

# Analysis of Caucasian Geopolitics from the Perspective of Overview of the Foreign Policy and Security Strategic Aspects of the Conflict Between Azerbaijan and Armenia

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This study analyzes the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus, with a particular focus on the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict and its implications for regional and global power structures. Through a qualitative geopolitical approach, the research examines historical continuities, alliance transformations, and the strategies of major actors, including the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Primary data sources include government reports, academic publications, and contemporary news analyses, providing a multi-faceted perspective on the shifting security environment. The findings suggest that Armenia's pivot toward Western alliances and Azerbaijan's strategic balancing between Russia and Israel are reshaping the regional order. Furthermore, the study identifies the South Caucasus as a key intersection where global strategic rivalries increasingly influence local conflicts. By situating the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict within broader patterns of geopolitical competition, this research contributes to the scholarship on Eurasian security studies and offers insights into the future trajectory of conflict and cooperation in the region. It also highlights avenues for further investigation, including the internal political developments within Armenia and Azerbaijan and the role of intermediary states in shaping great power rivalries.

*Keywords:* international relations, eagle partner, Azerbaijan, South Caucasus, Russia, Great Power Rivalries

## Introduction

If we divide our world politically into two, one of these two denominators is led by America and the other by Russia. It is possible to explain America's management of its own denominator through a single organization and institution. But should we say BRICS or Shanghai Cooperation Organization for Russia? This part will remain unknown until Russia establishes an order.

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If America provided the order it needed with the establishment of NATO and made its political ideas effective against its rival. When we examine the establishment of NATO, we see that among the reasons for its establishment, the Soviet Union, to which Russia was the successor, put forward the possibility of the Soviet Union starting World War III and invading countries. Therefore, NATO was established as an anti-Russian cooperation organization in itself. At the same time, the United States, claiming that its troops would protect NATO member states against an invasion by the Soviet Union, authorized the presence of troops in these countries. In the report of the Parliamentary Investigation Commission on the Reasons for the Failure to Identify Those Responsible for Terrorism and Massacres in Italy, established by the Italian Republican Senate, the evidence collected within the scope of the investigation in the “Operazione Gladio”<sup>1</sup> section shows how they have established a superior organization within the people and the state. While controlling NATO member countries with Gladio, the US has tried to take non-member countries under its control through various intelligence and political activities with the CIA and has been successful in most of them. In Aydoğan Vatandaş’s book “Asala Operations”, in the chapter “What Yavuz Ataç Says” (Vatandaş, 2005), what Yavuz Ataç says reveals that Gladio is in contact with states. However, not every organization that is in contact with the state will disclose all of its personnel to the state with which it is in contact by saying, “In your country, such and such a man is working at such and such a level” (Vatandaş, 2005). As much as what they say, there is also what they do not say.

The United States has played a significant role in shaping political developments in the Middle East through its intelligence operations and diplomatic strategies. Its continued strategic engagement has significantly influenced political realignments across the Arab world. America, which is influential in the governance of states in the Middle East, is now trying to establish this superiority in the Caucasus. This is because the only way to weaken and occupy Russia is to antagonize its interests and disrupt its good relations with its partners in the Caucasus and the Asian region (Anadolu, 2024). It is possible to evaluate its rapprochement with India in this context, with the exception of China (BBC, 2023). At the same time, we could see the terrorist organizations that are banned in Turkey operating in Turkic countries in the Caucasus and Asia as the first steps. The developments in Armenia following the Karabakh war are closely related to the entire Caucasus. In our study, our main aim is to analyze the developments and how these developments will affect Turkey and the geopolitics of the region..

### **Armenia-Russia Relations**

A significant part of the territory that currently belongs to Armenia was incorporated into the Russian Empire in accordance with the 1828 Turkmenchay Treaty signed between Russia and Iran following the 1826-1828 Iran-Russia War. As of the War of 1893 and its aftermath, the support and promises given to the Armenian nation have been effective in the Armenians working for Tsarist Russia as a whole. In fact, in order to reduce the settlement areas of Azerbaijani Turks and their influence on the state during the USSR, first the process that took place in 1948 and afterwards, then the process that took place in 1988 and afterwards, and the 1991 Karabakh massacre are proof of how strong the Armenian and Russian relations, which we can say started in the 19th century in the era close to the Russians, were. However, even after the collapse of the USSR, the Russians continued to treat Armenians as an autonomous republic. As a matter of fact, they continued to do so for many

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<sup>1</sup> After a series of explosions, robberies and assassinations in Italy whose perpetrators could not be found, the suspicion of Gladio, which had been suspected before and covered up with unsolved murders, was formalized with the bold steps of Italian prosecutor Felice Casson. The operation was named Operazione Gladio.

years.

After the 1917 Russian Revolution, Armenia gained a short-lived independence as the Democratic Republic of Armenia. In 1920, the state was incorporated into the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, a founding member of the Soviet Union, which was formally established in 1922. In 1936, the Transcaucasian state disintegrated and abandoned its constituent states, including the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Present-day Armenia became independent in 1991 as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union due to a failed coup in August. Armenia boycotted the union-wide protection vote earlier that year.

