Choke, Don't Block

Russia's Bottleneck Strategy in Its Neighborhood and the Middle Corridor

Great powers rarely need to control an entire neighborhood to exercise influence over it. Sometimes it is enough to control the doors. For Russia, the geography of the post-Soviet space has always offered such doors in abundance: mountain passes, railways, pipelines, ports, electricity grids, military bases, border crossings and, increasingly, regulatory systems. The strategic objective is not necessarily to shut these doors. In many cases, Moscow benefits more if they remain open, but only sufficiently open, sufficiently dependent and sufficiently controllable to ensure that alternatives remain expensive, slow or politically risky.

This distinction is very important. The proposition that Russia wants the South Caucasus simply "closed" is too crude. Moscow trades through Georgia, supplies Armenia with gas across Georgian territory and, in 2026, publicly discussed restoring railway connections through occupied Abkhazia. It actually uses those countries to avoid Western sanctions. A more defensible proposition is that Russia benefits when the South Caucasus remains a chokepoint that Moscow can reach into, influence, or bypass at will. This distinction changes how we should understand Russian regional strategy. The issue is not simply occupation – it is not even primarily about territorial control but about control over choices.

A country may possess sovereignty over its territory while lacking strategic freedom if a foreign actor can influence the routes by which its energy arrives, the railways over which its goods travel, the ports through which its exports move, or the infrastructure through which its neighbors connect.

Eurasian geography offers a complex example. A country can be a sea state, a land bridge, an energy transit route, or the principal gateway of the emerging Middle Corridor between China and Europe, or all together — as Georgia is. Paradoxically,

TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI
Contributor

Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili distinguishes himself as an accomplished leader in government, crisis management, and diplomacy. As the founder of TY Strategies LLC, he extends advisory services globally. A pivotal figure in co-founding the Revival Foundation, aiding Ukraine, and leading the New International Leadership Institute, Yakobashvili held key roles, including Georgia's Ambassador to the U.S. and Deputy Prime Minister. With the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, he is a Yale World Fellow, trained at Oxford and Harvard. As a co-founder and chair of the Governing Board of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, he actively contributes to global media discussions on regional security. His significant contributions have merited the Presidential Medal of Excellence.

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The Russian strategy therefore need not be to destroy connectivity. It may be enough to ensure that connectivity never becomes fully independent of Russian influence. This is the essence of the bottleneck strategy.

From "Weaponized Interdependence" to "Chokepoint Sovereignty"

The intellectual starting point is the concept of "weaponized interdependence," developed by Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman. They argue that states controlling central nodes in international networks can exploit those nodes for surveillance or coercion.

While the Middle Corridor was created partly to bypass Russian territory, Russian policy is evolving from exploiting a network it controls to preventing an alternative network from becoming robust enough to eliminate Russian leverage. This is a second-order form of weaponized interdependence. The strategy is not necessarily to own the new corridor, but to prevent it from becoming independent. For that goal, Russia employs several tools at its disposal:

Residual asset: Russia retains ownership, concessions, or operational control over infrastructure inside another country. The asset becomes a standing option. Moscow does not have to use it constantly. Its value lies in the ability to withhold access, change terms, or threaten withdrawal.

Client actor: Russia can exercise influence through governments, political networks, or territories that can obstruct connectivity without requiring direct Russian intervention.

Regulatory chokepoint: Administrative procedures can be more effective than military force because they are reversible and legally defensible. Safety inspections, permits, environmental requirements, customs procedures, and licensing decisions can slow a strategically important flow without appearing to constitute coercion.

Physical disruption below the threshold of war: Damage to cables, pipelines, or other infrastructure can create uncertainty even when attribution remains contested.

Inherited dependency: A country may retain formal sovereignty but remain dependent upon infrastructure inherited from the Soviet or earlier regional system.

Constructed legal veto: A treaty or regulatory framework need not explicitly grant Russia a veto. If investors believe Moscow can obstruct a project, they may demand a risk premium or simply decide that the project is not worth pursuing.

