

# New Geopolitical Features of the South Caucasus Region

## Нові геополітичні риси регіону Південного Кавказу

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**Purpose.** To identify the main geopolitical trends of the rapid transformations that have occurred in the security architecture of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War.

**Method.** Historical, comparative analysis, systematic approach and structural analysis methods.

**Findings.** The connection of new geopolitical activity with proselytism in the South Caucasus is the leitmotif of this research work. Here we can focus on two trends. First, this is a very dangerous trend and can turn the region into a battlefield of extra-state and military alliances. Second, the classical threat model can be replaced by new regionalism principles based on economic cooperation. Overall, the confrontation-cooperation axis will continue its transformative role more rapidly in the formation of the new security architecture of the South Caucasus.

**Theoretical implications.** The Second Karabakh War had a serious impact on theoretical issues related to security in the South Caucasus. The traditional sphere of influence and threat model that has maintained itself in the South Caucasus for a century is currently undergoing a period of transformation. The regional geopolitical order is expanding due to new actors, the range of threats is expanding and increasingly originating from abroad. Despite the influx of external influences into the region, confidence in the creation of a unified security system among the countries of the region is growing.

**Practical implications.** The results of the Second Karabakh War have brought the South Caucasus out of its inertia. Geopolitical dualism is noticeable in the region. On the one hand, there is an expansion of the horizons of intense armament, military-technical cooperation between local states and new transregional actors, and even the transition of extra-state competition to this region. On the other hand, confident steps towards peace and peaceful coexistence are evident in the region. The achievement of reconciliation between Azerbaijan and Armenia at the initiative of the United States and the transformation of the Zangezur corridor (TRIP) into the main object of this reconciliation creates the basis for the beginning of a new stage of regionalism in the South Caucasus, and the replacement of military rhetoric with heated disputes around regional corridors.

**Value.** This article is considered significant in terms of the new content of the geopolitical processes that took place in the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War, the radical transformation of traditional views, and the transformation of the region into a theater of extra-state conflict.

**Paper type.** Theoretical.

**Мета дослідження.** Визначити основні геополітичні тенденції стрімких трансформацій, що відбулися в архітектурі безпеки Південного Кавказу після Другої карабаської війни.

**Метод дослідження.** Історичний і порівняльний аналіз, системний підхід та методи структурного аналізу.

**Результати дослідження.** Лейтмотивом цього дослідження є зв'язок нової геополітичної активності з прозелітизмом у Південному Кавказі. Тут можна виокремити дві тенденції. По-перше, це вкрай небезпечна тенденція, яка може перетворити регіон на поле протиборства позадержавних і військових альянсів. По-друге, класична модель загроз може бути замінена принципами нового регіоналізму, заснованого на економічній співпраці. Загалом вісь «протистояння – співробітництво» й надалі відіграватиме трансформаційну роль, але в прискореному режимі, у формуванні нової архітектури безпеки Південного Кавказу.

**Теоретична цінність дослідження.** Друга карабаська війна справила істотний вплив на теоретичні проблеми безпеки Південного Кавказу. Традиційна модель сфер впливу та загроз, яка зберігалася в регіоні протягом століття, нині переживає період трансформації. Регіональний геополітичний порядок розширюється за рахунок появи нових акторів, а спектр загроз зростає та дедалі частіше має зовнішнє походження. Попри посилення зовнішніх впливів у регіоні, зростає довіра до можливості створення єдиної системи безпеки між країнами Південного Кавказу.

**Практична цінність дослідження.** Результати Другої карабаської війни вивели Південний Кавказ зі стану інерції. У регіоні спостерігається геополітичний дуалізм. З одного боку, відбувається розширення горизонтів інтенсивного озброєння, військово-технічного співробітництва між місцевими державами та новими трансрегіональними акторами, а також перенесення позадержавної конкуренції до цього регіону. З іншого боку, очевидними є впевнені кроки до миру та мирного співіснування. Досягнення примирення між Азербайджаном і Вірменією за ініціативи Сполучених Штатів і перетворення Зангезурського коридору (TRIP) на головний об'єкт цього примирення створюють підґрунтя для початку нового етапу регіоналізму в Південному Кавказі та заміни військової риторики гострими дискусіями навколо регіональних коридорів.

