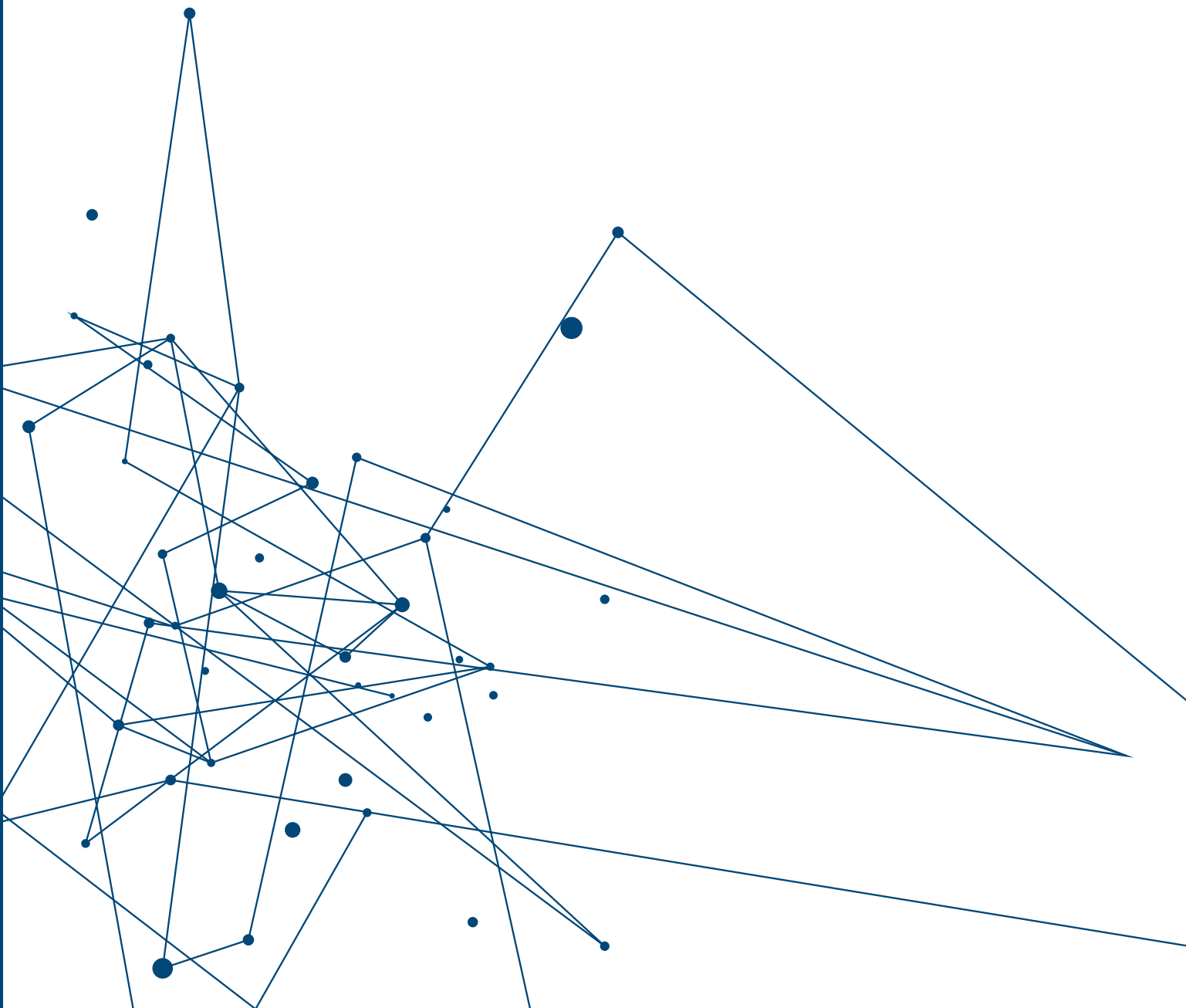


Russia's Assessment of Turkey's Policy in the South Caucasus

Implications for the EU

Nikolas K. Gvosdev



The decline of Russian influence in the South Caucasus means that Moscow must incentivise Turkey to limit the access and reach of Western powers in the region. The Kremlin must ensure Ankara's interests are better served in protecting Russia's vital equities rather than undermining them.

This paper is part of a series of CATS Network Papers that aim to assess Turkey's South Caucasus policy from the perspective of different actors.