The common denominator is that a bottleneck does not have to stop the flow. It only has to make the alternative more expensive than the status quo. That is why Russia's most important strategic assets are sometimes surprisingly mundane: a railway concession, a refinery, an electricity distributor, a border crossing, a port connection, or a pipeline terminal.

Georgia: The Single Thread in the Middle Corridor

Georgia best illustrates this strategy because its geography creates a structural condition that politics can exploit: single-threaded connectivity.

The principal land-based Middle Corridor routes from the Caspian Sea toward Europe pass through Georgia. The country contains approximately 249 kilometers of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and roughly 248 kilometers of the South Caucasus gas pipeline. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway also passes through Georgia, with the gauge transition physically located at Akhalkalaki.

This creates something unusual in contemporary Eurasian infrastructure: a major international connectivity project whose western gateway depends disproportionately on one relatively small country. The northern alternative runs through Russia, while the southern alternative runs through Iran. For Western governments seeking to diversify away from both, Georgia is therefore an important transit hinge.

This explains why the Middle Corridor can expand rapidly while remaining strategically vulnerable. Transit volumes have increased substantially from the very low base of the early 2020s. Container traffic has grown particularly quickly, and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway has recorded dramatic increases in container movements.

The important point is therefore not that Russia wants "to block" the Middle Corridor. It does not. The important point is that the corridor remains insufficiently redundant. Current Middle Corridor capacity remains only a fraction of the northern Russian route's capacity. That makes the Georgian section strategically important even before it reaches commercially dominant volumes. A chokepoint matters because of tomorrow's traffic, not merely today's.

Narrowing Gate, Widening Rhetoric

Georgia's government has repeatedly presented the country as the central link in the Middle Corridor. Major road projects have been completed, the Rikoti section of the East–West Highway has substantially improved east-west transportation, and the Tbilisi Silk Road Forum has promoted Georgia's role as a regional logistics hub. Yet infrastructure development is uneven. The contradiction is most visible in the port sector.

Poti is operating close to capacity. Anaklia, the proposed deep-water port, is therefore strategically important because it could provide Georgia with additional container capacity and a genuinely deep-water gateway. But the Anaklia story has become remarkably complicated.

The original Western-backed consortium lost its contract in 2020, followed by an international arbitration process in which the tribunal rejected the investors' claims and found that the state had not interfered with their efforts to attract financing. In 2024, a Chinese state-owned consortium was selected as the sole bidder for the new project.

By 2026, however, the Chinese consortium had withdrawn before a binding construction contract was concluded. The Georgian government subsequently announced a state-led "landlord model." At the same time, the 2026 budget allocation for Anaklia was cut sharply, from GEL 150 million to GEL 50 million. Construction nevertheless began, including dredging and breakwater work.

This is why the evidence should not be simplified into "Georgia is not building Anaklia." It is building it. The more interesting question is whether the project will be built at the scale and under the governance model necessary to turn Georgia into a genuinely European-standard logistics gateway. That distinction is strategically significant. Washington and European commercial interests have continued investing in Poti. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation invested in Poti's second berth, while APM Terminals has continued expanding its operations in Georgia.

The Western preference therefore appears increasingly concentrated around an existing commercial port rather than the politically complicated Anaklia project. That does not point to a Russian-controlled strategy, but it does create a vulnerability Russia can benefit from.

Russia's Georgian Levers

The most revealing Russian lever may actually be one that Russia has recently advertised as connectivity. For years, the railway through occupied Abkhazia has remained closed. The 2011 agreement associated with Russia's WTO accession envisioned monitored transit across Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, but those arrangements were never implemented.

In February 2026, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk publicly raised the possibility of restoring railway links through occupied Abkhazia. The stated Russian objective went beyond simple Georgian transit and envisaged connectivity to Türkiye and Iran, Mediterranean ports and the Persian Gulf.

That is precisely what makes the proposal strategically interesting. If ever restored, the Abkhaz railway would create a route that could reduce Russia's dependence on Georgian-controlled transit while simultaneously converting occupied territory into an alternative regional transport artery. The railway itself is currently in poor condition. Restoration would be expensive and take years. And the politics surrounding the transit through the occupied territory are extremely toxic and almost insurmountable.

