

THE STRUCTURAL DETERMINANTS OF U.S. POLICY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: MAPPING STRATEGIC DRIVERS

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Abstract. The United States' foreign policy toward the South Caucasus has evolved over several decades under the influence of national interests and a complex set of factors that have shaped and transformed American strategy in this direction. The article examines the principal determinants defining the U.S. foreign policy course in the South Caucasus since the end of the Cold War. Employing a multi-level, multi-factor analytical framework that integrates systemic, regional, state, and sub-state influences, the study shows that U.S. policy in the South Caucasus is not reduced to one or two axes, but is polyaxially in nature. The analysis draws on the U.S. Grand Strategy to situate US policy in the South Caucasus within broader U.S. strategic objectives and highlights how the hierarchy and interaction of determinants shift with changing regional and global circumstances. Key drivers identified include the regions' geostrategic location, energy and transport corridors, security considerations (including counterterrorism and NATO partnership dynamics), great-power competition, democracy promotion, and domestic interest groups such as ethnic diasporas and energy corporations. The paper relies on historical-comparative and structural-functional methods and qualitative content analysis of policy documents, archival sources, and scholarly literature.

Keywords: *South Caucasus; U.S. Foreign Policy; Principal Determinants; Geopolitics; American Grand Strategy*

Introduction

The South Caucasus occupies a position of considerable geopolitical significance, consistently drawing the attention of major global powers due to its strategic location at the intersection of Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. This geographic positioning renders the region a critical corridor for energy transit, trade routes, and geopolitical influence, functioning as a bridge between key economic and security blocs. Moreover, the region's intricate political

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landscape – marked by protracted historical disputes, ethnic and territorial conflicts, and the presence of competing external actors – further amplifies its relevance in global affairs. Beyond its geopolitical value, the South Caucasus is endowed with substantial hydrocarbon reserves and other critical natural resources, including minerals, freshwater, and agricultural potential, all of which contribute to its enduring strategic importance for both regional and international stakeholders. In the post-bipolar period, the United States has emerged as one of the leading actors in consistently developing and institutionalizing the South Caucasus dimension of its broader strategic agenda. U.S. foreign policy in the South Caucasus has evolved over decades, driven by U.S. national interests that extend far beyond the region itself, as well as a set of factors that have played a formative and transformative role in shaping U.S. engagement in the region.

This article employs geopolitics as its primary methodological framework, incorporating a synthesis of classical, neoclassical, and critical geopolitical approaches to examine the key determinants shaping U.S. policy in the South Caucasus. The central hypothesis posits that U.S. foreign policy formation in the region is inherently complex and multifactorial, with the hierarchy and interaction of influencing variables shifting in response to evolving regional and global dynamics. The study is grounded in the concept of multi-factor foreign policy analysis, which holds that foreign policy emerges from the interplay of diverse, interrelated drivers, including geopolitical interests, economic priorities, security concerns, ideological imperatives, and domestic political pressures.

The research employs a multilevel analytical model encompassing systemic factors (such as global strategic competition with Russia and China), regional dynamics (including relations with Turkey and Iran), state-level interests (notably energy security and democracy promotion), and sub-state influences (such as ethnic diasporas and lobbying groups). This framework demonstrates that U.S. strategy in the South Caucasus is polyaxially in nature and cannot be reduced to a single strategic axis or priority.

By examining the interplay among these factors, the study aims to offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the dynamic determinants shaping the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy in the South Caucasus. Furthermore, the analytical lens of “Grand Strategy” is employed to situate U.S. regional engagement within the broader context of its global strategic objectives – namely, the preservation of global leadership, containment of strategic competitors, and promotion of a liberal international order.

The study employs a combination of historical-comparative analysis, the structural-functional method, and qualitative content analysis. The data corpus includes a wide range of sources, such as scholarly publications, policy documents, doctrinal frameworks, and strategic guidelines related to U.S. geopolitical interests and foreign policy priorities. It also incorporates official reports and information issued by government agencies, as well as reports, working papers, and policy briefs produced by non-governmental organizations and think tanks. In addition, the analysis considers the practical actions undertaken by U.S. diplomacy, providing a comprehensive empirical basis for understanding the formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy in the South Caucasus.

*The Geostrategic Position of the South Caucasus
in the System of International Relations after the End of the Cold War*

The profound transformations of the early 1990s, most notably the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, were both the culmination of preceding global shifts and a catalyst for significant changes in the geopolitical structure and configuration of the postwar world. In the aftermath of the USSR's collapse, the South Caucasus emerged as a region of key geopolitical significance. Comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, its strategic value is largely determined by its geographical positioning: situated between the Black and Caspian Seas, and sharing borders with Russia to the north and Turkey and Iran to the south. Located at the heart of Eurasia, the South Caucasus serves as a critical strategic platform for projecting influence over neighboring regions, including Russia, Turkey, Iran, the Central Asian republics, and China.

