exposure to the dynamics of extended conflict, as the rivalry between Iran, Israel and the United States is projected onto the Caucasian space, with the consequent increase in the risk of regional destabilization and interruption of trade flows.

The post-war order remains fragile and characterized by competitive multipolarity. Armenia's diversification of alliances, Turkey's regional projection, Iran's defensive posture and the growing involvement of external actors such as China and the United States make up a congested strategic environment.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has significantly reshaped the South Caucasus and the structure of its regional relations. The management of the post-conflict order will have

implications that transcend the regional sphere and may constitute a benchmark for the governance of strategic spaces in an unbalanced multipolar international system.

Geopolitics keeps being constantly redrawn; war and politics remain intertwined, and the concept of "international order" seems to fall short. Is there really an order? The powers that defend the *status quo* continue to confront, directly or indirectly, revisionist powers. War is no longer fought only on the battlefield, but also in the economy, in proxy conflicts and in gray areas. States fight for their survival and to increase their influence, forming alliances based on interests, but never fully trusting each other. No state can be completely sure of the intentions of others, and most act on the basis of fear or insecurity, which further deepens the security dilemma. Will this new order endure, or will it fracture under constant tensions? Every corridor built and every alliance modified in the Caucasus resonates with the logic of global strategy, reminding us that even in the periphery the disputes of a multipolar era are being fought, and that the "winners" will shape not only the regional order, but also the international one.

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