

# Changing Geopolitics of the Caucasus and Türkiye after the Double Wars

**T**he Second Karabakh War marked a significant shift in the region's geopolitical dynamics, showcasing Türkiye's resurgence, Iran's diminishing role, the weakening of Western influence, and the emergence of a Russian-Turkish partnership in the South Caucasus.

Azerbaijan's victory in the war established its dominance in the political and military spheres, while Armenia's power and influence declined. Georgia faces the risk of marginalization from the regional processes if Azerbaijan and Armenia start successful cooperation. Both Russia and Türkiye increased their influence, with Russia deploying peacekeepers in Karabakh 30 years after its withdrawal from Azerbaijan and Türkiye establishing a military presence in Azerbaijan after a century. Thus, a new geopolitical whirlwind is blowing in the South Caucasus.

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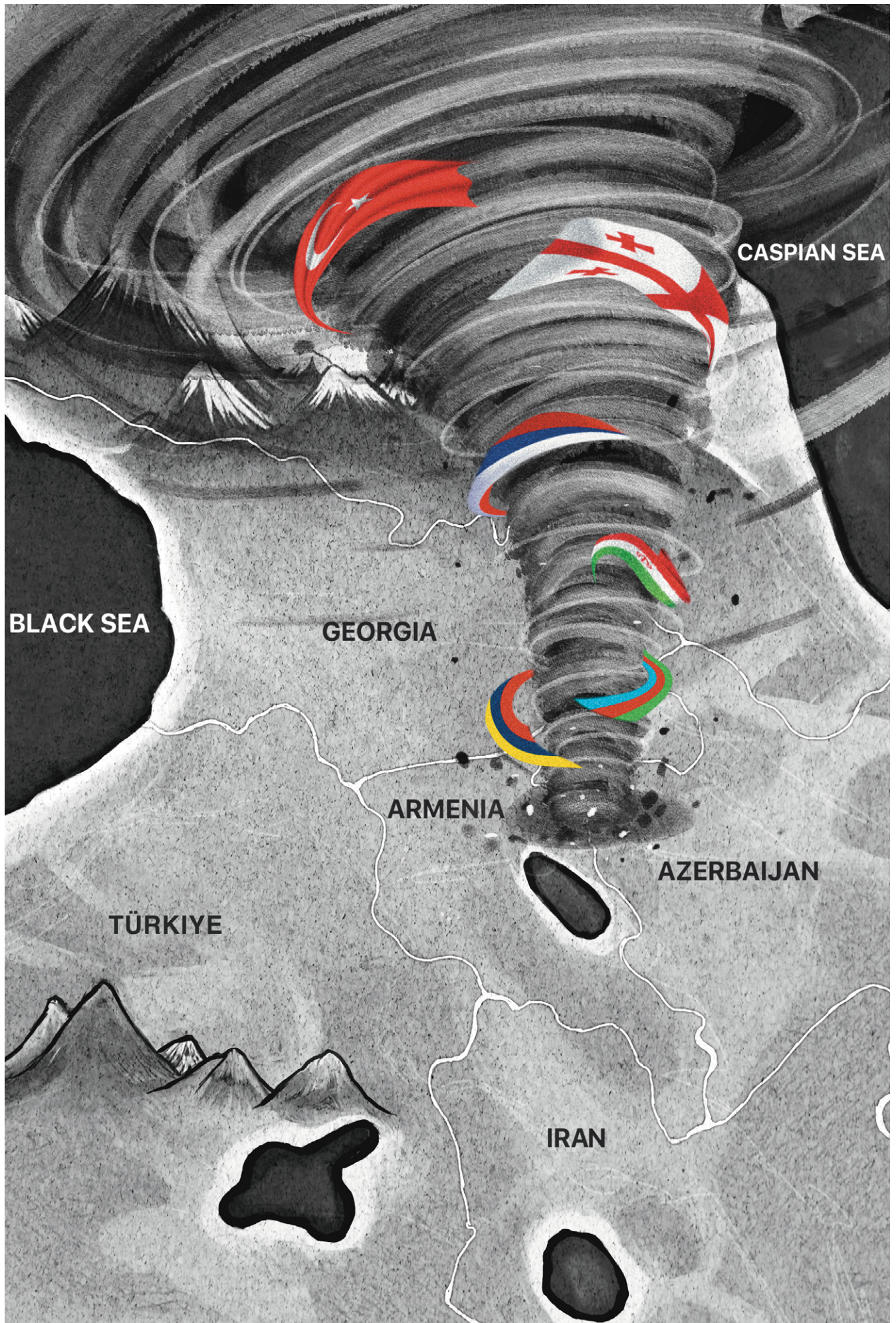
Russia aims to solidify its military and security role in the region, evident in the implementation of the ceasefire agreement and the deployment of peacekeepers. This has bolstered Moscow's power projection and influence, with troops now stationed in all three South Caucasus states. While its military and diplomatic maneuvering has positioned Russia as a gatekeeper for international initiatives, Türkiye, Iran, and China pose a challenge to Russia, particularly in the economic and transportation sectors.