Historically a site of sustained political, economic, and military rivalry, particularly among Russia, Turkey, and Iran, the South Caucasus continues to represent a zone of vital strategic interest for numerous global and regional powers. Today, the region stands at the crossroads of competing interests among the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, China, the European Union (EU), and several states from the Arab-Islamic world. As such, the South Caucasus plays, and continues to play, a pivotal role in the formulation of foreign policy strategies for a range of actors across the Caucasus, Eurasian, and Middle Eastern geopolitical spaces.¹

In the tradition of classical geopolitical thought, the South Caucasus has long served as a battleground for competing civilizational and geopolitical paradigms, functioning as a historical arena of confrontation between maritime and continental powers. This dynamic is frequently conceptualized through the “*thalassocracy–tellurocracy*” dichotomy: “*thalassocracy*”, denoting power rooted in maritime dominance, is commonly associated with the West and the ideology of *Atlanticism*, while “*tellurocracy*”, rooted in control over vast land territories, is linked to the East, particularly Russia, and the ideological framework of *Eurasianism*.² This confrontation can be effectively interpreted through

¹ T. German, “Russia and the South Caucasus: The China Challenge”, *Europe-Asia Studies* vol. 74, no. 9 (2022): 1596-1615, DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2022.2071843; P. Remler, “Russia’s Stony Path in the South Caucasus”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (October 20, 2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/10/russias-stony-path-in-the-south-caucasus?lang=en>; S. Cornell, F. Starr, and M. Tsereteli, “A Western Strategy for the South Caucasus”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, Silk Road Program (2015), <https://www.isdp.eu/content/uploads/images/stories/isdp-main-pdf/2015-cornell-starr-tsereteli-a-western-strategy-for-the-caucasus.pdf>; N. Gevorgyan, “The EU’s Strategic Interests in the South Caucasus: From a Bystander to Perceived Interests”, *Armenian Journal of Political Science* vol. 2, no. 3 (2015): 91-112, DOI: 10.19266/1829-4286-2015-02-91-112; E. Fallahi, and N. Shafiee, “Assessment of China’s Strategy in South Caucasus”, *Central Eurasia Studies* vol 13, no. 2 (2020): 515-542, DOI: 10.22059/jcep.2020.289173.449869; E. Balla, “Turkish and Iranian Interests and Policies in the South Caucasus”, *NOREF Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center*. Policy brief, (April. 2014), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/163461/gfnahost1211.pdf>.

² N. Bekiarova, “South Caucasus as a Region of Strategic Importance”, *IJASOS- International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences* vol. 5, no. 14 (2019): 1016-1025, <http://ijasos.ocerintjournals.org/tr/download/article-le/801964>.

Mackinder's "Heartland Theory", which posits that control over the central landmass of Eurasia, what Mackinder termed the "pivot area", is key to global dominance.³ The South Caucasus, situated at the periphery of the Heartland, occupies a critical geostrategic position as a gateway between the Eurasian interior and the maritime periphery, rendering it a focal point in the broader struggle between land-based and sea-based powers. For Russia, the South Caucasus is a critical part of its near abroad, necessary for maintaining its strategic depth, ensuring access to the Black Sea and the Caspian region, and preserving its influence in the post-Soviet space. Moscow's approach is shaped by a Eurasian vision that emphasizes Russian-led regional integration, as reflected in initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).⁴ In contrast, for the West, represented by the United States, NATO, and the European Union, the South Caucasus is a key frontier in limiting Russian influence and expanding Western economic, political, and security ties. Western engagement in the region often takes the form of democracy promotion, economic cooperation, and strategic infrastructure projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor, which aims to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian energy. NATO partnerships with the South Caucasus states, as well as EU initiatives such as the Eastern Partnership, further highlight the region's importance within the broader *Atlanticist* agenda. This geopolitical competition for influence and control makes the South Caucasus a region of exceptional strategic importance, where local actors must navigate complex external pressures while seeking to balance their own national interests.

This geopolitical dualism can further be examined through the framework of "critical geopolitics", which challenges deterministic and binary representations of space and power.⁵ From this perspective, the South Caucasus is not merely a passive object of great power rivalry but an active agent that negotiates its position within shifting geopolitical discourses. Regional actors have demonstrated varying degrees of alignment and resistance to both Western and Russian spheres of influence, thereby shaping the contours of the broader geopolitical competition.

In the post-Soviet period, the South Caucasus has acquired heightened strategic significance, largely due to the discovery of substantial oil and gas reserves in Azerbaijan and the broader Caspian region, including parts of Central Asia. These hydrocarbon resources have transformed the Caspian Basin into a focal point of geopolitical competition, drawing the sustained attention of both global and regional powers. The presence of significant energy reserves has not only bolstered the economic potential of the littoral states but has also elevated their strategic relevance within global energy markets.

³ H. Mackinder, "Geographical Pivot of History", *Geographical Journal*, vol. 23 (1904): 421-437.