It is believed that the Russian Federation, the successor of the Soviet Union, was instrumental in the Armenian victory in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994). In 2013, Azerbaijan's deputy prime minister Ali S. Hasanov said: "If we enter the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, we need to be much stronger to resist Russian troops, because these lands will be ours. Has Armenia occupied our lands? Is Armenia's power enough for this?" (Caliber.Az., 2024)

Faced with the choice of either joining the Russian-led Customs Union or signing an Association Agreement with the European Union, Armenia finally chose the first option. The decision on Armenia's accession to the Customs Union was announced by Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan on September 3, 2013. At the same time, under pressure from Moscow, Armenia was forced to abandon its plan to sign a pre-arranged Association Agreement with the EU and instead joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). (Shiraliyev, 2023)

On December 2, 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Armenia for an official visit. The heads of the two states discussed Armenia's accession to the Customs Union and signed 12 agreements to increase cooperation in a number of key areas, including security, economy, energy and others. Russia also reduced the gas price for Armenia from \$270 to \$189 per 1,000 cubic meters and expanded Russian military bases in Armenia. (Caliber.Az., 2024)

However, this changed after Nikol Pashinyan became the prime minister of Armenia on May 8, 2018. Pashinyan approached NATO countries, which can be defined as the western bloc. In particular, he established remarkably close relations with France and continued to do so despite Russia's displeasure. (Caliber.Az., 2024)

In this process, which we have described and will describe, Armenia has organized attacks, sometimes large, sometimes small, on many border cities of Azerbaijan since independence. After the large-scale attack in the morning hours of September 27, 2020, which was the last of these and triggered the 2nd Karabakh war, the war officially started. Meanwhile, Russia, which guards Armenia's borders and maintains troops, did not provide direct support, citing that the clashes did not take place on Armenian territory. In fact, in this way, we can say that Armenia showed what awaits it in the event of its separation from Russia.

### **Armenian-American Relations**

In 2018, Nikol Pashinyan, who was elected Prime Minister of Armenia, wanted to see an Armenia that opens up to the world instead of an Armenia under the patronage of Russia. In line with the negotiations with countries such as France, we can say that we see an Armenia open to the West. With the 2nd Karabakh war, Armenia has started to separate itself from Russia in every sense, and has been working for the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country. One of the latest examples of this is described in detail in the article by Yavuz Aydın from AA dated 09.05.2024, titled "Armenia demanded that Russian soldiers on the line of contact with Azerbaijan leave the country".

"The decision to suspend the activities of the Russian Border Guards at Zvartnots Airport was also approved

at the highest level” and “Peskov confirmed that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had reached an agreement on the withdrawal of Russian troops from various regions of Armenia due to the change of circumstances, and noted that the Russian Border Guards on the Iranian and Turkish borders will continue their duties at the request of the Armenian side”. As we can understand from the statements in the same news text, Armenia is now in a situation where it does not want to be interfered in its internal affairs, wants to be left alone in Azerbaijan and does not want to be left alone against powerful neighboring countries. The phrase “He noted that the Russian Border Guards on the Iranian and Turkish borders will continue their duties” supports this idea (Caliber.Az., 2024).

America’s covert policy of de-Russianizing Armenia was like completing the missing piece in a project that was actually desired but could not find a demonstrative reason after Russia did not give Armenia the support it expected in the 2nd Karabakh war. We can say that after the war, the US filled the power vacuum with the psychological support environment created in favor of Armenia with the statements made by US officials such as Secretary of State Antony Blinken when necessary, President Joe Biden when necessary, etc. Geopolitical outcomes often result in unintended strategic advantages for rival states, with Russia being one such case. Furthermore, Israel and America supported different sides in the two warring states and actually achieved a political success. It can be said that America, which improved its relations with Armenia after the war, started to do for Russia in Armenia what Russia did for America in Africa, with a delay of a few years, and took the first steps (Caliber.Az., 2024).

In terms of Israel, it is possible to say that Azerbaijan has maintained its bilateral relations since its establishment (Teshim News Agency, 2024). It can be said that the arms trade between the two countries has increased significantly, especially in the year of the 2nd Karabakh war (2020). Wartime actions often serve to clarify the underlying positions and priorities of states toward one another. According to different news sources, Azerbaijan has given Israel permission for Mossad to establish a forward operating base in the country “to spy on Iran” (BBC, 2024).

There are now two countries in the Caucasus with the lowest level of bilateral relations. With their bilateral relations, these countries can use the territory of countries with a history of wars against each other for their own interests in a way that suits each other’s interests. After all, Armenia has US military headquarters and trainers. At the same time, it can be argued that there is a Mossad forward operating base in Azerbaijan. When we evaluate the claims of Iranian people and the news made by the Israeli TV channel Channel 14 after the attack on Iran at 02:15 on Monday, October 27, which was reported by the Iranian media as explosions and accepted as the beginning of the attack, we will see that they support each other (Channel 14, 2024). When we look at the direction of the targeted area, both voices say that the missiles came from northern Iran. Who knows, maybe the outcome of the ongoing war in Gaza will be determined by these military air bases, which we cannot take further than allegations.