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1.

Introduction

Any assessment of Russian attitudes towards Turkey's role in the South Caucasus must be evaluated at two levels: in consideration of Russian preferences, and in the context of a pragmatic assessment of what outcomes the Kremlin believes it can shape and be prepared to live with. This two-level analysis of the Russian perspective is critical. In public statements as well as in private conversations, Russian officials and analysts often toggle back and forth between expressing dissatisfaction with Turkey's position based on an ideal/preferred understanding of Russian interests, while simultaneously embracing Turkish actions as a necessary mitigation to prevent even worse outcomes, from Moscow's perspective. Moreover, although Russian interests may be enduring, specific policy positions are neither fixed nor immutable. Because the situation in the South Caucasus as well as in Russia, Turkey, and Europe as a whole is dynamic and unpredictable, it is most important to focus on critical factors and the dependent variables from which useful assessments can be derived, as Vitaly Naumkin advises.¹

This is occurring against the backdrop of a dramatic shift in the importance of the South Caucasus for Russia's overall grand strategy, especially in the wake of the conflict over Ukraine. Since 2022, the trend towards a decoupling of Russia and the West, especially Europe, has accelerated. At the same time, the Russian perspective is impacted by shifts over the last two decades in both Turkey's domestic politics and Ankara's own revisions of what it sees as its grand strategy. Finally, the Russian approach is shaped by the personal relationship between the two long-serving chief executives of the Russian and Turkish states: Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This has resulted in an embrace by the Kremlin of what might be termed "flexibility in opportunism" for assessing Turkey's role in the region and how it impacts Moscow's interests, not only in the South Caucasus but vis-à-vis the West in general. Thus, the Russian approach is quite situational based on a very fluid situation – in Russia, in the region as a whole, in Turkey, and in Europe – as well as the identities of specific leaders.²

¹ Vitaly Naumkin, "Russian Policy in the South Caucasus", *Connections* 1, no. 3 (September 2002): 31

² Gayane Novikova, "The South Caucasus between Russia and the West: How Pragmatic Are the Stakeholders' Approaches?", *Connections* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 41

2.

Enduring Russian Interests in the South Caucasus

Russia's core interests in the South Caucasus have been remarkably consistent across tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet regimes. The South Caucasus is the keystone linchpin of what Amur Hajiyeu describes as "the Caspian-Black Sea macro-region". Hegemony over this zone provides the opportunity to project power and influence into "the adjacent zones of Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Balkans".³

In Soviet times, the South Caucasus had been economically integrated into a larger Soviet/Eurasian economic space, with its human capital reserves, raw material base, and manufacturing centres utilised at Moscow's direction and integrated into supply chains designed to support enterprises within the Soviet core. From a security perspective, control over the South Caucasus pushed the Soviet frontier from the "natural" boundary of the Caucasus mountains into the northern Middle East and helped to secure the Black and Caspian Sea basins. The three Soviet republics in the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) gave the Soviet heartland a degree of strategic depth against the southern tier of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as well as the pro-American regimes in the Persian Gulf. Indeed, the term for the region during Soviet times ("Transcaucasia") reflected an orientation where all roads lead to Moscow – and it was via Moscow that the region interacted with the broader world, including its geographically proximate neighbours of Turkey and Iran.

Despite the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the post-Soviet Russian government initially hoped to maintain the old Soviet borders as the de facto delineation of Moscow's zone of privileged interests. While rejecting Mikhail Gorbachev's vision of a revamped Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin and his team initially believed that other former Soviet republics would maintain their linkages to the Russian metropole and accept

³ Baku-Ankara-Moscow Co-op Format Based on Regional Interaction", *Azernews* (online), 08 October 2019, <https://www.azernews.az/nation/156981.html> (accessed 11 March 2024);
Nikolas K. Gvosdev, *Keystone States: A New Category of Power* (Belgrade: Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development [CIRSD], Autumn 2015), <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-autumn-2015--issue-no5/keystone-states---a-new-category-of-power> (accessed 11 March 2024)

Russian leadership of the region.⁴ In formulating Russian national security strategies for post-Soviet realities, Yeltsin declared, “Russia has special geopolitical, strategic, economic and humanitarian interests in the post-Soviet geopolitical space and should be recognized as an unchallenged leader in this region.”⁵

