

Captive of the Caucasus: Can Georgia Navigate the Multipolar World?

Multipolarity is the buzzword of the day. Like most fashionable terms, however, it is ill-defined and contested. In fact, the very existence of such a contestation is a sign that the parameters of a multipolar world are yet to be established, with various hegemonic powers vying to make their mark on the shape of the future global order. This year's Munich Security Conference (MSC) chose multipolarity as its central theme, posing a fundamental question: What does multipolarity really mean in practice? Who stands to benefit from the shifting order, and who risks being on the losing side? Are we moving to a new bipolar world dominated by U.S.-China competition or a tripolar world with Russia, China, and the U.S. carving the world into respective spheres of influence? Where is Europe in this new division? Alternatively, rather than neatly divided, the future

global order may be much more fragmented and messy – perhaps best described not as multipolarity but as non-polarity.

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Putin's Russia has been one of the most vocal and consistent critics of post-Cold War liberal internationalism. Its wars against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014 were direct efforts to push back against Western influence, defend its regional hegemony, and reclaim what it saw as its rightful place at the high table of great powers. Moscow viewed itself as sidelined in a Western-dominated world and was willing to fight to change that reality. China, too, challenges Western hegemony—albeit through economic and diplomatic means rather than outright military confrontation. Beijing has aligned itself with Russia in an effort to reshape the global order, promoting an alternative vision of multipolarity.

Perhaps most paradoxically, the United States under the Trump presidency also emerged as a challenger to liberal internationalism. For Trump, the U.S. had been shortchanged by the post-Cold War order, taken advantage of by allies, and too easily challenged by rivals, leading to its relative decline. In response, the Trump administration is championing a highly competitive, transactional foreign policy focused on narrowly defined national interests rather than global leadership.

States like Georgia are particularly vulnerable in an increasingly competitive regional and global environment—where international norms that protect small states from the predatory instincts of great powers are neglected, and survival as sovereign actors is far from guaranteed.

What is the fate of small states like Georgia in this evolving global order? How do global and regional dynamics intersect, and what risks and opportunities do they create for smaller actors? Shifting regional dynamics of the South Caucasus serve as a microcosm of emerging multipolarity, offer-

ing insight into its defining characteristics. States like Georgia are particularly vulnerable in an increasingly competitive regional and global environment—where international norms that protect small states from the predatory instincts of great powers are neglected, and survival as sovereign actors is far from guaranteed.

Multipolarity, per Russia

The concept of multipolarity has become a central theme of Putin's foreign policy, serving as a conceptual basis for Russia's expanding global agenda. The idea is most closely associated with the [Primakov doctrine](#) which proposed the Russia-China-India strategic alignment as a counterweight to the Western hegemony. The doctrine's key pillars include preserving Russia's sphere of influence, challenging U.S. unipolarity, mainly through deepened ties with China, and ensuring the non-expansion of NATO. Russia under Putin has upgraded the doctrine, enhancing it with messianic messages about turning the world into a better place for those who have been exploited, colonized, and marginalized because of Western dominance. As aptly summarized by Ican Klyszc, Russia pursues '[messianic multipolarity](#)' to generate support for its vision of the global order, particularly among the countries of the Global South.

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While pursuing an imperialist agenda and advocating for a world divided into civilizational centers of power, Putin presents a benign vision of a multipolar order based on the principle of sovereign equality. He promises a more democratic and inclusive

system that claims to treat all forms of governance as equally legitimate and morally equivalent. In practice, however, this means equating democracy with autocracy and reviving the principle that domestic affairs are beyond external scrutiny. It also means a differentiated interpretation of sovereign equality whereby a state's level of sovereignty is determined by its proximity to great powers, size, and geopolitical weight – effectively making some states more equal and sovereign than others.

Central to this vision is the order fragmented into spheres of influence, each clustered around hegemonic powers and governed by multilateral institutions such as BRICS and the CSO – explicitly designed to exclude Western states. Many states, particularly the Global South's so-called middle powers, find multipolarity inherently more appealing than the Western-led rules-based international order (RBIO). They see it as offering greater autonomy at home and more strategic flexibility abroad, allowing them to effectively balance competing powers to advance their interests. Their foreign policy posture is often characterized by multi-alignment, a strategy that avoids taking sides and remains neither explicitly pro- nor anti-Western.