**Цінність дослідження.** Стаття є значущою з огляду на новий зміст геополітичних процесів, що відбулися в Південному Кавказі після Другої карабаської війни, радикальну трансформацію традиційних уявлень та перетворення регіону на театр позадержавних конфліктів.

**Тип статті.** Теоретичний.

**Key words:** South Caucasus, Second Karabakh war, "Heartland", extra-state confrontations, regionalism.

**Ключові слова:** Південний Кавказ, Друга карабаська війна, "Гартленд", позадержавні протистояння, регіоналізм.

## **Introduction**

For the first time in the history of the South Caucasus, it is about to enter a period of radical transformation. The geopolitical order, which has been closely linked to the conflicts, occupations and deportations that have arisen in the region over the past two centuries, is about to collapse. The actors who have controlled the region for a long time are forced to adapt to the impact of the new geopolitical reality. The new rules of the game are about to suppress classic behaviors. It is not excluded that this situation will bring new development and breath to the region, as well as new problems in content.

The “Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Interstate Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia”, which was laid with the 44-day Second Karabakh War and signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia under the mediation of the United States on August 8 in Washington, is capable of seriously influencing the formation of the new geopolitical architecture of the region. A strong desire is being observed among the countries of the region towards the logic of “0 problems”. This has created unique opportunities for adapting bilateral relations to the requirements of the new reality, seeking ways to jointly solve regional security problems and realizing the principle of peaceful coexistence.

However, in the new reality, it does not seem easy to easily achieve the desired future. There are many who dream of disrupting this peace and bringing the region back into the clutches of separatism. It seems that the interests of the countries of the region have never been as close as they are today. It is this tendency that is capable of seriously hindering the advancement of divisive and disruptive plans in the South Caucasus.

Although the new conditions seem attractive compared to the previous pessimistic period, they imply the projection of military-political contradictions between transregional forces to the region. The Israel-Iran and India-Pakistan conflicts are considered new problems transferred to the region after the Second Karabakh War. This problem, if not directly, then indirectly affects the regional order.

The projection of all these foreign games into the region reflects the potential of the South Caucasus to open up to the world and become a natural geographical springboard for advancing towards the "Heartland" as Russia's main focus shifts to the war with Ukraine.

A real basis has been created for replacing long-standing violence and hostility with mutually beneficial cooperation. The future development of the region can be better and more stable on the basis of a “soft power” strategy. It is not excluded that a new wave of regionalism will create the basis for a positive transformation of a “free and stable Caucasus”.

## **Theoretical Background**

The main vectors of the theoretical foundations of the study are considered to be the following:

1. The geopolitical transformations after the Second Karabakh War gave impetus to the rise of economic and political pragmatism in the system of intra-regional cooperation.
2. The deepening of contradictions between internal independence and influences projected from abroad;
3. The potential for the region to become a stage for broader external geopolitical games.
4. Future prospects of “Pax Americana” in the South Caucasus in the context of the “Great Games”.

## **Problem Statement**

Geopolitical problems in the South Caucasus have historically been closely related to military-political events and trends. For this reason, the processes taking place in the region have always been explained in the context of political realism. After the Second Karabakh War, the new

geopolitical realities that emerged in the region created a serious need to study them from the perspective of liberalism. This can be associated with the opening of transport and communication systems in the region, the potential for expanding logistical capabilities, and the dominance of pragmatism. All these innovations are undoubtedly closely related to constructivism. Radical ideologies – Miatsum, the collapse of Greater Armenia – see “zero problems” as a new stage in the relations between states.