Even as it pursued integration with the Euro-Atlantic world, the Yeltsin administration embarked on what might be termed a “denial/compellence” strategy for the South Caucasus. Russia would seek to “deny” access to any Euro-Atlantic organisation or project in which Russia itself was not represented, while attempting to maintain Soviet-era networks that connected the region to Russia – and which could give Moscow economic and political leverage over the states in the region. Yeltsin had a consistent vision of the South Caucasus states – along with other former Soviet republics – being politically integrated into a robust Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that would prevent the other “newly-independent” states from becoming “anti-Russian” buffer states and promote the formation of a Moscow-led regional economic space.⁶ In energy matters, for instance, the Russian preference was for post-Soviet Caspian states to continue to reach world markets via Russian intermediaries and for Moscow to be able to control sales to European and Asian customers.⁷ In short, the Russian agenda for the post-Soviet South Caucasus comprised the following principal points:

- Maintenance of the old Soviet integrated supply chain networks, by which the bulk of South Caucasus economic output would be purchased by Russian enterprises at favourable rates, with South Caucasus economies in turn buying Russian goods and services;
- Use of Russian logistical infrastructure for South Caucasus states to sell to world markets with appropriate transit fees paid to Russian operators;
- Continued deployment of Russian forces in the South Caucasus to maintain the Soviet-era status quo in the Black and Caspian seas as well as the early warning/detection networks for securing the Russian homeland and warding off attacks;

⁴ Alexander A. Sergunin, “Russian Post-Communist Foreign Policy Thinking at the Cross-Roads: Changing Paradigms”, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 3, no. 3 (September 2000), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/jird/jird_sept00sea01.html (accessed 11 March 2024)

⁵ John M. Goshko, “Yeltsin Claims Russian Sphere of Influence”, *Washington Post* (online), 27 September 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/09/27/yeltsin-claims-russian-sphere-of-influence/fe3fe83b-bef3-4c10-b9bf-4784b4ec39c6/> (accessed 11 March 2024)

⁶ Paul Goble, “Russia: Analysis from Washington – Yeltsin’s CIS Ultimatum”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (online), 09 April 1997, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1084280.html> (accessed 11 March 2024)

⁷ Dominique Finon and Catherine Locatelli, *Russian and European Gas Interdependence: Can Market Forces Balance Out Geopolitics?* Série EPE, no. 41 (Grenoble: Laboratoire d’Economie de la Production et de l’Intégration Internationale [LEPII], January 2007): 3–5, 13

- Preservation of security relations that would ensure that non-Russian forces would never be deployed in the South Caucasus and that the South Caucasus states would not join any alliance (read NATO) that was opposed to Russia. In addition, the South Caucasus states were expected to guarantee that they would neither provide support and succour nor allow their territories to become supply lines for separatist forces inside the Russian Federation.

However, the execution of this agenda faced major setbacks. Russian capabilities, especially in the 1990s, could never match Moscow's aspirations. Governments in Baku, Tbilisi, and Yerevan were not prepared to run all of their external relations via the Kremlin. Even though the George H. W. Bush and then the Clinton administrations sought to develop a strategic partnership with the post-Soviet Russian Federation, the United States and most European states rejected the proposition that the relationships of other post-Soviet republics must be channelled through Moscow. Former Ambassador to Turkmenistan, Steven Mann, has noted that the United States wanted new, strong, independent countries to emerge from the rubble of the old Soviet empire.⁸ Guided by a strategic imperative to limit Russian (and Iranian) regional influence, Ankara's Euro-Atlantic partners expected that, given Turkey's strategic location, Turkey would take the lead in advancing and extending Western interests in the region, especially in "providing options whose main effect would be to weaken the Caspian states' economic and transportation dependence on Russia".⁹ For its own geopolitical and geo-economic reasons, Turkey made the conscious choice to move from a "Moscow-centred approach" to developing direct ties to the post-Soviet republics in the Caucasus in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse.¹⁰ This reflected President Turgut Özal's vision of Turkey as a keystone interconnector between the Euro-Atlantic and greater Middle Eastern worlds (including the Turkic states of the Caucasus and Central Asia).¹¹

This put Turkey at odds with Moscow because Ankara – on its own or acting in concert with the Euro-Atlantic powers – was in a position to offer alternatives to the South Caucasus states that would weaken Russia's ability to advance its "denial/compellence" strategy by offering clear alternatives to Russia. With one state – Armenia – the failure of efforts to promote rapprochement between Yerevan and Ankara meant that Armenia remained firmly ensconced in the Russia camp. However, Turkish efforts found greater receptivity in both Azerbaijan and Georgia.