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For Russia, however, multipolarity is not a neutral concept—it is fundamentally an anti-Western project designed to challenge Western dominance and reshape the global order in its favor. While Moscow harbors global ambitions, it cannot achieve them alone. As a result, it seeks partners and has demonstrated a willingness to accommodate their interests, provided they align with the overarching goal of diminishing the West. This dynamic has

contributed to geopolitical shifts in regions such as the South Caucasus and Central Asia, where other actors, including Türkiye, Iran, and China, are increasingly challenging Russia's previously uncontested hegemony. However, rather than leading to greater Western influence, the relative decline of Russia's dominance in the South Caucasus has instead resulted in a diminishing Western presence as regional players assert themselves in the evolving balance of power.

Multipolarity in the South Caucasus

Two wars have reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus in recent years: Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and Azerbaijan's successful offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. These conflicts are closely interrelated as Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine stretched its strategic bandwidth, forcing Moscow to prioritize its partnerships with regional actors such as Türkiye and Iran. Taking advantage of Russia's shifting focus, Baku—backed by Türkiye—launched a successful military campaign, restoring Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and effectively altering the balance of power in the region.

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In a stark reversal of its long-standing policy of underpinning Armenian security and leveraging unresolved conflicts as tools of influence, Moscow watched from the sidelines as Nagorno-Karabakh collapsed, triggering the exodus of its Armenian population. Moscow determined that aligning with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, particularly to secure ac-

cess to connectivity and trade routes, was more valuable than continued support for Armenia, which had limited maneuvering space.

Moreover, Russia was unlikely to sustain military operations on two fronts simultaneously, especially against a well-equipped Azerbaijani army, while also risking antagonizing Türkiye. Consequently, Ankara considerably strengthened its position in the South Caucasus, further bolstered by its success in Syria – both coming at Russia's expense. Meanwhile, Iran, wary of Türkiye's growing influence, has intensified its engagement in the region, seeking to capitalize on its close ties with Moscow to counterbalance Ankara's expanding role.

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Armenia, disillusioned by what it perceives as Russia's betrayal, has declared a pivot toward the EU, seeking to diversify its foreign partnerships and reduce its long-standing dependency on Moscow. Georgia, in contrast, appears to have stepped back from its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, joining instead the growing trend of multi-alignment, attempting to balance between competing global and regional powers rather than committing fully to the West. Georgia's ruling party seeks partners that align with its authoritarian tendencies, offering engagement without obstructing its efforts to consolidate power and dismantle democratic institutions.

For years, Georgia was the West's primary pillar in the South Caucasus, pursuing a dual track of democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, despite formally holding EU candidate status, both objectives have effectively been aban-

doned. In contrast, Armenia's outreach to Europe, backed strongly by France, can be seen as a partial counterbalance to Georgia's geopolitical drift. Nevertheless, Armenia cannot fully replace Georgia in this role. Its strategic maneuverability remains constrained by Russia's economic and military leverage. Moreover, without Georgia's European integration, Armenia's own path toward the West remains uncertain. This explains why Yerevan is treading carefully, diversifying its partnerships without making a sharp pivot toward the West—unlike Georgia in previous years.

The geopolitical order in the South Caucasus is evolving into a microcosm of regional multipolarity, with an increasing number of actors competing to shift the balance of power and advance their own interests. The outcome of the war in Ukraine will determine how quickly Russia will be able to reassert its influence in the South Caucasus. To do so, it must keep the West out, manage relations with Türkiye (and, to a certain degree, Iran), and, in the long run, prepare for the potential competition with China.

Furthermore, two additional trends are emerging at the intersection of foreign and domestic dynamics in the South Caucasus. On the foreign policy level, the relative decline of both Russia and the West has led to growing inter-regional connections between the South Caucasus and the Middle East. As Türkiye and Iran maintain strategic interests in both regions—and Russia continues to exert influence, particularly through its military presence in Syria—developments in the Middle East are increasingly shaping the balance of power in the South Caucasus.

On the domestic level, the weakening of external democratization pressures fosters the consolidation of authoritarian or hybrid authoritarian governance across the region. This shift risks deepening domestic polarization, as seen in Georgia, where social resistance to “autocratization” re-

mains strong. The key question is whether or not Georgia can successfully navigate the evolving multipolar landscape—and what risks and opportunities it will face while doing so.