## **Results**

Historically deprived of geopolitical comfort, the South Caucasus cannot escape the vortex of conflict and confrontation even today. Military campaigns, expansions, and occupations are considered concepts that determine the eternal fate and history of this region. The transformation of a small region into spheres of influence between various civilizations and empires has not created anything positive for the smooth development of regionalism. On the contrary, the hatred and distrust of major powers for each other have had a serious impact on the psyche, behavior, and way of thinking of the peoples of the region and have turned this small region into an object of severe asymmetries. Since the 19th century, merciless geopolitical disputes and wars over the South Caucasus have reached their peak and have forever left their negative mark on the life of the region – the division of the region among regional powers. In addition, during the Soviet regime, by regularly shearing borders, the regime laid the foundation for a “powder keg” in the region, created the basis for ethnic conflicts, and was able to deliberately instill ethnic antagonism among local peoples.

The geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic role of the South Caucasus in Eurasia is truly unique due to its natural resources and geographical location. Its inclusion in H.Mackinder’s “Heartland” makes the region attractive for the geopolitical struggle for Eurasia [1]. Undoubtedly, the aggravation of the military-political situation in the South Caucasus after the collapse of the “cold war”, collisions around oil and its transportation routes have led to the formation of a conflictological architecture in the region. Military-political games continue to keep all processes, including non-military ones, dependent on it. Even if the 44-day Second Karabakh War saved the region from 30 years of destructive war and violence, it is still too early to talk about the establishment of lasting strategic stability [2]. This can be highlighted against the background of a number of emerging trends.

**1. Intensification of geopolitical processes in the region.** It is not surprising that the activities, interests and competition of international and regional powers in the South Caucasus have intensified in recent years, and that events are taking place with faster and deeper impacts. This trend is especially noticeable after 2020.

There is no doubt that the South Caucasus is in the sphere of interest of several major states. Any changes in the region affect the geopolitical balance. Russia is trying to maintain its traditional dominant role in the region. Its military bases in Armenia (Gyumri) and Georgia (Abkhaziya and Ossetiya) are a very serious means of influence. However, after the Russian-Ukrainian war, its influence in the region may weaken.

Turkey has further strengthened its relations with Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and increased its geopolitical weight in the region. Iran, on the other hand, is seriously concerned about Azerbaijani-Armenian relations, the Zangezur corridor and Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation and is trying to protect its position in the region [3].

As for the US and the European Union, their interests cannot be considered unambiguous. After the second Karabakh war, the US and the European Union tried to hinder the development of the peace process in the region under the mediation of Russia and came to the center of attention with their selective approach to the countries of the region.

The 44-day war in 2020 and the end of Armenian separatism as a result of one-day anti-terrorist measures carried out in the Karabakh economic zone of Azerbaijan in 2023 had a serious

impact on the balance of power in the region. By fully restoring its sovereignty in the region, Azerbaijan changed the “status quo” and reshaped the political map of the region [4]. These changes brought to the fore sensitive issues such as the Zangezur corridor and the delimitation of the Azerbaijani-Armenian border.

After the anti-terrorist measures, another success of Azerbaijan was the closure of the Russian-Turkish monitoring center operating in the territories controlled by Russian peacekeepers last year and the departure of Russian peacekeepers from Azerbaijan. This step did not allow Russia to restore its military presence in Azerbaijan. In fact, Pashinyan’s recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as Azerbaijani territory and Russia’s efforts in the Ukrainian swamp also had a positive impact on the development of events in Azerbaijan’s favor.

The region has the potential to become a transit hub between Europe and Asia: the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route) increases the geopolitical importance of the region by increasing transportation in the China-Turkey-Europe direction. Azerbaijani oil and gas pipelines (BTC, TAP, TANAP) are important for Europe’s energy security, which makes Azerbaijan a strategic partner.

New threats and challenges also do not go unnoticed. Moscow’s focus on Ukraine has created new opportunities and gaps in the South Caucasus. It is also too early to talk about lasting stability in Iranian-Azerbaijani relations. In the post-war period, Iran's military exercises along the border with Azerbaijan, harsh rhetoric, and an armed raid on the Azerbaijani military embassy in Tehran have contributed to a cooling of bilateral relations.