⁸ Steven Mann, "Memoir: Clinching the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline", *Eurasianet* (online), 03 January 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/memoir-clinching-the-baku-ceyhan-pipeline> (accessed 11 March 2024)

⁹ Mustafa Aydın, "Turkish Policy Toward the Caucasus", *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 1, no. 3 (September 2002): 46

¹⁰ Ibid: 39

¹¹ Igor Torbakov, "Ankara's Post-Soviet Efforts in the Caucasus and Central Asia: The Failure of the Turkic World Model", *Eurasianet* (online), 26 December 2002, <https://eurasianet.org/ankaras-post-soviet-efforts-in-the-caucasus-and-central-asia-the-failure-of-the-turkic-world-model> (accessed 10 March 2024);

Bayram Balcı, "Strengths and Constraints of Turkish Policy in the South Caucasus", *Insight Turkey* 16, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 43-52

In furthering these aims, Turkey played a leading role in advancing regional cooperation and development projects that would offer alternatives to dependence on Russia, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan crude oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, and, finally, the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP). Turkey was indispensable in creating these new east-west trade corridors that allowed Russia to be bypassed; as Ziya Öniş has concluded, “Significant investments undertaken by Turkey [...] played an important role in linking the republics to international markets, a factor of critical importance in their transition process.”¹² These new investment and connectivity projects helped to reorient the region’s trade and investment flows away from Moscow towards Ankara, with Turkey, in turn, serving as the South Caucasus’ window to the West. During this time, Turkish policy aimed to create “new networks of interdependency between Ankara and the regional capitals”, and this was viewed as a direct threat to Russian interests.¹³ In fact, over a 25-year period after the Soviet Union’s collapse, the fundamental reorientation of the trade flows of Georgia and Azerbaijan away from Russia was completed.¹⁴

Moreover, after an initial period of irrational exuberance, it became clear that Russia would remain outside the principal Western institutions, and thus it would have no ability to influence the policies of either NATO or the EU – including the ability to exercise a veto if South Caucasus states wished to draw closer or even join these institutions. This could make it more difficult or even impossible for Russia to guarantee that its economic and security interests would be honoured or safeguarded.¹⁵

The economic penetration of the South Caucasus by Western interests also led to concerns about the institutional expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions into the region. This growing economic infrastructure could pave the way for closer political and security ties, with concerns that Turkey was actively acting as the midwife for the Euro-Atlantic community. Indeed, the recession of Russian power in the South Caucasus was so dramatic in the 1990s that the then-national security advisor to the president of Azerbaijan, Vafa Guluzade, urged Turkey and the United States, along with the main European states, to work together to increase the tempo of Western

¹² Ziya Öniş, “Turkey and Post-Soviet States: Potential and Limits of Regional Power Influence”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 52 (Summer 2001): 71; Wojciech Górecki and Mateusz Chudziak, *The (pan-)Turkic Caucasus: The Baku-Ankara Alliance and Its Regional Importance*, OSW Commentary, no. 374 (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies [OSW], 01 February 2021), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2021-02-01/pan-turkic-caucasus-baku-ankara-alliance-and-its-regional> (accessed 10 March 2024)

¹³ Mustafa Aydın (2002): 46–47

¹⁴ The countries of the European Union now comprise the principal trading partners for all three states of the region, including Armenia.

¹⁵ Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, *Turkey’s Interest and Strategies in the South Caucasus* (Ankara: Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey [TEPAV], May 2012), https://tepav.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/upload/files/1336992403-3.Turkey_s_Interest_and_Strategies_in_the_South_Caucasus.pdf (accessed 16 October 2024)

activity in the region to protect the South Caucasus countries from a “Russian revanche”.¹⁶ In remarks on 5 July 1999, Guluzade described Euro-Atlantic involvement in the region as part of the “welcome tidal wave that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union” – and was expected to culminate with the South Caucasus being firmly integrated into the West via Turkey.¹⁷