With the “Eagle Partner 2023” military exercise, which took place between September 11-20, 2023, America officially gave the world the message “I am here”. 85 U.S. and 175 Armenian soldiers participated in the exercise, after which U.S. soldiers of Armenian origin, some retired, some active duty, were deployed in Armenia to both manage and teach U.S. military technology to Armenian soldiers. The purpose of the exercise was to improve the level of interoperability of troops participating in international peacekeeping missions, to share best administrative and tactical communications practices, and to increase the readiness of the Armenian contingent for peacekeeping operations within the scope of the NATO/Partnership for Peace (PfP) “Concept of Operational

Capabilities” assessment.

Mehmet Gökhan Özçubukçu, a guest-researcher at Türksam, stated the following in his article titled “US-Armenia Joint Military Exercise: Eagle Partner 2024” dated July 16, 2024 (Türksam, 2024).

On July 15, the “Vazgen Sargsyan Military Academy” of the Armenian Ministry of Defense Armenia announced the start of the joint American-Armenian exercise “Eagle Partner 2024”. Armenian Defense Minister Suren Papikyan, US Ambassador to Armenia Kristina Kvien and other officials attended the opening ceremony of the exercise (Euronews., 2023).

The Eagle Partner 2024 exercise will take place in Armenia until July 24 and will be attended by soldiers from the US Army in Europe and Africa and the Kansas National Guard. The exercises are aimed at preparing Armenia to participate in bilateral peacekeeping operations. “Conducting this training allows troops from both countries to familiarize themselves with each other’s equipment”, the US military said in a statement. Although military ties between Washington and Yerevan are weak, the pace of exercises and cooperation has increased in recent months. A U.S. military official told Al Arabiya English, “The consistent U.S. goal is to train and cooperate with partners, ensure readiness, and increase interoperability between partner military forces”.

The start of joint military exercises between the US and Armenia on July 15, 2024 and the Pashinyan government’s policies of turning towards the West are parallel to the tense relations between Yerevan and Russia. As a result of the decisions taken by Armenia, a long-time ally and neighbor of Russia, to take part in almost every field against it, it seems unlikely that relations will improve. Yerevan has sent humanitarian aid to Kiev, emphasizing at every opportunity that it stands by Ukraine in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. Last week, Armenia attended the NATO summit in Washington, despite not being a member of the alliance. This year’s military exercises show that Armenia has no intention of abandoning its hopes of strengthening its ties with the West. The training that has taken place over the past almost 10 months - and which is still ongoing - appears to be yielding positive results. The developments of the last few months also show that what Russia has been to Armenia until now, America will strive to be more (Caliber.Az., 2024).

If we take a look at the military reports that Caliber.Az news website has accessed and which are constantly mentioning in more detail, we can see that there are analyses suggesting that the United States may seek to enhance its strategic presence in Armenia to counterbalance Russian influence (Caliber.Az, 2024). The US made shipments to Armenia’s Zvartnots Airport on August 2-3, allegedly bringing not only weapons and ammunition to develop the Armenian army, but also special devices to control the Iranian airspace, and these devices were controlled by 30 to 50 military personnel of Armenian origin who served in the US army. In this way, we can say that Iranian airspace is in the process of coming under the control of the United States, because unfortunately, we do not know the extent of the technology used. At the same time, with the joint US-Armenia military exercises held in the past years, a preliminary preparation was made for the Armenian army for this year’s ammunition shipment. This is because a significant majority of the weapons used in the exercises belonged to the US military.

Especially through provocations and intelligence activities in Georgia, it does not seem far-fetched that a second war front will be opened directly on Russian territory, as in Ukraine, with the aim of weakening Russian military units and the economy. After the events in Syria, Russia’s failure to protect its regional partner and a more passive Russia; and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has significantly strained Russia’s economic and military capacities.

The reason why the US soldiers coming to the region are of Armenian origin is to accelerate the adaptation process of the two armies (Armenian and US armies) and to minimize conflicts in the command system. It has

been alleged that integration processes have taken place within camps associated with the VOMA organization, although independent verification is limited, and together with the members of the organization, they will carry out intelligence activities against neighboring countries (Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey, Georgia and Russia) in accordance with the interests of Armenia and the US. At the same time, the fact that these soldiers sent by the US military are of Armenian origin and speak Armenian will make it very difficult to clearly associate these people with other states.

### **Azerbaijan-Israel Relations**

On December 25, 1991, Israel officially recognized Azerbaijan's independence, and diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan were established on April 7, 1992 (Canar, 2012). In August 1993, the Israeli Embassy was opened.

In 1998, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu made a brief overnight visit to Baku, where he met with then Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev (Canar, 2012).

In January 2004, Alimamed Nuriyev, deputy chairman of the Constitutional Fund of the Azerbaijani Parliament, said that Azerbaijan has always been friendly towards Jews and that there has never been anti-Semitism in the republic. He called on the country's leadership to expand cooperation with Israel in political, economic and military fields.