The Pashinyan government's distancing from Russia and cooperation with the European Union could fuel new tensions in the region.

The Russia-Ukraine war has significantly increased Georgia's geopolitical importance for the United States. This is due to the security of communication lines passing through Georgia and its absence from Russian influence.

**2. Changing the trajectory of violence.** This is a very relevant and important trend. To justify this idea, it is possible to explain that violence has increased due to the influence, interests and interference of foreign powers rather than local reasons.

Although Russia tried to maintain its position in the region after the second Karabakh war, its influence has weakened as a result of the passivity of peacekeepers, the weakness of the CSTO and the deterioration of relations with Armenia. Pashinyan’s recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as Azerbaijani territory and the gradual depletion of military and human resources in the war against Ukraine resulted in the departure of Russian peacekeepers from the region. However, it is not excluded that Russia will make plans and resort to provocations to compensate for this weakening [5].

The Iranian Persian regime is also unlikely to come to terms with the current state of events in the region. The Zangezur corridor, the Middle Corridor, Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation and the August 8 statement signed under the leadership of the United States give grounds for the above-mentioned concern.

Turkey has increased its military, economic and political activity in the region within the framework of its alliance with Azerbaijan. This is not well received by other powers (especially Russia and Iran). It is simply that the current military-political situation in the South Caucasus and the post-Soviet space and the Middle East does not allow the latent jealousy of those states towards Turkey to take on an obvious character.

The course of events gives reason to say that violence is no longer the work of only local actors. If earlier violence was mostly limited to the Azerbaijani-Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh and other South Caucasus conflicts, now sometimes foreign intelligence services, proxy actors, and ideological influence networks are behind the violence. For example: Iran's support for some radical religious networks within Azerbaijan [6], increasing tensions between pro-Western and pro-Russian political groups within Armenia, etc. are examples of what has been said.

Violence is also spreading through cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, fake news, and foreign social media accounts that influence public opinion. Most of these information attacks originate from centers located abroad (for example, troll factories and anti-Azerbaijani platforms).

The strategic importance of the region also increases the violence originating from abroad. The Middle Corridor, energy projects, international transport routes make the region even more attractive. Tensions between external powers for control over these resources and routes are increasing, which negatively affects intra-regional stability.

Thus, after the Second Karabakh War, the trajectory of violence in the South Caucasus has changed from a local conflict to an external geopolitical tool, from internal actors to external influential players, from classical violence to hybrid and information violence, from border incidents to a clash of regional and international interests. These processes show that the cases of violence originating from abroad have not only increased, but also taken on a multifaceted and more dangerous form.

**3. The transformation of the region into a theater of extra-state confrontations.** The concept of extra-confrontation means the projection of conflicts between powers outside the region, not directly between states within the region, into the region, that is, their reflection here. These conflicts occur at the level of geopolitical, ideological, energy and transport interests, and information warfare. This can be seen in the short-term wars between India-Pakistan and Israel-Iran that took place this summer. The geopolitical and ideological confrontation between Israel and Iran, which has been going on for many years, is no longer limited to the Middle East. This rivalry is having an impact on the system of interstate relations in the South Caucasus region, and this region is increasingly becoming an indirect area of influence of the Israeli-Iranian conflict [7].

Israel and Azerbaijan have a strong strategic partnership in the military, security, and energy sectors. Azerbaijan provides approximately 40% of Israel's energy needs. Israel, in turn, sells modern weapons systems, including UAVs, missiles, and defense technologies to Azerbaijan. Israeli-made technologies played an important role in the Second Karabakh War of 2020. Iran perceives Azerbaijan's rapprochement with Israel as a "threat to its national security".

Although the conflict and tense relations between India and Pakistan (especially over the Kashmir region) mainly cover the South Asian region, this confrontation has direct and indirect geopolitical, diplomatic and economic implications for Azerbaijan [8]. The logical consequence of this is India's veto on Azerbaijan's membership in the organization at the 25th meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states in Tianjin, China, on September 1.

