

# Borderlands Redux: Are Türkiye and Russia Reprising the “Frenemies” Competition?

**B**eset by the acute crisis of its government’s legitimacy, Georgia is drifting without a rudder during the sea change of international politics bound to reshape the power dynamics in the South Caucasus. Russia and Türkiye, historical “frenemies,” are reprising their late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century joust in Syria and West Africa. It devastated the region’s peoples and ruined both the Russian and Ottoman empires back then. Tbilisi and the European powers could be well advised to pay close attention.

## Anarchy is What States Make of It

The re-election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, according to some scholars, [marks](#) the formal end of the hegemonic world order. What comes after can be understood as a return of oligopolist state competition rather than simply “multipolarity,” [argues](#) French historian Arnaud Orain.

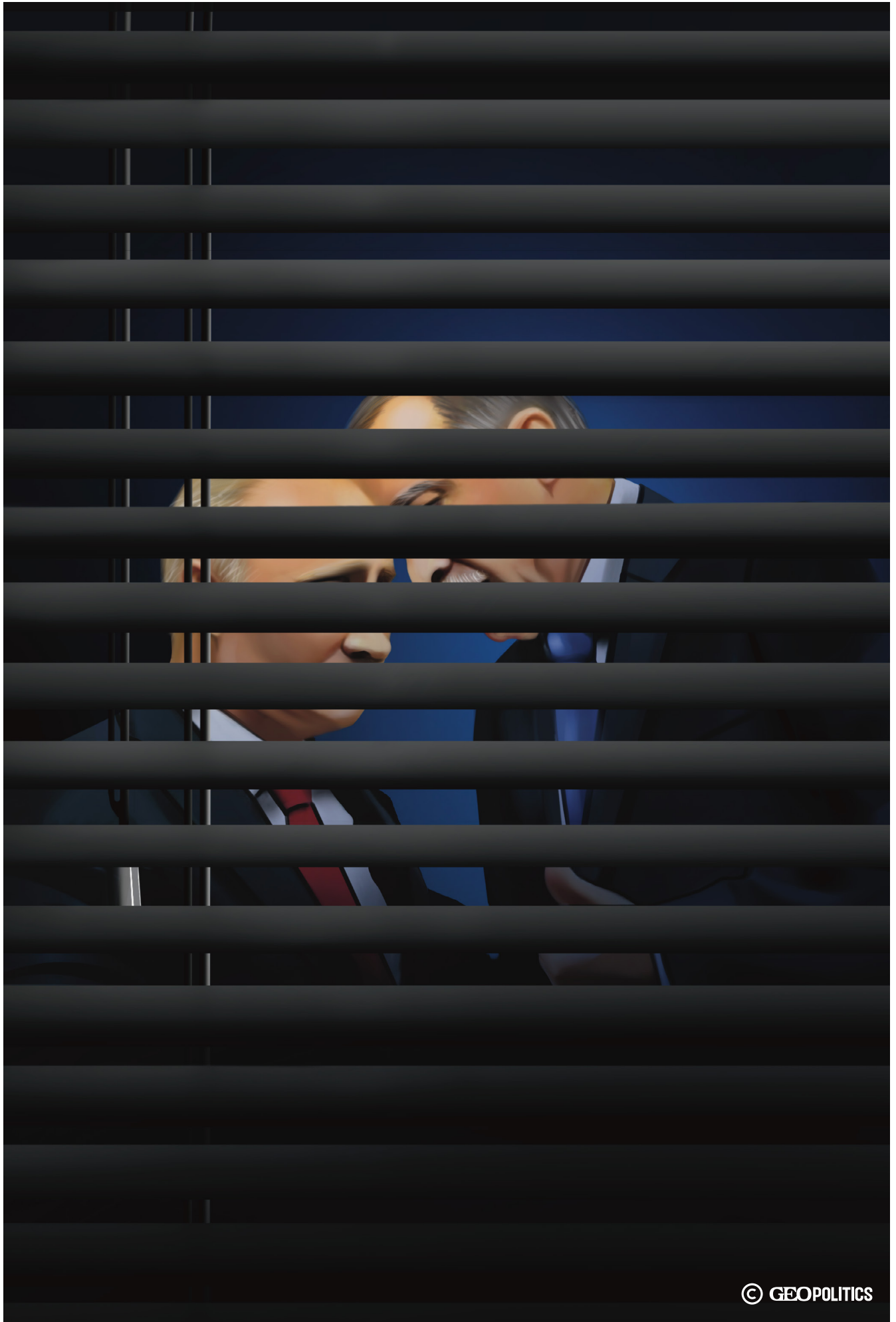
In this system, the powers with global ambition – the US and China – are competing economically within their areas of dominant influence over trade routes, much like Portugal and the Netherlands did in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries or as in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century US replaying the Monroe Doctrine as America First, but this time to keep China out of the southern hemisphere. In this view, the Amazon trade platform, as well as platforms that trade in information such as the GAFAs and Elon Musk’s X for the US and TikTok for China, play the role of the modern-day West Indies Trading Company – a commercial enterprise backed by and enmeshed into state power.