However, given Iran's proximity to Azerbaijan and its attitude towards any Muslim country's cooperation with Israel, the reason for the slowness of diplomatic relations is clear. In particular, the fact that the opening of the Azerbaijani Embassy in Israel has been delayed so long shows how much attention the process requires for Azerbaijan. Although Israeli President Shimon Peres visited Azerbaijan in May 2009, there were no high-level visits to Israel by Azerbaijan until then. Azerbaijan opened its first representative office in Israel on July 29, 2021 as the Trade and Tourism representative office. Although Azerbaijan supports Israel's position in the fight against terrorism, it has to take into account the possible reactions of Muslim countries. In addition, the intensification of relations with Israel is also constrained by some statements made by MPs of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party criticizing Israel's position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Caliber.Az, 2024).

Azerbaijan overcame all this and appointed Mukhtar Mammadov, who previously served in the ministries of foreign affairs and education, as Azerbaijan's first ambassador to Israel on January 11, 2023.

In the course of this diplomatic process, the Israeli press claims that during Shimon Peres' visit, an agreement was reached in Azerbaijan on the creation of an electronic intelligence network aimed at gathering information on the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>7</sup>

On February 9, 2010, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman arrived in Baku for the first time.

In April 2013, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov arrived in Israel for a visit. This was the first visit of an Azerbaijani representative at this level. Mammadyarov was received by Israeli President Shimon Peres. Meetings were held with Knesset Speaker Yuli-Yoel Edelstein, Deputy Foreign Minister Ze'ev Elkin and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

On December 13, 2016, talks were held in Baku between Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who was there on a working visit.

### **Azerbaijan-Russia Relations**

The AXC, founded by Mehmed Emin Resulzade in 1918, continued its life as an autonomous republic

under the name of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic after the occupation of the USSR in 1920. In 1988, approximately 1 year after the Baku massacre, which was called 1990 Bloody January, with the growth of the events in Azadlık Square, Azerbaijan gained its independence with the Independence Referendum and the first President Ayaz Mutallibov became the first President.

From the establishment of the Azerbaijani state to the time when Heydar Aliyev came to power, Azerbaijan pursued a more limited trade strategy towards foreign commercial companies. After Heydar Aliyev came to power, Azerbaijan provided the desired rates to multinational energy and oil companies and ensured a positive process in the Azerbaijani economy (Caliber.Az, 2024).

These steps taken in Azerbaijan are a remarkable beginning that will pave the way for the country to take part in world trade and seek a larger market.

As we mentioned in the introduction of our article, global political alignments have historically been influenced by the leadership of the United States and Russia. Because of this situation, it is common for Russia to be subjected to embargoes from pro-American countries from time to time. In such cases, Russia uses its relations with Azerbaijan to fulfill its market needs through Azerbaijan. The fact that Russia and Azerbaijan have such advanced bilateral relations has led to the fact that Azerbaijan is also affected by an economic crisis centered on Russia. The reason for the decline in Azerbaijan's average annual GDP growth from 1998 to 1999 and in 1999 was the Russian and Asian crises that erupted in 1998. (Bilgin, 2005)

Especially when we look at Russia's near abroad strategy, it is usual for Russia to establish such advanced relations with the countries with which it has land borders. After the 3rd President of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev came to power, this strategy of Russia has increased its influence on Azerbaijan. If we look at Mr. Aliyev's role in the Soviet Union<sup>2</sup>, it is to be expected that he has sympathy for the Russian Federation.

### **The Importance of Azerbaijan for Russia**

Apart from the political and economic partnerships mentioned in the section on the relations between the two states, the declaration on allied interaction between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan was signed in Moscow on February 22, 2022 in two original copies, each in Russian and Azerbaijani Turkish, both texts being equally valid. Based on the declaration agreement, the details of which can be found on the Kremlin website (Kremlin.ru, 2022), it is possible to say the following about the relations between Azerbaijan and Russia (Kremlin.ru, 2022).

Azerbaijan is Russia's largest strategic and economic partner in the Caspian and Caucasus regions. In the event of a possible war, the instant consultations of both states and their foreign relations have further strengthened the unbreakable ties between the two states. The cohesion of the societies and their agreement on joint sports, cultural, etc. activities take the regional partnership to a higher level by interacting in social unity structures other than states.

It is a fact that in order to destroy or weaken Russia, you must first either destroy Azerbaijan or make agreements against Russia. The regional ties in the Caucasus almost force you to do this.

We can say that America is planning for Azerbaijan what it has achieved in Armenia in line with its relations with Azerbaijan through Israel. Although Azerbaijan's political and economic distance from the US does not

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<sup>2</sup> Heydar Aliyev assumed the 13th term of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan and held this position for 13 years.

seem possible, it is possible to say that such a situation would be the biggest blow to Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin will also be aware that he paid a visit to Azerbaijan after 6 years, and although the 2-day visit had many purposes, the announcement to the media that the issue of American headquarters in the region was also discussed shows that the following message was given to the world public opinion:

Azerbaijan is Russia's ally and will stand by it.

### **Groups That Could Pose a Threat to Azerbaijan**

Although Azerbaijan's population is predominantly Turkic, it also includes citizens of Talysh and Lezgi origin. Every Azerbaijani lives with a common status of Azerbaijani citizenship, but history repeats itself and therefore some of the measures are taken according to the dusty pages of history.