Pakistan is one of the most resolute supporters of Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and does not officially recognize Armenia. This is in line with Azerbaijan's interests. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, exhibits a pro-Pakistani approach on the Kashmir issue, which is negatively perceived by India.

India has strengthened military cooperation with Armenia in recent years: it sells it missile systems, anti-aircraft complexes and unmanned aerial vehicles. In 2022 and 2023, India signed multi-million dollar arms deals with Armenia. This rapprochement is seen as a balance to the Azerbaijan-Pakistan partnership.

The tension between India and Pakistan indirectly affects the South Caucasus and Azerbaijan, as both sides seek to strengthen their strategic partnerships there. India is developing relations with Armenia, while Pakistan provides political and military support to Azerbaijan, creating a new "polarization line" in the South Caucasus.

**4. Weakening of asymmetries between the countries of the region.** The South Caucasus asymmetries are noticeable in the context of frozen conflicts between the countries of the region, geopolitical orientation, routes for the development and transportation of hydrocarbon resources, and cooperation with foreign powers. Frozen conflicts have long undermined trust in the region,

laid the foundation for diversification in the foreign policy and geopolitical orientation of local countries, and have not created conditions for regional consolidation. Instead, mini-blocks have been created in the region instead of a unified security system, but it was impossible for them to act on behalf of the entire region.

At one time, the determination of the routes for the exploitation and transportation of Azerbaijani oil also created a collision between development and stability in the region and disintegration and military coups.

The prolonged existence of asymmetry met the interests of states interested in keeping the region under their control. Also, asymmetry did not allow new forces to enter the region. Armenia has been trying to cover up its weak potential in the South Caucasus for a long time with the policy of aggression carried out against Azerbaijan with the support of foreign patrons and direct military assistance, and has tried to use the biased activities of the Minsk Group for its own interests. By winning the 44-day Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan neutralized one of the asymmetries by putting an end to Armenian separatism in the South Caucasus [9].

In addition, this conflict resulted in the collapse of another asymmetry in the region - Armenia's farewell to its pro-Russian geopolitical orientation. As is known, in January of this year, Armenia signed a document on strategic partnership with the United States, putting an end to "99 percent strategic dependence on Russia", in Pashinyan's words. The Armenia-Russia-Iran tandem, which has dominated the South Caucasus for the past 30 years, could not withstand the strategic alliance formed between Azerbaijan-Georgia and Turkey.

On August 8, the "Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Interstate Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia" was signed in Washington under the mediation of the United States. The main provisions of this agreement include the peaceful coexistence of the two countries, the resolution of state borders in accordance with the Almaty Declaration signed in 1991, the termination of the activities of the OSCE Minsk Group, etc., which created the basis for the complete elimination of a number of asymmetries.

The new geopolitical conditions may create the basis for strengthening Georgia's national security, further strengthening its cooperation with the United States and the European Union, further expanding its constructive cooperation with China, and resolving controversial issues with Russia.

**5. The new content of regionalism.** For the first time in history, a unique opportunity for constructive regionalism has arisen in the South Caucasus. The results of the Second Karabakh War have created a basis for replacing disintegration with coexistence, mistrust with confidence, and isolation with cooperation. The centuries-long conflict, ethnic cleansing, territorial claims, genocide, deportation, etc. disintegrative processes in the region have led to the association of the South Caucasus with the term "balkanization". Therefore, the principle of indivisibility of security in this region has never been ignored.

In general, regionalism is the desire or tendency of states or regions located in a certain region to cooperate. This can be in the form of political associations (for example, alliances), economic integration, and cultural rapprochement. The countries of the South Caucasus have different ethnic, religious, and political identities, but at the same time they have a number of common historical and geographical features. The region is located in the post-Soviet space and is in the sphere of interest of various global and regional powers (Russia, Turkey, Iran, the United States, the European Union, the People's Republic of China, India, Pakistan, and Israel, etc.).