Georgia's Diminishing Returns

Georgia has long had a complicated relationship with its geographic region, often exhibiting characteristics of what is known as a displaced state—one that has a dissonant relationship with its geography, physically located in one place while culturally and geopolitically identifying with another. At the policy level, Georgia's sense of displacement has been reflected in its relentless pursuit of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. This strategy was driven by an effort to distance itself from the Russian-dominated South Caucasus and reclaim what it sees as its rightful place in Europe, regarded as its political destiny. However, this aspiration has always required external recognition of Georgia's Europeanness—a validation that has not been guaranteed, given Georgia's geographic position on Europe's eastern periphery.

After 30 years of trying (and with some help from Putin himself), Georgia succeeded in moving the mental frontiers of European policy-makers. Initially, not even considered a part of the European neighborhood, Georgia secured EU candidate status, albeit thanks to the evolving geopolitical circumstances. Yet, as this milestone was reached, Georgia's ruling regime abandoned the European project and embraced the regional multipolarity which the country's rulers believed better served their economic and political interests. It enables them to consolidate authoritarian rule with minimal accountability while extracting economic advantages by balancing and bargaining among competing regional powers—all while leveraging Georgia's geostrategic position.

While multi-alignment has emerged as a prevailing trend in fragmenting regional order, it carries sig-

nificant risks for a state like Georgia. Azerbaijan, endowed with natural resources and backed by a robust alliance with Türkiye, has been far more successful in leveraging regional competition to position itself as a rising middle power. Georgia, by contrast, lacks comparable resources and enters this shifting environment with few—if any—reliable allies. While Armenia's traditionally strong relations with Russia have deteriorated, it maintains close ties with Iran and has doubled down on forging strong partnerships with France and India. Meanwhile, Georgia's spectacular dramatic democratic backsliding has eroded the strategic relationships it had painstakingly built with the EU and the United States over the past three decades. These lost alliances cannot be replaced—nor adequately balanced—by Tbilisi's growing engagement with China or its conciliatory approach toward Russia. As a result, Georgia risks being exposed to the predatory instincts of larger powers without the protective buffer of either international norms or trusted partnerships.

This raises a critical question about Georgia's strategic value in the evolving regional and global landscape. Geographically, Georgia possesses significant transit potential and is well-positioned to serve as a key transport and energy corridor. However, its comparative advantage has, in part, stemmed from Armenia's relative isolation. A potential peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the normalization of Armenia-Türkiye relations could open up alternative transit routes—thereby diminishing Georgia's unique role in regional connectivity. At the same time, the policies of Georgia's ruling party have undermined the country's strategic value as a successful, EU-oriented democracy and a reliable multiplier of Western influence in the region.

The ruling Georgian Dream has placed high hopes in resetting relations with the United States under the Trump administration. Despite its earlier deployment of widespread anti-U.S. and anti-West-

ern rhetoric, the party now seeks to mend ties by appealing to perceived ideological affinities and proposing avenues for economic cooperation. Yet Georgia is far from alone in this recalibration—regional actors, such as Russia and Türkiye, are also adjusting to the new U.S. posture, aiming to advance their respective interests in national security and regime stability. There is a growing risk that the new U.S. administration, particularly one that embraces a multipolar world order grounded in spheres of influence, may choose to effectively cede Georgia to Russia's orbit. This may well be the outcome Georgia's ruling party is preparing for—and perhaps even welcoming. But it is not the will of a substantial portion of the Georgian population. Recent civic mobilization has demonstrated a clear societal resistance to the country's authoritarian drift and anti-Western orientation. As a result, domestic instability is likely to persist, with the Georgian Dream confronting an intensifying legitimacy crisis.

While it is true that the West has often been slow to fully reciprocate Georgia's aspirations—leaving the country vulnerable to Russian pressure—Euro-Atlantic integration still remains Georgia's most viable path forward.

Georgia's earlier efforts to anchor itself within Western institutions were motivated not only by identity and values but also by pragmatism. Western integration was seen as a strategic response to growing threats from Russia and a critical component of Georgia's national security. While it is true that the West has often been slow to fully reciprocate Georgia's aspirations—leaving the country vulnerable to Russian pressure—Euro-Atlantic integration still remains Georgia's most viable path forward. As a small state in a volatile region, Georgia needs reliable allies and institutional anchoring. Only with such support can it credibly pursue a balanced foreign policy and engage with other regional actors from a position of strength and stability ■