As realist political scientists have long [argued](#), the behavior of individual states is defined by systems that influence the relations between the individual states and affect their calculus and power calculations. This is especially true in the non-hegemonic orders, characterized by a lesser normative pull and a higher degree of anarchy. How states re-



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spond to anarchy, however, is historically and culturally contingent, or as Alexander Wendt [wrote](#), “anarchy is what states make of it” – that is, competition and rivalry are not the only natural responses.

## Make the South Caucasus Unsafe Again?

This brings us to the South Caucasus, a region of strategic significance bridging Europe and Asia, a site of contestation for influence and power, especially when anarchy in the world order prevails. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> and, particularly, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship between the Russian and the Ottoman Empires shaped the region’s geopolitical dynamics, notably from the rise of the Young Turks to the outbreak of World War I. The borderland between the two empires was not only an area of mutual competition, as Michael A. Reynolds has demonstrated in his [captivating book](#), *Shattering Empires*. It was a complex interdependency where the competition for influence over the emerging nations, which are ethnically and religiously related, coexisted with a shared interest in keeping extra-regional actors out.

Today, this historical pattern resonates. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [recently said](#), driven by hubris of success in Syria: “Every incident that has occurred in our region, especially in Syria, reminds us of this fact: Türkiye is bigger than Türkiye [...] it cannot limit its horizons to its current surface area” and cannot “escape or hide from its destiny.”

Equally messianic, the Kremlin is keen to keep outsiders out. In the recent Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which Moscow signed with Tehran in January 2025, the parties [pledged](#) to “counter interference of third parties in the internal and external affairs of the Contracting Parties.”

True, on paper, the Kremlin’s relationship with Ankara is far from the level offered to Tehran. Yet, their interdependence is sufficiently strong to have averted open animosity in the most challenging times. Erdoğan and Putin kept things from escalating during serious incidents like Türkiye’s shooting down of a Russian fighter plane over Syria in November 2015 and the murder of the Russian Ambassador by a Turkish policeman in December of the same year.

The Black Sea basin re-emerged as the “borderlands” area where Moscow and Ankara are engaged in reprising their *tango mortal*. The potency of this confrontation is gradually amplified by the erosion of the rules-based order (to which both capitals have contributed) and the disengagement of the US and EU as promoters of the rule of law, regional stability, free trade, and conflict resolution.

The recent years, starting in the autumn of 2020, saw Türkiye militarily backing Azerbaijan to gradually restore its territorial integrity and solidify its position as a dominant sub-regional power – at the expense of Russia’s longtime client – Armenia. On the surface, this was a great loss of face for Moscow, which treated the South Caucasus as its backyard and where, for almost two centuries, no army other than its own had been able to conduct military operations. But complexities of dynamic relationships hide beneath the surface.

Türkiye took special care not to humiliate Russia and provide it with face-saving solutions and profitable exits. After the 2020 escalation around Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia kept the military foothold and a potentially critical role in deciding the region’s future – something it could not capitalize on after invading Ukraine, leading to Azerbaijan forces assuming full control over the breakaway region in September 2023.

In the meantime, Russia has also forged closer ties

with Baku. In addition to political support and extensive trade, Azerbaijan became Moscow's key ally in keeping European influence out of the region. Most notably, Azerbaijan and Russian spies seem to have worked together to [foment and exploit strife](#) in distant New Caledonia against France, Armenia's newfound political and military ally.

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## The Regional Chessboard

Similar dynamics of competition and cooperation also play out in a wider region. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Ankara militarily supported the embattled Kyiv from the get-go and closed the straits to Russian naval reinforcements, helping ensure Ukraine did not succumb to military onslaught. But politically, it remained "non-binary," as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank, [put it](#).