There is great potential for regionalism in the South Caucasus, but there are also many challenges. If political will, real steps are taken to build trust and resolve conflicts, cooperation in this region can deepen and stable regional integration models can be formed.

Unfortunately, although a number of initiatives have been put forward in the South Caucasus to date in terms of the positive development of regionalism, ethnopolitical conflicts, political disagreements, and geopolitical trends have played a serious role in preventing it. For the first time

since the Second Karabakh War, hopes for the emergence of regionalism have increased. The peace treaty signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the White House on August 8, 2025, with the mediation of the United States, can make a significant contribution to the positive development of regionalism in terms of future prospects [10].

On August 8, a historic agreement was signed in Washington under the auspices of the United States, marking the beginning of a new era in relations between the two countries. For the first time in a conflict that has lasted more than a century, the parties agreed to cease hostilities, paving the way for a potential new geopolitical framework in the South Caucasus. Experts say the region is entering a period of radical change, with traditional actors at risk of losing influence and new powers seeking to assert leadership through more flexible “soft power strategies” (including the use of “smart power”).

The signing of the Joint Declaration between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Washington on August 8 is a turning point in the history of the region. For the first time in more than three decades of conflict, both sides committed to normalizing relations, establishing diplomatic relations, and resolving the issues of demarcation and delimitation of borders. This not only represents an end to military operations, but also the emergence of a new geopolitical framework in the South Caucasus, in which traditional actors will gradually lose influence and new forces will shape the rules based on “soft power”. For Azerbaijan, this is an opportunity to finally curb Armenia’s revanchist ambitions and secure its historically justified positions.

What concrete benefits does Azerbaijan gain from signing this declaration? Azerbaijan gains on several strategic fronts. First, the declaration legally and formally eliminates Armenia’s territorial claims against Azerbaijan, in particular its claims to the Karabakh economic zone, and eliminates potential disputes in the future. Second, the repeal of the US 907 amendment effectively eliminates double standards and opens the door to full-fledged defense cooperation with Washington. Third, the opening of the Zangezur Corridor under US control, rather than Russian control, creates a new model for regional logistics and strengthens Azerbaijan’s position in transcontinental projects. Fourth, the OSCE Minsk Group will definitively end its activities and remove formal obstacles to the direct peace process (the OSCE Minsk Conference and the Minsk Group were legally terminated on December 1, 2025). Fifth, an agreement will be reached on the establishment of a Strategic Working Group between the United States and Azerbaijan, which will prepare a “Strategic Partnership Charter”. In general, US-Azerbaijani cooperation will further deepen in priority areas such as energy, trade, defense, artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure [11].

These changes will have a serious impact on the balance of power in the region and Azerbaijan’s foreign policy position.

It is likely that the influence of Russia and Iran in the region will weaken compared to previous years, and the influence of the United States, NATO and Turkey will expand. As an ally of the United States and a member of NATO, Turkey will gain additional opportunities to strengthen its regional presence. In a broader context, this creates conditions for transforming the Central Corridor into a strategic logistics artery across Eurasia and has a positive impact on the integration of the Turkic world. In this scenario, Azerbaijan, while raising its bilateral relations with the United States to the level of a strategic partnership, will have a sufficient impact on the development of events as a major regional actor. At the same time, these changes will not go unnoticed by the Russian-Azerbaijani alliance, which will have to adapt to the new reality.