⁴ А. Дугин, *Основы геополитики. Геополитическое будущее России. Мыслить пространством*. АРКТОГЕЯ-Центр. (1999)

⁵ S. Dalby, "Critical Geopolitics: Discourse, Difference, and Dissent", *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* vol. 9, no 3 (1991): 261-283. DOI:10.1068/d090261.

Crucially, the region's role as a transit corridor has further amplified its geopolitical importance. The South Caucasus serves as a vital conduit for the transportation of oil and natural gas from the Caspian Basin to Europe and other global markets. In light of the European Union's growing emphasis on energy security and its strategic imperative to diversify energy sources, particularly in efforts to reduce dependence on Russian supplies, the South Caucasus has emerged as a key transit hub within the global energy architecture. Of particular significance are the major pipeline projects that facilitate the westward export of Caspian energy resources. Among these, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline transports Azerbaijani crude to the Mediterranean, circumventing Russian-controlled routes. Likewise, the Southern Gas Corridor, comprising the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP), the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), constitutes a critical infrastructure network delivering natural gas from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz field to European consumers. These projects not only contribute to regional and European energy security but also enhance the geopolitical and economic relevance of the South Caucasus, reinforcing its status as a competitive arena for influence among major powers, including the European Union, Russia, the United States, and China.⁶

Currently, the South Caucasus holds considerable potential to evolve into a major hub within integrated transcontinental transport networks running along both North-South and East-West axes. Owing to its geographic position at the intersection of key continental trade routes, the South Caucasus has historically functioned as a bridge between civilizations, facilitating economic, cultural, and political exchange across vast territories. In the contemporary context, with the resurgence of overland trade routes, the region is regaining its historical role as a strategic transit hub within an evolving global order. Existing and planned trade and communication routes through the region are critical for the development of transport corridors connecting Europe and Asia, Russia and the Middle East, as well as South Asia. As experts have noted, "the Caucasus is the most direct and hence crucial link in the emergence (or re-emergence, after centuries of dormancy) of land-based continent-wide trade corridors that connect China and India with Europe and the Middle East, and vice versa."⁷ This assessment is particularly salient in light of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to revive the ancient Silk Road through the development of a modern infrastructure network encompassing railways, highways, and energy pipelines. Accordingly, the South Caucasus is emerging as a pivotal region for the West's strategic and commercial access to the Eurasian interior, as well as for facilitating future economic and geopolitical interactions between Europe and the Middle East.⁸

⁶ A. Rondeli, "The South Caucasus: Pipeline Politics and Regional Economic Interests", in Jean Dufourcq, and Lionel Ponsard (Eds.), *The South Caucasus: Promoting Values Through Cooperation*. NATO Defense College (2004): 43-52.

⁷ S. Cornell, F. Starr, and M. Tsereteli, "A Western Strategy for the South Caucasus", 17-18.

⁸ Silk Road Strategy Act. S. 579-106th Congress (1999-2000), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/106th-congress/senate-bill/579>; F. Inan and D. Yayloyan, "New Economic Corridors in the South Caucasus and the Chinese One Belt One Road", *The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey* (2018), https://epfarmenia.am/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/New_Economic_Corridors_in_the_South_Caucasus_and_the_Chinese_One_Belt_One_Road_2018.pdf.

The geopolitical significance of the South Caucasus is further reinforced by its high conflict potential, stemming from the complex interplay of ethnocultural, religious, and political diversity, as well as historically contested state borders. This volatility is exacerbated by the presence of unresolved or “frozen” conflicts, the existence of unrecognized and partially recognized states, and the lack of effective conflict resolution mechanisms – factors that collectively pose enduring threats to regional stability.⁹ The most salient expression of this conflict potential remains the protracted confrontation over Nagorno-Karabakh. The Second Karabakh War in 2020 marked a pivotal moment in the transformation of the region’s geopolitical and strategic landscape. While the conflict resulted in significant territorial and political shifts, it failed to resolve the underlying causes of tension. Despite formal ceasefire agreements, the post-war period has been characterized by ongoing instability, with recurring escalations, ceasefire violations, and armed incidents highlighting the fragility of the current status quo.

Further destabilization has been driven by broader geopolitical developments, most notably the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This war has altered the strategic equilibrium across the post-Soviet space and intensified the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West, which inevitably have had direct repercussions in the South Caucasus. The imposition of sanctions, disruptions to traditional logistics routes, and the growing involvement of external actors, including Turkey, the United States, the European Union, Iran, and China, have introduced new layers of complexity to the regional security environment.¹⁰ As a result, the security situation in the South Caucasus continues to deteriorate. The region remains a theater of geopolitical competition and unresolved ethno-political disputes, shaped by overlapping interests of global and regional powers, which collectively contribute to its growing unpredictability and strategic volatility.