Türkiye, the sole NATO member not to join either the US or the EU sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, emerged as the largest exporter of Russian oil and gas via *Turk Stream* and *Blue Stream*, the key energy link between Moscow and the EU, supplying such countries as Hungary, Slovakia and, until recently, Austria.

Russia's sinking into the Ukraine quagmire benefited Ankara economically – it gave Russian citizens a place [to go on vacation](#), where 22 million were reported to have visited in 2022 alone, and sold citizenship for a hefty EUR 400 thousand through a citizenship-by-investment scheme. Türkiye also did not mind establishing a string of small and medium enterprises that re-export sanctioned goods to Russian consumers. In the meantime, Russia's state-owned Rosatom got much-needed cash,

having completed Türkiye's first nuclear power plant in Mersin, on the Mediterranean coast.

Erdoğan's masterful foreign policy tradesmanship was displayed with a lasting saga of the Russian-made S-400 anti-aircraft systems. The purchase in 2017 helped soften Moscow and dismayed NATO when Türkiye was at loggerheads with Greece and France over exploring the continental shelf. The US shut the doors to Türkiye's participation in the F-35 program in 2021. But having weathered the storms, Ankara returned, [repaid](#) foreign exchange-strapped Moscow for the system, and made up with the West by the end of 2024. For this slow-playing bargain, it got back to the F-35 program, acquired the capacity to refurbish F-16 jets domestically, and is on track to build its domestic fifth-generation jet, KAAN. As in previous cases, Türkiye profited, but Russia also got part of what it wanted.

Broadly speaking, Ankara seems to have an upper hand in its wider jousting with Russia. Nowhere is it more evident than in Syria. Erdoğan bet against Bashar al-Assad's regime 13 years before its fall. And while the relations with the force that eventually toppled the bloody regime – Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham (HTC) – have been somewhat tense, Erdoğan clearly emerged in a much better power position than its regional rivals – Russia and Iran. And while Russia is compelled to evacuate its naval base in Tartus, Türkiye [expands the stakes](#) in Syria's reconstruction.

On the African continent, where Russia has worked the ground to oust Western powers through military force, Türkiye is also playing its own game. By the end of 2024, Erdoğan scored a significant victory in the Horn of Africa by [mediating a deal](#) between Ethiopia and Somalia – its key African foothold – on access to the ocean. This mediation [opens](#) for Türkiye's unimpeded access to explore Somalia's continental shelf for hydrocarbons. On top of the 2022 deal with Tripoli, this sets the

foundations for diversifying Türkiye's supplies further away from Azerbaijan and Russia. There are [burgeoning security relations](#) with the junta in Niger, building, once again, on the ground softened by the Kremlin's Wagner mercenaries.

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## Where Does It Leave Georgia?

As the Georgian Dream (GD) turns its back to the European Union and the United States ponders exiting regional politics, what conclusions can one draw about Georgia's options in regional politics for the short and medium-term future?

Since regaining its independence, Georgia has forged close and friendly ties with Türkiye, serving as an economic lifeline for the impoverished country. Back in the 1990s, the road through Türkiye was also a road towards closer links with the EU. Friendship has transformed into a trilateral strategic partnership on oil and gas pipelines and, later, railway links involving Azerbaijan. Until the 2020s, Georgia's alignment with Türkiye and Azerbaijan was a ticket for diluting Russia's influence but also a visible token of alliance with NATO and the US. As demonstrated above, Türkiye's anchoring in the Western security and political architecture has weakened considerably but it is a dynamic regional player on the ascendant. Still, Erdoğan's authoritarian tendencies make its internal politics brittle.

Russia, on the other hand, is weakened but no less dangerous. It has played its ultimate card—war—against Europe and is paying the price with Sweden and Finland in NATO, Poland's skyrocketing military spending, and the economic fallout from sanctions. Stymied in the north and west, Russia also looks to the south to compensate. In an environment meticulously contested by Ankara, the Kremlin is dallying with Azerbaijan and forging an alliance with Tehran.

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Georgia also had its own share of transformations lately. Even as the long-shuttered path to EU membership has suddenly opened, Tbilisi opted against it, putting a stop to accession. Irked by the violence visited on peaceful protesters by the Georgian Dream, the US broke off the strategic alliance. Georgia is no longer an “agent” interested in opening up the region to extra-regional influences. This is good news for Russia but also for Türkiye.