But a road is another matter. The lesson is that Moscow does not necessarily need to restore an entire infrastructure network to obtain strategic leverage.

It can preserve the option of doing so. The same logic applies to Upper Lars. The Dariali crossing is the only functioning legal land crossing between Russia and Georgia and is also Armenia's principal overland connection to Russia. In September 2025, several thousand vehicles accumulated there even while the highways were open. This is a classic bottleneck: the infrastructure exists, but capacity is limited, and disruption can rapidly become politically consequential.

Energy provides an even more important example. Georgia is simultaneously one of the region's principal non-Russian energy transit countries and a country whose own dependence on Russia has increased. Russian gas deliveries to Georgia rose sharply in 2025. Russian crude also became a dominant component of Georgian crude imports. In electricity, Russian state-controlled Inter RAO retains controlling stakes in Georgia's capital-city electricity distribution system and related assets.

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The strategic paradox is very interesting. Georgia can serve as a corridor through which Europe reduces dependence on Russia, while Georgia itself becomes more dependent on Russian-controlled energy assets. This is precisely the kind of asymmetric interdependence from which bottleneck power emerges.

Georgia as a Gatekeeper

There is another dimension that cannot be attributed automatically to Moscow: Georgia can itself act as a gatekeeper.

The December 2025 dispute over Azerbaijani fuel shipments to Armenia provides a revealing example. When an Azerbaijani fuel shipment destined for Armenia transited Georgia, Georgian authorities initially demanded substantial transit fees. The dispute was resolved after Azerbaijan signaled that it could potentially develop alternative arrangements, including direct connectivity with Armenia. Georgia subsequently reconsidered the fee. This episode demonstrated that a state sitting astride a corridor can extract rents from its geographical position. It also demonstrated the power of bypass.

This is the essence of Frederick Cooper's "gatekeeper state": political authority can derive not from controlling the entire economy but from controlling the interface between the domestic economy and the outside world. A government does not have to be acting on behalf of Moscow to produce an outcome that benefits Moscow.

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This is perhaps the most important qualification to the Russian bottleneck thesis. Russian strategy and Georgian domestic incentives do not need to coordinate to become mutually reinforcing. If a Georgian government prefers discretionary control over a corridor to an EU-regulated, highly transparent and competitive logistics system, the resulting infrastructure may remain more vulnerable to Russian influence — even without a Kremlin instruction.

This is why the argument should not be framed as "Moscow controls Tbilisi." The stronger argument is that Moscow benefits from a system in which Georgia remains indispensable but insufficiently

diversified, strategically ambiguous, and vulnerable to external pressure.

Armenia: The Test Case

If Georgia is the principal chokepoint, Armenia is the test case for whether Russia can retain influence after losing political primacy. For decades, Armenia's connectivity was deeply embedded in Russian-controlled infrastructure.

The most important legacy is the railway. Russian Railways operates Armenia's railway network through South Caucasus Railway under a concession extending to 2038. This means that any major rail corridor crossing Armenia, including the rail component envisaged by the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), must eventually confront the question of Russian operational control. TRIPP represents a fundamental change in the regional connectivity model. The 2020 trilateral statement had placed control over the transport connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan in the hands of Russian FSB border guards. The TRIPP framework instead establishes a U.S.-Armenian development structure while explicitly retaining Armenian sovereignty over territory, customs, borders, security, and law enforcement.

Under the May 2026 framework, the proposed TRIPP Development Company would be owned 74% by a U.S.-controlled entity and 26% by Armenia, with a 49-year initial term and an option for a further 50 years under specified conditions.

Russia's original model placed a Russian security institution at the center of the corridor. The emerging model places an American-controlled development company inside Armenian territory while leaving formal sovereign authority with Armenia. That is why TRIPP represents such a profound challenge to the Russian bottleneck system.