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Azerbaijan's victory altered the territorial status quo. Baku psychologically overcame past defeats, investing heavily in the recaptured territories and resettling displaced persons. Azerbaijan's close security ties with Türkiye and Israel enhance its regional position with [potential economic benefits](#) from eventually connecting Türkiye to Central Asia and China via its Nakhchivan exclave, Armenia, and the Caspian Sea, thus making it an essential nodal point in China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Middle Corridor.

Georgia is concerned about Russia's military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, prospects of Moscow's increased military and political role in the South Caucasus, and potential isolation if Azerbaijan and Armenia enhance cooperation. Post-war challenges for Georgia primarily revolve around economic issues, especially future transportation routes, domestic political polarization, and fragmentation.

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Despite losing territory, Armenia could “benefit” from the war by pursuing domestic reforms and normalizing relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, strengthening its regional ties and reducing its dependence on Russia, leading to economic development.

Türkiye's good political relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia and military presence in Azerbaijan strengthened its regional position without directly challenging Moscow's hegemonic place. Ankara's closer economic ties with Baku reflected in the [Shusha Declaration](#) of 15 June 2021, as well as Tür-

kiye's restored military presence in Azerbaijan after more than a century, give it a stronger position when Russia withdraws its peacekeepers from the region. Normalization with Armenia could further enhance Türkiye's regional connectivity by creating land links to Azerbaijan through Nakhchivan and Armenia. This will realize Ankara's long-term goal of gaining access to the Caspian Sea and beyond, bypassing Iran, and becoming a transit hub for this region to Europe. In addition, Türkiye will benefit from the reconstruction of the liberated territories of Azerbaijan and the success of Turkish-made drones and other military systems used in the war against Russian-armed Armenia.

## **The Geopolitical Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has significantly altered the already complex geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus with potential long-term implications. While the full consequences are still unclear, the Russian aggression, seen as a reaction to Ukraine's desire to decide its future, has raised serious security concerns for the South Caucasus states, [resonating with their desires](#) for independence, strategic autonomy, and security.

The war poses various risks for the South Caucasus, including increased refugee flows, Russian immigration, and potential escalation in the Armenia-Azerbaijan border areas due to shifting international attention, allowing the latter to challenge the status quo. Regardless of its outcome for Russia, the aftermath of the war in Ukraine could result in a more embittered, isolated, and potentially vengeful Russia.

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All three South Caucasus countries have sought ties (albeit of a different degree) with Europe and the US while avoiding negative attention from Russia. Despite the changes, the South Caucasus states are trying to maintain pragmatic relations with Moscow, recognizing Russia's continued importance in the region, albeit in a different role than before. However, the perception of Russia as an influential and trustworthy partner is weakening.

Türkiye has maintained a [delicate balance between Ukraine and Russia](#), sending armaments to Ukraine while refraining from joining Western sanctions against Russia. However, Türkiye's role in the region could increase as a counterbalance to Russia, a gateway to the West, and a key transportation corridor. This possible greater role would be strengthened with the success of the normalization process between Türkiye and Armenia, which could, in turn, open the region, reduce conflict behavior, and mitigate the consequences of Russian spoiler power using regional conflicts as leverage.