Deterministic Architecture of U.S. Policy in the Region: the Constellation of Primary Drivers

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States emerged as one of the principal external actors consistently shaping the South Caucasus dimension of its foreign policy strategy. Leveraging considerable economic, political, and military resources, the United States began to exert a sustained and structured influence on the transformation of the region’s geopolitical landscape. Washington viewed the South Caucasus through the lens of a broader strategic agenda aimed at the stabilization, democratization, and integration of the post-Soviet space into a liberal international order. Although some analysts argue that the South Caucasus does not fall within the category of “vital national interests” for the United States, it nonetheless holds substantial strategic relevance in several

⁹ N. MacFarlane, “Geopolitical Development and its Implications for the Southern Caucasus”, *The Georgian Institute of Politics* (September 19, 2022), <https://gip.ge/geopolitical-development-and-its-implications-for-the-southern-caucasus/>.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

domains. These include regional security, energy security, the fight against transnational threats, and geopolitical balancing vis-à-vis competing powers.¹¹

The long-term U.S. interest in the region is shaped by a confluence of factors, particularly the South Caucasus's geostrategic location, its energy resources, and its growing importance within the wider Middle East security architecture.¹² From the perspective of U.S. strategic planning, the South Caucasus lies at the crossroads of two critical geopolitical zones that have consistently occupied prominent positions in the American foreign policy agenda. To the north, the region borders the Russian Federation – nuclear successor to the Soviet Union and a continuing systemic rival in global affairs. To the south, it shares borders with Turkey, a NATO ally and a pivotal player in U.S. Middle East policy, often cited as a model of secular Islamic governance within the framework of Western engagement with the Muslim world. Simultaneously, the proximity of the South Caucasus to the Islamic Republic of Iran – an enduring adversary of the United States since 1979 – reinforces the region's strategic salience, particularly in the context of Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional influence. In the strategic calculus of the Anglo-American policy and security community, the South Caucasus is frequently conceptualized as a nodal space within emerging political and security architectures across Eastern Europe and Eurasia. These configurations aim to contain the resurgence of Russian influence and constrain the strategic reach of both Iran and China.¹³ Furthermore, the inclusion of the South Caucasus in broader geopolitical constructs such as the “Greater Middle East” and the “Eurasian Balkans” underscores its significance as a critical geostrategic corridor – central to U.S.-led efforts to shape trans-Eurasian political, energy, and security dynamics.¹⁴

The military-strategic significance of the South Caucasus occupies a central place in U.S. security considerations. Alongside Central Asia, the region is viewed as a critical geopolitical bridgehead linking Europe and East Asia within the broader architecture of the post-bipolar U.S. security system.¹⁵ Its value is further enhanced by its geographic proximity to the Middle East – a region where the United States maintains long-standing strategic interests and faces persistent security vulnerabilities – as well as to the Persian Gulf, which has been formally designated as an area of “vital national interest” in U.S. strategic doctrine.¹⁶ In this context, the South Caucasus holds potential as an alternative transit corridor for U.S. military assets, particularly in scenarios involving restricted

¹¹ E. Rumer, R. Sokolsky and P. Stronski, “U.S. Policy Toward the South Caucasus: Take Three”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2017), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2017/05/us-policy-toward-the-south-caucasus-take-three?lang=en>; F. Hill, “A Not-So-Grand Strategy: U.S. Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia Since 1991”, *Brookings Foreign Policy Program*, Commentary (February 1, 2001), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-not-so-grand-strategy-u-s-policy-in-the-caucasus-and-central-asia-since-1991/>.

¹² M. Olcott, “U.S. Policy in the South Caucasus”, *Connections* vol. 1, no. 3 (2002), 66.

¹³ S. Cornell, F. Starr and M. Tsereteli, “A Western Strategy for the South Caucasus. ”, 5.

¹⁴ Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York, Basic Books. 1997, 122-129.

¹⁵ S. Cornell, F. Starr and M. Tsereteli, *art. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁶ W. Odom, “U.S. Policy Toward Central Asia and the South Caucasus”, *National Security Studies*, Hudson Institute (1999), 1-4.

access or escalating conflict in the Middle East. Beyond its logistical value, the region also functions as a strategic buffer zone – positioned between zones of instability and the Euro-Atlantic security perimeter – serving to mitigate the spread of transnational threats. These include terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, Islamic extremism, uncontrolled migration, and trafficking in narcotics and human beings, many of which emanate from or are exacerbated by instability in the broader Middle East.¹⁷

With that, given its geographical location at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the South Caucasus occupies a potentially pivotal role in the logistics infrastructure supporting U.S. military and auxiliary operations, particularly in Southwest Asia. The region has functioned as a strategic land link for transport and communication networks, facilitating operational support for American military campaigns and stabilization missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and adjacent theaters. In this capacity, the South Caucasus serves not only as a transit corridor but also as a buffer zone that reduces U.S. dependence on more volatile or politically constrained routes through the Persian Gulf or Pakistan. This logistical and strategic utility became especially salient in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, when counterterrorism emerged as a central pillar of U.S. engagement with the South Caucasus. The evolving nature of asymmetric threats led to a fundamental recalibration of bilateral relations between the United States and the states of the region, shifting the focus from traditional geopolitical balancing to multidimensional cooperation on transnational security challenges. This shift stimulated the development of institutional mechanisms that extended beyond conventional diplomatic frameworks, encompassing counterterrorism collaboration, intelligence sharing, and infrastructure support.¹⁸