In 1993, Suret Huseynov's military revolt was supported by Colonel Alikram Hummatov, a close friend of Huseynov and also the leader of Talysh nationalists. Having established his power in the southern part of Azerbaijan, Alikram Hummatov declared the Talysh-Mughan Republic in Lankaran. This historical event proves that in the south of Azerbaijan, there is a group of Azerbaijani citizens of Talysh origin who may be encouraged to revolt in the future, although not all citizens of Azerbaijan of Talysh origin are included.

Another organization that we should pay attention to is Iran's Shia extremists affiliated with Allahshukur Pashazadeh, the Sheikholeslam of the Caucasus, and Ocaq Nejat, who was appointed by Ali Khamenei for his activities in Azerbaijan. Although Ocaq Nejat has not been able to continue his activities in Baku in recent years, many of the people who were once affiliated with him and attended his talks show their respect and loyalty Allahshukur Pashazadeh. Just as there are Sunni extremists loyal to Fetullah Gülen in Turkey, there are Shia extremists loyal to Allahshukur Pashazadeh in Azerbaijan, and they preserve their existence by passing it on to the next generation. When we look at the Shia organizations in Azerbaijan, we see propaganda methods similar to those used by the communities in Turkey. The same methods were used by terrorist organization banned in Turkey for many years. The methods of propaganda and maintaining dominance over state officials, which Hanefi Bey summarized in a very understandable way in his book (Hanefi, 2010) *Simons Living in the Golden Horn*<sup>3</sup>, are constantly used in all kinds of congregations, organizations, etc. structures. The organization, which has been in existence for years, will undoubtedly play an important role for the Azerbaijani state in the future. The potential influence of religious organizations in Azerbaijan raises concerns about future political stability, similar to issues experienced in Turkey. In the event of a war between Iran and Azerbaijan, the country they will obey will not be Azerbaijan, but indirectly Iran.

In 2020, the 2nd Karabakh War, which ended with the victory of Azerbaijan, resulted in the Nagorno-Karabakh region being included in Azerbaijani territory. With the US-Armenia relations that developed in the process that followed, the American troops stationed in Armenian territory will undoubtedly be the determining party in the 3rd Karabakh War. America, which wants to weaken Russia and Russia's partners in every field, is likely to realize its goal in Azerbaijan through Armenia.

### **India-China Rivalry and Iran**

Although a ceasefire was signed after the Sino-Indian border war that started in 1962 and lasted for a month, which China won, these conflicts continue from time to time, large and small.

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<sup>3</sup> For detailed information, you can read the chapters "How is it governed. Who Rules?", "The Propaganda Tools of the Community" and "A Strange Cassette Incident".



Nepal and Tibet, China are two states with ongoing problems, but they are also engaged in a race for growth in the world market. There is no doubt that in the new world order, wars are no longer fought with weapons, but rather with economic power (NTV., 2024).

There is a new external factor in India and China's regional war: America.

Although India and China are regional rivals, China's biggest rival is undoubtedly America, which is ahead of it in almost every statistic. America, which is so close to it in almost every statistic, is trying every way to encircle China. Agreements with Taiwan region, agreements with Vietnam, agreements with Japan and most importantly agreements with India prove this.

India and the US have signed four security cooperation agreements since 2016. Between 2000 and 2021, India purchased \$21 billion worth of military equipment from US manufacturers.

India has also joined the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which includes the US, Japan and Australia.

The Quad is ostensibly about trade and security in the Indian and Pacific oceans, but Solanki says the ulterior motive is to keep China in check:

"India is concerned about China's growing presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, and the US wants to balance China's growing global influence".

As we can see from his words, India is ready to do everything it can to prevent the growth of its neighbor China and to narrow its sphere of influence. At the same time, as a quid pro quo for the security treaties, we see that India is likely to take an anti-Iranian stance in the Israeli-Iranian war, which is carried out through pro-Iranian organizations such as Hamas, Hezbollah, etc., in return for the US supporting it in the Indian and Pacific oceans, in line with its future relations with the US. After all, even the BRICS member states continue to have problems within themselves, however much Russia may not want them to. Abdulmalik al-Houthi, the leader of the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, stated that the "Yemeni Front" was continuing its operations against US, Israeli and British targets at sea and threatened to expand these operations to the Indian Ocean. Iran's indirect message to India is actually very clear.

NEW DELHI, May 14 (Xinhua)—India announced that it has signed a 10-year agreement with Iran to develop and operate the Chabahar port. Indian Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal visited Chabahar, Iran on Monday to attend the signing ceremony of the agreement to develop the Shahid Beheshti port terminal in Chabahar. The agreement was signed between India's Global Ports Limited and the Ports and Maritime Organization of Iran. However, it is impossible to innocently interpret this agreement as a step to improve relations between Iran and India. One should not forget the Quad and the US-India security agreements. America is likely to use India against Iran. The fact that India has significantly increased its arms trade with Armenia, especially since the establishment of American headquarters in Armenia, cannot be underestimated or ignored.