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A crucial step in this regard is normalizing Türkiye's relations with Armenia. Establishing new transport routes is vital from Türkiye's point of view and stabilizing the South Caucasus is critical for this purpose. Türkiye has long seen the opportunity to develop into an energy center and a [logistics and manufacturing hub](#), in general, benefiting from the country's geographical location between Asia and Europe. The realization of the corridor between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan and the subsequent connection of Türkiye with Azerbaijan via Nakhchivan and Armenia will connect Türkiye with the Caspian Sea and Central Asia beyond.

As demand increases and the Middle Corridor emerges as an alternative route to bypass Russia, the underprepared regional infrastructure needs to be updated to meet potential transportation needs. To address this growing concern, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye recently [signed](#) a declaration to improve transportation routes in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia as an alternative to the northern route via Russia.

The Caspian region is becoming increasingly [important for energy supply](#), and the South Caucasus is a transportation corridor for the EU and Europe, particularly as countries seek to bypass Russia. However, developments in the security situation in the Black Sea, particularly Russian actions around Crimea and eastern Ukraine, concern the coastal states. The Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 and its following military build-up in the region led to a loss of maritime superiority of Türkiye in the Black Sea by the middle of the decade. Russia's attempts to cut Ukraine's access to the Black Sea by taking control of regions like Mariupol and later reports about the floating mines in the western Black Sea were alarming news regarding regional dynamics and Turkish interests. Nevertheless, recent reports that Ukraine has so far been able to [decapacitate a third of Russia's Black Sea Fleet](#) indicate a weakening of Russia's maritime supremacy in favor of Türkiye.

For Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, the Russian invasion of Ukraine presents new security risks, especially following the Second Karabakh War. In addition to the possibility of escalation of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian propaganda could further destabilize Georgia. Moreover, if Ukraine's borders were to change because of the war, this could have a severe impact on the countries in the South Caucasus due to the precedent set. Moreover, Russia uses its regional networks to circumvent sanctions, [creating tension](#) for regional countries with the US and EU.

There is a possibility of further division among South Caucasian countries, with some aligning with Russia to avoid aggression and maintain strategic autonomy. In contrast, others may seek unity against a common threat. However, recent developments, such as direct peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan without Russian involvement, supported by the EU, offer a glimpse of a more favorable scenario for regional cooperation.

## Changing the Regional Balance of Power

There is a clear awareness of change in the regional balance of power between Russia and Türkiye and the region's relations with external powers such as the EU and the US. However, the outcome is still in flux. For now, the South Caucasus countries seem to benefit from attention being focused on another arena, but this can change quickly. Therefore, increasing stability within the region is the best remedy to prevent it from becoming the next target of a proxy war.

The Russian distraction caused by the war in Ukraine is having visible effects on the dynamics of the South Caucasus region. Russian military presence has been reduced in various areas, including Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Armenia, to focus on the conflict in Ukraine. This scaling down and other signs of diminishing Russian influence are reshaping the regional security landscape, creating a vacuum.

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Türkiye is currently seen as the most critical regional balancing power against Russia. It is impossible to predict how long the existing standoff between Türkiye and Russia will last as both parties compete for foreign policy influence in the Black Sea, Mediterranean, and Levant regions. While their competing cooperation is delicate, Türkiye is still trying to strike a balance between its Western allies and Russia. However, its interests and policies in the South Caucasus are more aligned with the West than with Russia.

The current lack of Russian focus on the Caucasus enables Türkiye to advance in normalizing its relations with Armenia, potentially enhancing its standing in the region. If Türkiye swiftly progresses in this endeavor and manages to overcome its hesitations about displeasing Azerbaijan, it could pose a challenge to Russian influence in the area. However, achieving this would necessitate Türkiye to [revise](#) its policy towards Russia. Whether Türkiye intends to pursue this course of action remains uncertain.

Many “power struggles” in the South Caucasus have developed simultaneously. For Türkiye, the South Caucasus is one of many geographical areas where the boundaries of cooperation and competition dynamics in relations with Russia are constantly being tested. How Türkiye will move in the region will depend on Russia's strength after the war in Ukraine and Türkiye's strategic priorities ■