The region's unique geostrategic location has allowed it to contribute to U.S. and allied counterterrorism efforts in several critical ways. These include the provision of overflight rights that improved logistical mobility, enhanced intelligence coordination, and the facilitation of alternative transport routes that helped reduce reliance on chokepoints vulnerable to disruption. The institutionalization of this cooperation has led to the creation of specialized counterterrorism centers, joint operational planning protocols, coordinated threat assessments, and formalized intelligence-sharing arrangements. Despite differences in the depth and scope of engagement among the South Caucasus states – reflecting their divergent foreign policy orientations and national interests – a flexible and adaptive model of counterterrorism cooperation has emerged. This model has proven capable of addressing a wide array of emerging transnational threats, including cybercrime, illicit financial networks, drug trafficking, and the cross-border movement of extremist militants.¹⁹ One of the key policy outcomes

¹⁷ S. Cornell and F. Starr, The Caucasus: “The Caucasus: A Challenge for Europe”, *Silk Road Program, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute* (2006), https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2006_06_SRPCornellStarr_Caucasus.pdf, 21-22.

¹⁸ E. Rumer, R. Sokolsky and P. Stronski, “U.S. Policy Toward the South Caucasus: Take Three”, 2017.

¹⁹ S. Carney, “Allied Participation in Operation Iraqi Freedom. of Military History”, *Center of Military History United States Army*, (2011), <https://history.army.mil/portals/143/Images/Publications/catalog/59-3-1.pdf>.

of this strategic shift was the temporary suspension of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act (1992), which had previously restricted U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan due to its role in the blockade of Armenia and use of offensive force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. In response to the post-9/11 security environment, the U.S. Congress passed legislation in October 2001 granting the President the authority to waive these restrictions in cases where national security interests were at stake. Since 2002, successive U.S. administrations, regardless of party affiliation, have exercised this waiver annually, prioritizing strategic counterterrorism cooperation despite continued objections from domestic lobbying groups and unresolved regional conflicts.²⁰

At the same time, against the backdrop of the U.S. strategic shift toward the Asia-Pacific, driven by the need to counter China's growing influence and rising competition in the Indo-Pacific, the South Caucasus has acquired a new dimension in Washington's global priorities. The region is increasingly perceived as part of a peripheral belt that ensures geopolitical connectivity and operational flexibility on the Eurasian continent. Within this framework, the South Caucasus serves auxiliary functions in the broader U.S. strategy of containment and political-economic engagement with key actors such as China, India, the Persian Gulf states, and the countries of Eurasia's southern tier.²¹

Turning to the sphere of energy security and economic interests, the South Caucasus, though characterized by limited market capacity for U.S. exports due to its small population and modest purchasing power, acquires strategic significance primarily through its geoeconomic position as a critical transit corridor for goods, energy flows, and investment routes connecting major economic centers. For Washington, the region operates as a gateway to the resource-abundant areas of Central Asia and the Caspian Basin, thereby reinforcing U.S. objectives of economic and energy diversification while simultaneously mitigating reliance on Russian-dominated supply chains and transit networks. The discovery of significant oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea, particularly in Azerbaijan, has placed the region at the center of U.S. energy policy. Through large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor, alongside investments in regional connectivity and active diplomatic engagement, the United States has sought to secure influence over vital transportation and energy corridors serving Western economic interests. The East-West Energy Corridor, designed to bypass Russia and Iran, has become a cornerstone of this strategy, ensuring Europe's energy diversification and diminishing its reliance on Russian resources. By facilitating the transport of Caspian hydrocarbons through the South Caucasus, this corridor simultaneously

²⁰ U.S. Department of State. Extension of Waiver of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act with Respect to Assistance to the Government of Azerbaijan. Press Release (December 30, 2003). <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/prsrl/2003/27664.htm>.

²¹ H. Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy* (October 11, 2011), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

fostered the region's integration into Western trade and energy networks while curbing Iran's role in energy logistics.²²

Another key determinant of U.S. foreign policy in the South Caucasus has been the transformation of the regional security architecture in the context of NATO's enlargement and the strengthening of partnership mechanisms with the Alliance. Although full NATO membership for South Caucasus states remains unattainable due to both domestic constraints and international factors, Washington has actively promoted institutionalized forms of cooperation aimed at enhancing defense capabilities and improving interoperability with Allied forces over the past two decades. Particular emphasis has been placed on Georgia, whose Euro-Atlantic aspirations have consistently received U.S. political backing and military-technical support. Washington's direct support for Tbilisi's NATO ambitions was among the factors fueling tensions with Russia, culminating in the armed conflict of August 2008. Nevertheless, Georgia continued to be regarded by the United States as a key regional partner, receiving military assistance, personnel training, and support for defense infrastructure modernization. A comparable though more limited policy was pursued toward Azerbaijan, where bilateral defense cooperation included counterterrorism initiatives, maritime security in the Caspian, and logistical support for U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan. These efforts not only reinforced bilateral security ties but also sought to gradually align the defense structures of South Caucasus states with NATO standards.²³