During this period, one of the few tools Russia could effectively wield against the states of the South Caucasus was political subversion and support for separatist movements that challenged the ability of fragile new governments to effectively control their territories.¹⁸ This allowed Moscow to take advantage of longstanding policies requiring that countries with border disputes and challenges to their territorial integrity could not be admitted into EU and/or NATO structures without prior resolution of these internal disputes; it also made the countries of the South Caucasus potentially less attractive to European and American firms, especially when they were considering whether to make large-scale infrastructure investments. When credible guarantees were offered by Western governments – such as those proffered by President Bill Clinton to Azerbaijan, helping to pave the way for the 1994 “Contract of the Century” – Western companies responded, and Moscow took notice. But the haphazard levels of attention that the United States and other governments gave to the region – and their hesitation in playing more proactive roles – limited Western influence.¹⁹ As a result, the Russians hoped that by showing the limits of the West’s willingness to intervene in order to settle these conflicts, Moscow could extract concessions as the price for making Georgia and Azerbaijan whole again and to finalise Armenia’s borders. Yet, even the frozen conflicts did not entirely redound to Russia’s advantage; they slowed or complicated efforts to integrate the region into the Euro-Atlantic world, but they did not forestall them altogether.²⁰

¹⁶ Jamestown Monitor, *A Fresh, Astute Nuance in Azerbaijan’s Discourse on NATO* (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 09 July 1999), <https://jamestown.org/program/a-fresh-astute-nuance-in-azerbajans-discourse-on-nato/> (accessed 16 October 2024)

¹⁷ Azerbaijan in the World, *A conversation with Vafa Guluzade, former national security advisor to President Heydar Aliyev and longtime political commentator*, (Baku: Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy [ADA], 19 March 2008), http://biweekly.ada.edu.az/interviews/A_conversation_with_Vafa_Guluzade.htm (accessed 10 March 2024)

¹⁸ Jakub Lachert, *Post-Soviet Frozen Conflicts: A Challenge for European Security* (Warsaw: Warsaw Institute, 14 March 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/a-fresh-astute-nuance-in-azerbajans-discourse-on-nato/>. <https://warsawinstitute.org/post-soviet-frozen-conflicts-challenge-european-security/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

¹⁹ Rovshan Ibrahimov, *U.S.-Azerbaijan Relations: A View from Baku*, Rethink Paper, no. 17, (Washington, D.C.: Rethink Institute, October 2014)

²⁰ Amanda Paul, *The Eastern Partnership, The Russia-Ukraine War and the Impact on the South Caucasus*, IAI Working Papers 15, (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali [IAI], 06 February 2015), <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiw1506.pdf> (accessed 10 March 2024)

3.

Finding a New Modus Vivendi

By the end of the 1990s, Russian leaders were privately acknowledging the reality that the states of the South Caucasus wanted access to Western technology and investments and also sought a greater Euro-Atlantic presence to counterbalance any potential Russian interference in their affairs.²¹ Russia simply did not have the power to prevent any expansion of Euro-Atlantic influence in the region, including both private corporate investment as well as greater institutional links with both the EU and NATO.²² The Russian approach thus shifted along the following lines of effort:

- Shifting from trying to prevent all links to the West in favour of mediating the terms under which Turkey, the EU, and/or NATO would operate in the region;
- Finding ways to amplify points of disagreement between the South Caucasus states and Turkey;
- Taking advantage of tensions in Turkey's relationships with its Western partners to encourage Ankara to conduct its policies in the South Caucasus on the basis of Turkish national interests and via the paradigm of the bilateral Moscow-Ankara relationship.

The overall thrust was to modify a complete “denial/compellence” approach in favour of “compartmentalising and limiting” the Turkish and larger Euro-Atlantic presence. With both Turkey and the states of the region, Russia would attempt to pursue an approach defined as “flexible partnerships”²³ in the hopes of anchoring Moscow's

²¹ Timothy L. Thomas, “Russian National Interests and the Caspian Sea”, *Perceptions* 4, no. 4 (December 1999/February 2000): 75–96

²² Boris Toucas, *Turkey Has No Allies in the Black Sea, Only Interests*, *CSIS Commentary* (online) (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies [CSIS], 13 February 2018), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-has-no-allies-black-sea-only-interests> (accessed 10 March 2024)