Apart from the positive and negative agreements and events we have mentioned, the MV Cem Pluto and MV Sai Baba ship crises were also events that could not be taken lightly at the state level in the last months of 2023.

### **Non-State Armed Actors Influencing Iran's Regional Security Environment**

When we examine the land borders of the Iranian state and its relations with the countries with land borders, we see that its relations with states other than Turkmenistan are deteriorating day by day. Except for Turkmenistan, we cannot say that it has good relations with its border neighbors in line with the wars. In terms of Turkey, it is

enough to say that Ali Akbar Velayeti, Ali Khamenei's advisor Ali Akbar Velayeti, who made the statement "We did not think that Turkey would fall into the pit dug by the US and the Zionist Regime despite its long Islamic history and great scholars" for Turkey due to Turkey's support for the SMO, had targeted Turkey by putting it in the same league with the US and Israel.

Iran cannot be said to have a particularly favorable opinion of Azerbaijan because of its Turkish population of Azerbaijani origin, which also makes up a significant share of the Iranian population. Iran's open support for Armenia in the Karabakh War proves this. It would be wrong to say with certainty that Turkish countries would support or oppose Iran in the event of a possible military action against Iran. However, in terms of other land border countries and the US troops in these countries, pro-American groups and organizations established by the US in the past, we can say that they will take sides against Iran without hesitation. The US will largely solve its military deficit in the region through terrorist organizations and making them ready to be manipulated. The US, which provided significant support for the establishment of the PKK and Al-Qaeda, will undoubtedly use these forces when it needs them.

As we have mentioned, the use of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan in the event of a military operation against Iran is the number one factor for an invasion of Iran. But the success rate is very low if the possible attacks cannot be supported by internal revolts. For internal rebellion, we should not only think of nationalism. In a country ruled by religion, it may even be enough for a popular uprising to be fomented by the logic of the Shia-Sunni conflicts of the 1990s. Future political upheavals in Iran could stem from ideological divisions, including tensions between religious and secular movements.

Iran's eastern and western borders are affected by the activities of several non-state armed groups, impacting its security environment. If we come to the north of Iran, the American soldiers who continue to settle in Armenian military bases will clearly intervene in a possible operation against Iran in the first place, not with the American military identity, but through terrorist organizations. As for the US military power in Iraq, sources claim that 2,500 US troops remain in the region and that these troops will withdraw from the country in a two-year period within the framework of Iraqi-American bilateral agreements. However, no one can guarantee that the missions of the intelligence elements in the region will be terminated and withdrawn. After all, the presence and extent of intelligence operations in Iraq are not fully transparent to the Iraqi government. Another factor influencing Iran's regional security environment is undoubtedly Israel, which is attacking the Syrian state and expanding its territory. In Syria, there are no longer any Russian and Iranian elements in Syria, which were the main reason for Israel's non-aggression. Israel's progress in the region will become even easier from now on. In the future, if we see an Israel that is based on the borders of the Iraqi state, we have no doubt that they will play the leading role in an attack against Iran.

### **Turkey's Plan for Iraq**

The information text published by the Directorate of Communications on October 16, 2024 is as follows:

President Erdoğan received Barzani, President of the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq (Directorate of Communications, 2024).

During the meeting between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President of the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) Nechirvan Barzani, Turkey-Iraq relations and cooperation with the KRG were exchanged and regional and global developments were discussed (BBC, 2024).

During the meeting, President Erdoğan expressed his wishes that the KRG parliamentary elections to be

held on October 20 would be auspicious. He expressed his belief that the elections, in which the Iraqi Turkmen Front will also compete, will be held with an inclusive understanding and in peace and tranquility (Directorate of Communications, 2025).

President Erdoğan stated that there is a risk that increasing Israeli aggression could turn the region into an all-out war zone, that Turkey attaches great importance to the stability and security of the entire region, and that he appreciates the efforts of the Iraqi authorities to keep the country away from the conflict.

President Erdoğan underlined that the Development Road Project will make a significant contribution to the economic development, stability and brotherhood of the entire region and that this project will benefit the KRG in every aspect. President Erdoğan also stated that in this troubled period, cooperation must continue with determination to permanently eliminate the terrorist threat to the peace, prosperity and internal peace of the entire region. President Erdoğan emphasized that Turkey will always stand by its friend and brother Iraq and the Iraqi people, as it has done until today.

Nechirvan Barzani, the president of the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq, was received by President Erdoğan and met with senior Turkish officials, as well as having a separate meeting with Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Undersecretary of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) Ibrahim Kalın, who were part of the welcoming delegation prior to the meeting with Mr. Erdoğan.

The information text published by the Directorate of Communications on January 7, 2025 with the title "Statement on President Erdoğan's reception of KRG Prime Minister Barzani" is as follows:

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan received KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani at the Presidential Complex.

They discussed relations with the KRG and regional issues.

During the meeting, President Erdoğan stated that Turkey attaches importance to the preservation of Iraq's stability and security, especially in light of the developments in Syria, and that Turkey is making efforts to ensure that the developments in Syria do not lead to new instabilities in the region, and that the future of the new Syria does not include terrorist organizations and affiliated elements.