The strategic importance of the South Caucasus for the United States may also derive from the possibility that, in the long term, the region could serve as an alternative to Turkey as a strategic partner on the Eurasian chessboard should Ankara's relations with Washington and NATO continue to deteriorate amid further Islamization. Experts note that the Islamization of Turkey has been gradually advancing for several decades, a trend most visible today in the political and administrative spheres, while its influence on the sociological and legal domains remains more limited. The growing role of political Islam is exemplified by the electoral success of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdođan, which, despite officially presenting itself as a "conservative democratic" party, is widely viewed by analysts as pursuing a hidden Islamic agenda that challenges the secular and democratic foundations of the Turkish Republic.²⁴

Tensions between Turkey and NATO add another layer of uncertainty. Beyond the longstanding Greek–Turkish rivalry, frictions have been fueled by Ankara's

²² T. German, "Corridor of Power: The Caucasus and Energy Security", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* vol. 2 (2008), 65; Todorović, I. "East-West Energy Corridor to extend from Turkey to Montenegro". *Balkan Green Energy News* (July 24, 2024), <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/east-west-energy-corridor-to-extend-from-turkey-to-montenegro/>.

²³ M. Malek, "NATO and the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia on Different Tracks", *Connections* vol. 7, no. 3, (Summer 2008): 30-51.

²⁴ A. Rabasa and S. Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008; R. Baker, "The Islamization of Turkey", *BESA Center Perspectives*. Paper no. 805 (April 22, 2018), <https://besacenter.org/islamization-turkey/>.

deepening ties with Moscow. Turkey's 2017 acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system and its declared plans for joint development of a fifth-generation fighter jet prompted Washington to impose sanctions and expel Ankara from the F-35 fighter program.²⁵ President Erdogan's November 2022 threat to launch a military intervention in Rojava, the Kurdish enclave in northern Syria, further underscored the widening rift between Turkey and its NATO allies.²⁶

A further significant factor shaping U.S. strategic interests in the South Caucasus is the persistence of protracted ethno-political conflicts, most notably those in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. These unresolved disputes profoundly affect interstate relations in the region by hindering sustainable integration, weakening collective security mechanisms, and generating chronic instability with potential for cross-border escalation. For Washington, fostering stability and advancing peaceful settlements is regarded as a prerequisite for building a resilient security architecture in the post-Soviet space. The enduring nature of these conflicts not only obstructs regional cooperation initiatives but also increases the likelihood of external involvement by both regional and global actors, thereby heightening the risk of new military-political tensions with broader international repercussions.²⁷

An additional dimension to the regional dynamics is introduced by the phenomenon of so-called "oil geopolitics," whereby conflicts are closely linked to competition over energy infrastructure and transit routes. The intersection of security, peacekeeping, and resource access creates a complex geostrategic knot in which diplomacy, economics, and power are intertwined in a fragile balance.²⁸ The United States has played an active role in peace efforts over the past decades. Most notably, it serves as a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and has supported negotiation processes aimed at reducing tensions in Georgia and across the wider region. Within U.S. strategic logic, stability in the South Caucasus is also regarded as a critical buffer against the potential spillover of instability into neighboring areas, including the Middle East, the Black Sea basin, and Central Asia.

At the same time, the intensifying confrontation between the West and Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine, coupled with the shifting balance of power in the South Caucasus following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, created the foundations for a more strategically oriented U.S. policy toward the region.

²⁵ D. Zandee, "Crisisalert 1: Turkey and NATO – Living Apart Together", Clingendael Report (2019), <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/crisisalerts-turkey/crisisaleit-l-turkey-and-nato-living-apart-together/>; A. Stein, "Not a Divorce but a Defense Decoupling: What's Next for the U.S.-Turkish Alliance", *War on The Rocks. Texas National Security Review*. Commentary (October 18, 2021), <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/not-a-divorce-but-a-defense-decoupling-whats-next-for-the-u-s-turkish-alliance/>.

²⁶ H. Hayatsever and D. Butler, "Erdogan Says Turkey to Attack Kurdish Militants with Tanks, Soldiers", *Reuters* (November 22, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-urges-de-escalation-syria-after-series-retaliatory-strikes-2022-11-22/>.

²⁷ A. Cohen, "Ethnic Conflicts Threaten U.S. Interests in the Caucasus", The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder 1222 (September 25, 1998), <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/ethnic-interests-threaten-us-interests-the-caucasus>.

²⁸ U. Halbach, "Oil and the Great Game in the Caucasus", in *OSCE Yearbook 2004*, IFSH (Ed.). Baden-Baden (2005): 275-285.