The Railway Problem

Yet the Russian position has not disappeared. The Armenian railway concession remains. That creates an extraordinary institutional contradiction. A new Western-supported railway corridor may require infrastructure that sits within a network operated by a Russian company whose concession runs until 2038. This means TRIPP's success will depend not merely on diplomacy between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the United States, but also on resolving a legacy infrastructure relationship. This is exactly how residual-asset power works. Russia does not necessarily have to prevent Armenia from joining a new connectivity architecture. It can simply retain an existing piece of infrastructure that the new architecture needs.

Gas provides another example. Gazprom Armenia remains Russian-owned, and Armenia remains heavily dependent upon Russian gas. The gas reaches Armenia through the North Caucasus–Transcaucasia pipeline, which passes through Georgia. This arrangement shows that Russian leverage in the South Caucasus is not composed of isolated assets. It is a network of dependencies connecting Georgia and Armenia.

At the same time, Armenia has been reducing Russian control over border infrastructure. Russian border guards have progressively withdrawn from Armenian checkpoints, including Zvartnots airport and Armenia's border crossings. The result is a fascinating strategic race. Armenia is removing Russian control from the points where sovereignty is most visible while simultaneously confronting Russian control over infrastructure where sovereignty is less visible but economically essential.

Russia has also attempted to preserve influence through political and economic instruments. The events surrounding Samvel Karapetyan and opposition forces in 2025–26 demonstrate the potential importance of Russian-linked economic networks in Armenian politics.

Russian restrictions on Armenian agricultural and food products around the June 2026 election demonstrated that Moscow retains the capacity to impose economic costs. The same policy was attempted with Georgia almost two decades ago, when Russian authorities designated Georgian products as "unsafe for consumption."

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This is the important distinction between political influence and political control. Russia does not always need to determine the outcome of Armenian politics to constrain the choices available to Armenian governments. That is another form of bottleneck power.

Azerbaijan: The Missing Piece

Azerbaijan demonstrates the limits of the Russian bottleneck strategy. Moscow retains some influence in Azerbaijan, but Baku has progressively diversified its strategic and economic connections.

Azerbaijan has access to alternative routes through Iran, maintains the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and operates major energy connections westward through the TANAP and TAP. As a result, Russia has fewer direct opportunities to make Azerbaijan itself a transport hostage. The possibility of opening trade through Nakhchivan makes Baku's hand even stronger.

The pressure therefore shifts toward the weaker links. Those links are primarily Georgia and Armenia, and this is strategically significant. Azerbaijan does not have to be captured if its corridors can be constrained elsewhere.

The Wider Patterns

Unfortunately, Georgia and Armenia are not isolated cases. In Moldova, the Cuciurgan power plant in Transnistria illustrates how a residual Russian-controlled energy asset can become a strategic dependency. The subsequent construction of the Vulcănești–Chișinău electricity line demonstrates the counterstrategy: build alternatives rather than negotiate indefinitely with the chokepoint.

Meanwhile, Belarus demonstrates the "client actor" model. Migration flows, border closures and airspace disruptions can generate significant effects at comparatively low cost. Yet the Belarus case also demonstrates a Western mistake: a chokepoint can sometimes be transferred rather than eliminated. When Lithuania cut Belarusian potash transit through Klaipėda, the trade did not disappear. Much of it shifted toward Russian ports. Moscow and Minsk would love to resume the trade through Klaipėda, however, and Lukashenka would gladly release another batch of political prisoners if Vilnius were to agree to resume transit.

Serbia offers another residual-asset example. Gazprom and Gazprom Neft's ownership of Serbia's NIS refinery created a situation in which sanctions against the Russian shareholders became a problem for Serbian fuel security. Russia did not have to physically shut the refinery. Ownership itself created the vulnerability.

Kazakhstan and the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) provide perhaps the clearest infrastructure case. CPC carries the overwhelming majority of Kazakhstan's crude exports, while Russian actors possess significant ownership and board-level influence in the consortium. When Russian regulatory authorities intervened against CPC's marine terminals in 2025, the pipeline itself did not have to be shut down. This is the essence of regulatory chokepoint power.