President Erdoğan stated that there is a need to realize projects that will increase the stability and prosperity of the region, especially the Development Road.

We can say that Turkey is sending a message with such high-level protocols. To understand this, we must first look at the power divisions in Iraq.

The influential groups in Iraq can be summarized as follows:

Important Religious groups

1) Shiite groups, which make up 60-65% of the country, are the most important factor. They play an important role in the governance of the country. Although they have been experiencing divisions and conflicts among themselves since the American invasion of Iraq, it is possible to say that the majority of Shiite militants have united under the leadership of Muqtada al-Sadr.

2) The Sunni groups, which make up 30-32% of the country, are the second factor, and a certain part of them supported ISIS against Shiite groups during its period of influence.

Important ethnic groups

1) Shiite Arabs, who make up 51-54% of the country, have taken over the Iraqi state.

2) The Kurdish population, which makes up 15-20% of the country, has taken over a region in the north of Iraq with the KRG.

3) The Turkmen population, which constitutes 8-9% of the country, is united under the leadership of the Iraqi Turkmen Front and politically pursues Turkmen rights in Iraq in the Iraqi parliament. At the same time, in line with the intensive work of the leading figures of the party, President Hasan Turan and Iraqi Assembly member Erşat Salihi, the Turkmen Brigades, which are one of the important military forces of the Iraqi state, have been effective in the emergence of Turkmen Brigades by organizing the people in Turkmen cities against the PKK and Peshmerga.

Considering the data we have, if Turkey wants to replicate the buffer zone created within the scope of the Turkish peacekeeping force in northern Syria and the sphere of influence and the right to have a say in a certain region in Syria in Iraq, the most logical thing is to make an agreement with the KRG and the Turkmen Front (Çora, 2024). Because they are the ones who manage the Turkish border. The fact that Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Undersecretary of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) Ibrahim Kalin met with Nechirvan Barzani apart from Mr. Erdogan reveals this fixture. On October 16, 2024, in the news published by the Directorate of Communications about the meetings, “President Erdoğan emphasized that Turkey will always stand by its friend and brother Iraq and the Iraqi people, as it has done until today”. The use of this sentence after the meeting with Nechirvan Barzani is the most important thing. On the other hand, the meeting with Masrour Barzani on January 7, 2024 was as valuable and important as the meeting with Nechirvan Barzani. Only 10 days before Mr. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan received Masrour Barzani, a DEM Party delegation had gone to the F-type high security closed prison on İmralı Island to meet with the terrorist ringleader Abdullah Öcalan. 10 days later, the meeting with Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, who has an important history with the PKK and plays an important role in the KRG administration, is only one of the important steps for the foundation of Turkey’s scenario for Iraq.

If Nechirvan Barzani and Masrour Barzani did not need political support in the region, they would never have given such a clear appearance of unity. Turkey’s course also shows that this appearance of unity will surely be reciprocated.

Since Turkey, in addition to securing its power in the region, was approaching a similar process to the settlement process that officially started with the publication of the Council of Ministers’ decision to put into effect the law titled “Principles Regarding the Works to be Conducted within the Scope of the Law on the Termination of Terrorism and Strengthening Social Integration” prepared in July 2014 in the Official on October 1, it had to choose the person in the terrorist region with whom it could establish the closest contact and direct the PKK in its negotiations. Interviews show that this person has been chosen as Nechirvan Barzani because of his position as president of the KRG.

In the event of a possible military operation, a power vacuum in Eastern Anatolia, which will be created by Turkey’s total concentration on Iraq and Syria, is likely to be exploited by the US, which has increased its military forces in Armenia, through Armenian terrorist organizations, if not directly. In the event of a possible operation, the way to damage Turkey before the war spreads to other countries is undoubtedly an internal rebellion-like attack. For this, there must be infiltration into the region. Both militarily, intelligence-wise and economically. It is very likely that this situation will be exploited through neighboring countries—especially Armenia, where the US is gradually establishing its headquarters (Crimean News Agency, 2024).

The US soldiers, who provide adaptation process and trainings with Armenian militants in the region, will undoubtedly be used for US interests in the region in the coming years. Armenia, which is used as an outpost, will be aimed to overcome this process with the least danger. For this, the Rules of Engagement must be taken

into account.

When we examine Prof. Dr. İsmail Pamuk's study on this subject (Pamuk, 2012), it would be possible to make the following assessment of the US strategy in the Caucasus from Turkey's perspective:

In the event of a direct attack on the territory of the Republic of Turkey from Armenia, it is first determined whether the attack was carried out by the state or not. If the attack was carried out by a non-state organization, Turkey has the right to issue a note and, if the attack continues, to intervene in Armenian territory. If the attack came directly from the Armenian state, Turkey has the right to attack if this is proven. However, if Armenia and the United States want to secure themselves in the region, the only right Turkey has is to destroy the rebels in the event of infiltration into the territory of the Republic of Turkey by terrorist organizations and various armed groups, if the attack from abroad is presented as an internal rebellion and the connection with abroad cannot be found (Anadolu, 2023). At the same time, the consequences would not end with the devastation of a war confined to a single region, as Turkey would once again be perceived as a terrorist country in the world arena. If Turkey faces an internal insurgency-like attack, it also means a more favorable framework for an invasion by any state or group in any part of the country.