Both capitals may encourage the embattled Georgian Dream government to finally take its seat in the so-called 3+3 format. Inaugurated after the 2020 Karabakh war, this diplomatic forum embodies the drive to “lock out” the region from external and leave the South Caucasus behind the “*iron jalousie*.” And while the Georgian Dream refused to attend, fearing fallout, it may now have little to lose. Russia's Sergey Lavrov [reiterated the invitation](#) past October.

Ankara, just like Moscow, Tehran, and Baku, has thrown a diplomatic and PR lifeline to the Georgian Dream whose legitimacy is strongly contested at home. They recognized the 26 October parliamentary elections and [congratulated](#) the newly

inaugurated President, Mikheil Kavelashvili. While all know the Georgian Dream's weakness, perhaps Türkiye is more concerned than others whether Georgia is strong enough to resist any Russian attempt for a complete takeover.

## Come What May?

Türkiye is likely to adopt a hybrid strategy in the South Caucasus, combining elements of its approaches in Syria and Africa. On the one hand, Ankara will continue strengthening its military and strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, providing advanced weaponry and training. On the other hand, Türkiye could employ economic and infrastructural initiatives, such as expanding connectivity projects, to deepen its influence in Georgia and beyond.

Crucially, Türkiye's interactions with Russia in the South Caucasus will likely mirror the pragmatic balance observed in Syria. While Ankara and Moscow may remain competitors, they are likely to engage in dialogue to manage tensions and avoid destabilizing the region further. Objectively, Türkiye needs Georgia to remain sovereign and strong enough to resist a Russian takeover. Conversely, Russia's security services, whose imprint on Georgia's politics seems to widen, will try to fan the Turkophobic attitudes, playing – as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – on ethnic and religious affiliations.

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The rational course of action to navigate such complex dynamics of regional competition implies a multifaceted strategy focused on the following priorities:

- **Restoring the Popular Legitimacy of Governance:** The unfolding political crisis, sanctions, economic contraction, and, above all, fraying national cohesion is something Georgia can barely afford. The rational political actors must mobilize to end the crisis as soon as possible – and calling repeat elections whose results will be recognized by the widest swaths of the population seems like the most logical path to that.
- **Strengthening National Resilience:** Restoring governance must be accompanied by re-launching investment in security infrastructure, cybersecurity, and defense capabilities that are critical for Georgia to withstand external pressures. This includes enhancing its military, which has been neglected, bolstering border security, and developing mechanisms to counter hybrid threats such as disinformation campaigns. Türkiye – both bilaterally and as a NATO member – can be an essential ally in this.
- **Strengthening Existing Regional Alliances:** Georgia cannot afford to unravel its economic and security partnership with Azerbaijan and Türkiye despite changing international circumstances. Trilateral initiatives to foster economic integration and address shared security concerns must continue. It is crucial for Georgia's opposition forces to communicate the immutability of these commitments.
- **Enhancing Euro-Atlantic Integration:** Georgia needs to re-set relations with NATO and the EU to maintain its agency in the alliance with Ankara and Baku (but also vis-à-vis Moscow). Georgia's alignment with Euro-Atlantic stan-

dards creates a pull factor for Armenia and Türkiye. Despite the weakening international order, the EU is a potent regulatory and economic force that may help counterbalance. Strengthening ties with Western institutions remains essential for bolstering Georgia's security and financial resilience.

- *Proactive Diplomacy:* Georgia must reposition itself as a mediator and a venue for mediation of regional disputes, leveraging its strategic location to facilitate dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan involving external actors. Hosting peace talks or regional summits to address shared challenges will once again position Georgia as a “safe place” whose security is in the interests of competing regional actors.

## Getting Back in the Game

The South Caucasus remains a microcosm of broader geopolitical trends, reflecting the enduring legacy of historical rivalries and the complexities of modern power dynamics.

The parallels between the Russian-Ottoman rivalry of the early 20th century and the current competition between Russia and Türkiye underscore the region's strategic significance. Drawing on the insights of Michael A. Reynolds, it is clear that geopolitical interests, rather than solely cultural or ethnic affiliations, have consistently driven competition in this region. While the withdrawal of extra-regional powers has created space for Moscow and Ankara to assert their influence, the future trajectory of their relations will depend on their ability to navigate the intricate balance between cooperation, rivalry, and managed competition. In this evolving landscape, Georgia needs to regain agency, something which is currently dulled by its political crisis ■