Armenia's defeat in the 2020 war and the subsequent escalation of tensions along its borders, particularly the incursion of Azerbaijani forces into Armenian territory, highlighted the necessity of stronger U.S. engagement through active diplomacy and renewed geopolitical presence. Washington's involvement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations has markedly deepened its role in the South Caucasus. Through high-level meetings and public statements, the U.S. administration has increasingly demonstrated its commitment to facilitating dialogue between Baku and Yerevan.²⁹ Most prominently, on 8 August 2025 the White House hosted a trilateral summit at which the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, together with the U.S. president, initiated a U.S.-brokered peace framework.³⁰ Beyond shuttle diplomacy and symbolic endorsements, Washington also secured tangible strategic commitments within the broader diplomatic package, including agreements on a transit corridor and expanded bilateral cooperation, which analysts interpret both as incentives for compliance and as mechanisms for anchoring the South Caucasus more firmly within Western economic and security networks.³¹ Against this backdrop, the ongoing war in Ukraine has sharpened Western attention to the strategic significance of the South Caucasus. Russia's prolonged military engagement has overstretched its political and military resources, diminishing its ability to exert the same level of influence across the post-Soviet space. Western analysts argue that this relative Russian retrenchment has opened new opportunities for intensified U.S. and EU diplomacy in the region. Coupled with renewed Western efforts to secure European energy supplies and strengthen overland connectivity, these dynamics have elevated the South Caucasus as both a strategic buffer and a vital corridor linking the Caspian to European markets. Washington's diplomatic investment in Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations, including the transit-corridor provisions of the recent U.S.-brokered agreement, illustrates how the Ukraine war has reoriented Western policy to treat the South Caucasus as a theatre of strategic consequence rather than a peripheral concern. NATO's broader posture toward the Black Sea and the Euro-Atlantic periphery further reinforces this shift, with allied assessments highlighting the need to build partnerships, resilience, and connectivity in states

²⁹ U.S. Department of State. Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev. (February 18, 2023). <https://2021-2025.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-armenian-prime-minister-pashinyan-and-azerbaijani-president-aliyev/>; U.S. Department of State. Public Schedule. (May 1, 2023). <https://www.state.gov/public-schedule-may-1-2023/>; U.S. Department of State. Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Closing Plenary Session with Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov. (June 29, 2023). <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-closing-plenary-session-with-armenian-foreign-minister-ararat-mirzoyan-and-azerbaijani-foreign-minister-jeyhun-bayramov/>.

³⁰ U.S. Department of State. Peace Deal Between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Press Statement (August 8, 2025). <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/08/peace-deal-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan/>; L. Papachristou and N. Bagirova, "Azerbaijan, Armenia publish text of US-brokered peace deal", *Reuters* (August 11, 2025). <https://www.reuters.com/world/azerbaijan-armenia-publish-text-us-brokered-peace-deal-2025-08-11/>.

³¹ S. Holland, "U.S. secures strategic transit corridor in Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal", *Reuters* (August 7, 2025). <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-secures-strategic-transit-corridor-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-deal-2025-08-07/>.

bordering the Black Sea and the Caucasus as part of a comprehensive response to Russian revisionism.³²

Another key dimension of U.S. foreign policy in the South Caucasus is the promotion of democracy and the transmission of a normative model rooted in liberal-democratic governance and market economics, embedded within Washington's broader Eurasian agenda. This emphasis has been a consistent pillar of U.S. grand strategy, reinforcing regional influence while projecting global leadership in line with the doctrine of liberal hegemony. By advocating democratic governance, human rights, and market-oriented reforms, Washington seeks to integrate the South Caucasus into the Western political and economic order while counterbalancing the authoritarian influence of Russia, Iran, and, more recently, China.³³ Importantly, democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space has not been episodic but institutionalized and strategically calibrated, forming an integral component of American foreign policy since the early post-bipolar period. The National Security Strategy for Engagement and Expansion (1994), issued under the Clinton administration, identified democracy promotion as one of three core objectives of U.S. strategy. It articulated a vision in which the expansion of a global community of democratic states was considered essential to international stability, economic growth, and U.S. security. Within this framework, Russia and the former Soviet republics were explicitly prioritized as targets of democratization, reflecting Washington's belief that liberalization would help prevent the resurgence of hostile, anti-Western authoritarian regimes.³⁴ In the South Caucasus, this strategy has been implemented through a range of diplomatic initiatives, financial assistance programs, and institutional support mechanisms. U.S. funding channeled via agencies such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has supported civil society organizations, independent media, and electoral reform. By encouraging political liberalization and institutional development, Washington has sought to strengthen its partnerships with South Caucasus states, reduce their vulnerability to authoritarian influence, and foster closer ties to Euro-Atlantic structures. In pursuing these goals, the United States not only advances its immediate regional interests but also promotes its broader vision of a liberal, rules-based global order.³⁵

Among the significant determinants of U.S. foreign policy in the South Caucasus, ethnocultural diasporas and institutionalized interest groups occupy a distinctive place, given their ability to shape Washington's strategic priorities. Most notable are the influential Armenian-American lobbying organizations and the energy interests represented by transnational oil and gas corporations, both of which have consistently advanced U.S. political and economic agendas in the

³² North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). "NATO's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine" (26 June, 2025). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_192648.htm.