Is Armenia ready to abandon the myths of the past and seize this historic opportunity to become an independent, economically strong, and strategically important transit state, based on equal and cooperative relations with its neighbors and the United States? New prospects are opening up for Armenia and the global Armenian community, ones that could transform not only the country's domestic politics but also its entire foreign policy trajectory. By abandoning utopian and destructive ideas such as the concept of “Myatsum” or “Greater Armenia”, the country has the

opportunity to become a truly independent and modern state, capable of pursuing a pragmatic policy based on the real interests of its people, not on historical myths. The main outcome could be the normalization of relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, which would restore dialogue and create opportunities for cooperation within the “zero problem” approach. This would also open Armenia's domestic market to Turkish entrepreneurs, creating new jobs, investment, and economic growth. At the same time, Armenia's relations with the United States could further develop, becoming more constructive and focused on regional development. However, such a rapprochement will raise concerns in Iran, where the current regime could perceive Yerevan's moves as a departure from the traditional regional order. At the same time, US support will play an important role in gradually reducing Armenia's excessive dependence on Russia. In this regard, the withdrawal of the Russian military base from Armenian territory and a symbolic step toward genuine sovereignty could be a priority. Due to its strategic geopolitical location, Armenia has the potential to become an important transit country, located along the main corridors connecting the South Caucasus with Asia and Europe. This will open up new opportunities in transportation and logistics and strengthen Armenia's position as a significant regional player. Finally, strengthening ties with the West and reducing Moscow's influence will reduce the likelihood of pro-Russian forces returning to power. Thus, Armenia has a real chance for modernization, political independence, and economic revival.

As for the United States, by implementing these strategic measures, it can not only strengthen its influence in the South Caucasus but also fundamentally restructure the security architecture in the post-Soviet space. Since the United States is the author of this declaration, it can be assumed that Washington seeks to extract a number of strategic benefits from it. First and foremost, America will seek the swift signing of a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which will strengthen its position as a key player in the South Caucasus and gradually displace Russia from the region. At the same time, the United States will likely influence the formation of Iran's future governance model and strengthen the use of soft power instruments in regional governance. Until Russia and Iran are completely weakened, the United States will attempt to take advantage of Turkey's growing geostrategic potential. Against this backdrop, new competition – primarily economic – will emerge in the region between the United States and China, leading to the emergence of blocs compatible with these powers. Washington will also likely hinder the expansion of BRICS into the South Caucasus, instead promoting the growth of the Abraham Accords. At the same time, the United States will seek to integrate the South Caucasus into NATO's plans for eastward expansion and potentially create a new subregional security structure consistent with its strategic interests. More broadly, the United States intends to promote Russia's decentralization in the post-Soviet space, launch a Transcaucasian security system, gradually advance toward the center of the country, and gain control over anti-Atlantic forces [11].

The plan proposed on August 8 carries a number of serious risks. First and foremost, Russia could intensify its destructive activities aimed at undermining socio-political stability in Armenia and influencing a change of government. To achieve this goal, it could use a variety of means of influence—from its military contingent in Gyumri and the Kocharyan-Sargsyan political duo to the Church, which could act as a kind of “fifth column”. In Azerbaijan, where Moscow's position is less entrenched than in Armenia, increased pressure can be expected in the economic, informational, and humanitarian spheres—primarily a range of hybrid measures. Attacks on strategic targets outside its borders have already been recorded: on the night of August 8, Russia used Shahed drones to strike a SOCAR oil storage facility in Ukraine's Odessa region. Furthermore, Russia may try to use Armenia against Azerbaijan again by ramping up propaganda based on biased and politically motivated issues such as the renaming of place names, the destruction of cultural monuments, or the idea of Armenians returning to Karabakh.

## Conclusion

1. After the Second Karabakh War, geopolitical games in the South Caucasus have accelerated significantly. The Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Interstate Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia, signed in Washington on August 8, has given new life to these games.

2. Hopes are growing that the South Caucasus will be freed from the destructive conflict plans of foreign powers.

3. The region has become a theater of new geopolitical (extra) games and competitions in terms of content.

4. Mutual steps towards the transition to “0 problems” between Azerbaijan and Armenia are taking a constructive character. Grain from Russia and Kazakhstan entered Armenia through Azerbaijan in November. This event is the best example of how the centuries-old conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia will be replaced by beneficial economic cooperation.

5. The Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Interstate Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia will create a unique chance for new-content regionalism in the South Caucasus.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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