From the Euronews article dated 10/10/24 titled "Israeli Finance Minister Smotrich: It is written that the Jewish State must expand to Damascus" (Euronews, 2024), it is possible to include a small section on Israeli Finance Minister Smotrich;

"He has a radical vision of the Promised Land that includes all of Palestine, as well as Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia", Smotrich is quoted as saying in the documentary "Israel: Ministers of Chaos" produced by Jerome Sesquin.

When we consider the statements of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces Herzl Halevi, etc., who made statements in support of Israeli Finance Minister Smotrich's statements, it is possible to have a broader perspective.

If we look at the mentioned countries on the map, as already mentioned, the promised land, *Arz-ı Mevud*, is targeted. One of the countries that will be most affected by this plan is Turkey. Turkey plays a major role in Syria and Iraq, two of the targeted countries. The involvement of Turkish-supported opposition groups in Syria underscores Turkey's significant role in shaping regional dynamics. However, the latest situation shows that Turkey and Israel are likely to be border neighbors in this process. Since Turkey's operations in Syria coincided with a diminished presence of Russia and Iran in certain regions along with the Assad regime, if Israel enters Syria, it will no longer be confronted by Russia, Iran and the Assad regime, but by a naive government formed by the Syrian opposition forces.

### Findings

This study reveals that the South Caucasus, particularly the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, has emerged as a focal point for strategic competition among global and regional powers. The analysis suggests that Armenia's pivot from traditional Russian patronage toward closer alignment with Western states—especially the United States and France—has significantly altered the region's geopolitical balance.

The findings further indicate that Azerbaijan continues to pursue a multidimensional foreign policy, maintaining strong strategic ties with both Russia and Israel. Azerbaijan's dual approach positions it as a key intermediary actor capable of influencing both Eastern and Western agendas in the Caucasus.

A comparative historical review highlights that shifts in Armenia's foreign alliances have historically

coincided with major regional power transitions, often resulting in new security dynamics and altered political alignments. In the contemporary context, Russia's diminishing influence, compounded by its military engagements in Ukraine and Syria, appears to have accelerated Armenia's Western reorientation. Simultaneously, the increasing U.S. military and diplomatic presence in Armenia signifies a broader American strategy aimed at reshaping the regional security environment.

Another major finding relates to Iran's evolving security landscape. Iran faces growing challenges along its borders, influenced by the activities of various non-state actors and increased U.S. strategic engagement in neighboring countries. The developments suggest that Iran may become further isolated in the event of future conflicts in the South Caucasus, potentially altering the regional balance of power.

Turkey's proactive regional engagement is also noteworthy. Its efforts to secure influence in northern Iraq and Syria, alongside its evolving security calculus vis-à-vis developments in Armenia and the South Caucasus, highlight Ankara's strategic ambition to establish buffer zones that protect its national security interests.

The study concludes that the Caucasus is no longer merely a post-Soviet frontier but has become a dynamic and contested geopolitical crossroads. Strategic rivalries involving the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel are increasingly shaping the security, economic, and diplomatic structures of the region. Future conflicts—such as a potential third Nagorno-Karabakh war—could involve a broader international dimension if these complex alignments continue to evolve in their current trajectories.

### **Conclusion**

This study underscores the South Caucasus as a critical locus of strategic contestation between major global and regional powers. The Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, historically rooted in complex political, ethnic, and security dynamics, has evolved into a broader arena where U.S., Russian, Iranian, Turkish, and Israeli interests intersect and compete.

The research highlights that Armenia's gradual pivot towards Western institutions and security frameworks, particularly under the leadership of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, marks a significant departure from its long-standing reliance on Russian support. Conversely, Azerbaijan's efforts to balance its relations with both Russia and Israel reflect a pragmatic approach to navigating the increasingly multipolar regional environment.

Evidence suggests that Russia's capacity to act as a security guarantor in the Caucasus has weakened, largely due to its entanglements in Ukraine and broader geopolitical pressures. At the same time, the United States has expanded its strategic footprint in Armenia, signaling a possible long-term realignment of the regional order.

Turkey's active engagement in northern Iraq and Syria, as well as its strategic calculations regarding Armenia, indicate Ankara's determination to secure its national interests amid shifting alliances. The increasing complexity of ethnic, religious, and political networks further complicates the region's stability, making it susceptible to external influence and potential conflict escalation.

From a broader perspective, the findings suggest that a potential future conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh or adjacent areas may involve international actors more directly than in previous confrontations. The region's evolving security architecture necessitates careful monitoring, as local disputes are increasingly embedded within global strategic rivalries.

Overall, the study contributes to the field of Eurasian geopolitics by offering a comprehensive examination of contemporary power shifts, alliance transformations, and regional security trends in the South Caucasus. Future research may benefit from a closer investigation into domestic political developments within Armenia and

Azerbaijan, the role of diaspora lobbying networks, and predictive analyses of military and diplomatic trajectories in light of emerging great power competition.

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