³³ B. Poghosyan, "Thirty Years of Interaction: US Policy in the South Caucasus after the End of the Cold War", *USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture* vol. 1 (2022), 67-87.

³⁴ The White House. A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement (1994), 23.

³⁵ National Endowment for Democracy (NED). <https://www.ned.org/>; The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). <https://www.usaid.gov/>.

region.³⁶ The Armenian-American community, in particular, has established a strong lobbying presence through organizations such as the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) and the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA), both with long-standing experience in engaging the U.S. legislative process. Their efforts have ensured that initiatives supportive of Armenia have regularly appeared on the Congressional agenda, ranging from recognition of the Armenian Genocide and advocacy for conflict settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh to securing targeted economic assistance programs, including the Millennium Challenge Account. A prominent example of such legislative influence is Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, which, despite being periodically waived by successive administrations, continues to figure prominently in debates over U.S. policy toward the region.³⁷

At the same time, the corporate interests of transnational energy companies – primarily the American oil and gas corporations ExxonMobil and Chevron, which are involved in developing Caspian energy resources, particularly in Azerbaijan, and in constructing oil and gas transport infrastructure bypassing Russia and Iran – play a significant role in shaping Washington’s foreign policy priorities in the South Caucasus. These companies have actively lobbied for support for projects that are strategically important both for Europe’s energy security and for the geoeconomic positioning of the United States in Eurasia. Infrastructure initiatives such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor have received strong backing from successive U.S. administrations, which view them as critical to reducing Europe’s energy dependence on Russia and strengthening ties with key regional partners.³⁸

The interplay between humanitarian and corporate interests thus produces a complex configuration of domestic pressures on U.S. foreign policy, defining its multi-layered and often compromising character in the South Caucasus. While Armenian lobby groups advocate for increased political and humanitarian support for Armenia, the energy sector prioritizes strong relations with Azerbaijan due to its substantial hydrocarbon resources and strategic transit routes. Consequently, Washington’s engagement in the region often reflects a nuanced approach that seeks to balance these interests, maintaining diplomatic and economic partnerships with Azerbaijan while bolstering relations with Armenia and promoting regional stability. Ultimately, ethnic diasporas and economic interest groups continue to exert selective influence on U.S. policy in the South Caucasus, ensuring that Washington’s regional strategy is shaped not only by broader geopolitical considerations but also by domestic lobbying pressures and economic imperatives.

³⁶ G. Khelashvili and N. MacFarlane “The Evolution of U.S. Policy towards the Southern Caucasus”, *Uluslararası İlisKiler* vol. 7, no. 26 (2010), 110.

³⁷ N. Gevorgyan, “Peculiarities of the Armenian Diaspora in the United States: Formation, Development and Role in Armenian-American Relations”, *Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations*, vol. XX, no. 1 (2023): 166-186.

³⁸ М. Сучков, “Влияние лобби-групп на формирование внешней политики США на Южном Кавказе”, *Вестник МГИМО-Университета* N3(30), (2013): 18-24.

Conclusion

The South Caucasus occupies a pivotal position in the architecture of contemporary international politics, where geography, resources, and geopolitics converge to make the region a critical arena for both regional and global powers. For the United States, engagement in the South Caucasus has never been confined to the region itself but has consistently been embedded within broader strategic calculations aimed at sustaining global leadership, countering rival powers, and promoting a liberal international order.

This study has demonstrated that U.S. foreign policy toward the South Caucasus is inherently multifactorial and polyaxial. Systemic competition with Russia and China, regional dynamics involving Turkey and Iran, state-level objectives such as energy security and democracy promotion, and sub-state influences including diasporas and lobbying groups all intersect to shape an adaptive and multilayered policy framework. The hierarchy of these drivers has shifted in response to evolving geopolitical realities, most notably the Russia-Ukraine war and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, underscoring the fluidity and resilience of U.S. strategy.

Viewed through the lens of Grand Strategy, localized initiatives such as energy infrastructure projects, security cooperation, or democracy assistance reveal themselves as integral components of Washington's wider effort to project influence and reinforce a rules-based international order. At the same time, structural constraints, competing global priorities, and the agency of regional actors ensure that U.S. engagement remains selective and calibrated rather than comprehensive.

Ultimately, the analysis confirms the central hypothesis: U.S. policy in the South Caucasus cannot be explained through a single determinant or axis but must be understood as the outcome of a complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, security, and domestic factors. A comprehensive, multilayered approach is therefore indispensable for capturing the dynamics of American engagement in this strategically significant region.

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