The Limits of the Strategy

Russia's bottleneck strategy is powerful, but it is not unlimited. The most important countermeasure is making it redundant. The Baltic states demonstrated this through their 2025 synchronization with continental Europe's electricity system. Years of investment transformed an inherited dependency into a diversified network. Moldova's new electricity interconnection serves a similar purpose.

TRIPP represents another possible example. The purpose of a new corridor is not just to move goods faster; it is to make an existing Russian-controlled network less indispensable. This is why infrastructure competition has become a form of geopolitical competition. The contest is no longer simply between Russia and the West over territory; it is between networks.

The Critical Role of Georgia

This brings the argument back to Georgia. Georgia is not merely another South Caucasus state caught between competing geopolitical forces; it is a piece of infrastructure in its own right. Its geography makes it a corridor, its ports make it a maritime gateway, its railways make it a bridge, its roads make it a land connection, and its energy infrastructure makes it a transit state. And its political choices determine whether these assets become integrated into a broader, rules-based network or remain dependent upon discretionary national and regional gatekeepers.

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This is why Georgia's relationship with the European Union cannot be viewed solely through the traditional vocabulary of democracy and political conditionality. There is also an infrastructure-security dimension. A Western strategy that abandons Georgia without simultaneously creating alternative routes risks weakening the very connectivity architecture it seeks to protect. Conversely, a strategy that ignores governance because Georgia is geographically indispensable risks allowing a critical corridor to remain vulnerable to discretionary political control.

The challenge is to make the corridor more resilient than the politics of any single government. That means investing in ports, railways, digital infrastructure, energy interconnections and customs modernization. It means creating competing routes inside Georgia itself. It means connecting Georgia to European regulatory systems and ensuring that Western infrastructure financing is not merely announced but actually disbursed. Most importantly, it means reducing the strategic value of the chokepoint.

The best way to counter Russia's bottleneck strategy is to ensure that the party, or regime, that rules a bottleneck country is less dependent on Moscow. The Moldovan and Armenian examples show that, with pro-Russian forces defeated, Russia's leverage has weakened, even if the chokepoint infrastructure is still intact and Moscow-controlled.

From Chokepoints to Resilience

The ultimate lesson of Russia's strategy is therefore paradoxical. The objective should not be to prevent Russia from possessing influence; that is unrealistic. The objective should be to make Russian influence less consequential.

This can be done through two parallel tracks of resilience. First, build alternatives; second, weaken the regimes that serve Russia's interests and increase Russia's leverage over bottlenecks.

A resilient system is one in which the closure of one railway, the loss of one port, the interruption of one pipeline, or the withdrawal of one investor does not kill a strategic project. This requires alternatives. It also requires recognizing that infrastructure is no longer simply physical. Ports, pipelines and railways increasingly depend on digital systems, financial networks, satellite positioning, cloud services, fiber-optic cables and AI-driven logistics.

The chokepoint of tomorrow may therefore be an algorithm, a data center, a digital identity system or a software platform just as easily as a mountain pass.

The second component of resilience is the nature of the government that runs the place. In places like Georgia, where the government has deliberately chosen to serve Russia's interests, the priority should be to exert leverage so that authoritarian practices are weakened, and democratic pro-Western forces get a level playing field. In Moldova and Armenia, pro-Western parties in power, supported by Brussels, Washington and Western institutions, have undermined Russia's bottleneck instruments. In Georgia, the same support should be extended to those democratic forces that are countering Georgian Dream.

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Russia's experience in the post-Soviet space offers a lesson that applies far beyond Russia. Power increasingly belongs not only to those who control territory, but also to those who control the points through which other people's systems must pass. The strategic response is therefore not to eliminate connectivity but to multiply and diversify it.

Russia's bottleneck strategy is ultimately a strategy of optionality. It needs influence over the government or institution that sits at the narrowest point. And it does not need to stop connectivity altogether. It only needs to ensure that the alternatives remain sufficiently expensive, uncertain, or politically vulnerable that the old system never truly disappears.

The outcome will help determine whether the South Caucasus remains a collection of strategically vulnerable corridors or becomes a genuinely redundant, interconnected region in which no single power can turn geography into a veto ■