²³ Alexander Karavaev, “Uniting the Caspian Sea: Integration of the Region in the Framework of ‘Network Partnerships’ Scenario”, *Vestnik Kavkaza* (online), 11 August 2018, <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/analysis/Uniting-the-Caspian-Sea-integration-of-the-region-in-the-framework-of-%E2%80%98network-partnerships%E2%80%99-scenario.html> (accessed 10 March 2024)

relationships with Ankara and the three national capitals of the region on the basis of “transactional neutrality”.²⁴

Beginning in the second term of the Yeltsin administration, particularly under the influence of Foreign Minister (and then Prime Minister) Yevgeny Primakov, the Kremlin began to reassess the inevitability of systemic rivalry with Turkey. By changing the lenses – from viewing Turkey as a member of NATO and a candidate to join the EU in favour of treating Ankara as an emerging Eurasian middle power (“an entity of its own, friendly to the West but separate from it”, as Selim Koru describes it²⁵) – the Russian national security establishment believed that there was an opportunity to disaggregate Turkish interests, including in the South Caucasus, from those of the larger Euro-Atlantic community. This reassessment carried over into the presidency of Vladimir Putin. It rested on the following conclusions:

- Turkey understood that Russia was not as weak as expected, and that an “overly aggressive” stance in its South Caucasus policy in Eurasia risked direct confrontation with Russia that could exact major costs;²⁶
- Turkey could not rely on its NATO partners for support in the event of a clash with Russia – a perspective that was reinforced in Ankara due to the number of European NATO members that were reluctant to address Turkey’s security concerns in the run-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003;²⁷
- Turkey’s bid for membership in the EU was likely to stall, and Europeans would be unlikely to support and compensate Turkey for any losses incurred for advancing the Euro-Atlantic agenda against Russian opposition;
- Given Turkey’s own economic crisis, prioritising good relations with Russia – especially in economic matters – was more important than deepening ties with the South Caucasus;
- New political movements in Turkey, especially the emerging Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, or AKP), were less committed to viewing Turkey as a forward base for the Western world and more in favour of operating as an independent regional power – or, as Ahmet Davutoğlu put in his 2001 work *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth), seeing Turkey not as a “wing state” but as a country becoming a “pivotal actor”.²⁸

²⁴ Nikolas K. Gvosdev, *Russia’s Southern Strategy* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute [FPRI], November 2019), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/11/russias-southern-strategy/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

²⁵ Selim Koru, *The Resiliency of Turkey–Russia Relations* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute [FPRI], April 2018), <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/bssp2-koru.pdf> (accessed 10 March 2024)

²⁶ Mustafa Aydın (2002): 47

²⁷ Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Don’t Believe the Doomsayers: NATO Has a Future”, *National Interest* (online), 15 April 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/don%E2%80%99t-believe-doomsayers-nato-has-future-52712> (accessed 10 March 2024)

²⁸ Deniz Devrim and Evelina Schulz, *Turkey’s Rise as a Regional Power and its Role in the European Neighborhood*, ARI 108/2009 (Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, 30 June 2009),

Davutoğlu's vision was very compatible with Primakov's recommendations for engaging with Turkey as a Eurasian regional power, and Putin's team began to accelerate a new Russian outreach approach to Ankara based on strengthening that orientation. The "Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Eurasia", inked in 2001 by then Foreign Ministers Igor Ivanov and Ismail Cem, took on new salience once the AKP took power in 2003. After Sergei Lavrov became foreign minister in 2004, the Russian side extended feelers to Ankara that in the South Caucasus, Russia and Turkey – as the two leading regional powers – ought to coordinate their efforts to manage regional problems without involving "outsiders" (e.g. the EU or the United States). In turn, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan resurrected the idea of a "Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform" where Turkey, Russia (and later Iran) would work with the three South Caucasian states to promote regional peace and development, with so-called extra-regional powers excluded.²⁹

Putin's deputy chief of staff, Igor Sechin (later deputy prime minister and CEO of the Rosneft energy concern), became the de facto coordinator of this effort, working primarily with the major Russian conglomerates and heads of the state-owned companies. Energy became the linchpin of this upgraded relationship, as new direct pipelines guaranteed direct supplies at acceptable prices to facilitate Turkish economic growth and for Turkey to emerge as a regional energy hub to connect Russia to other markets. Turkish industry also benefited not only from cheap, reliable power but also from access to petrochemicals that the Russian energy bridge supplied. Russia was prepared to supply technologies, especially in the nuclear power field, that other partners were reluctant to provide. The AKP could reap the electoral benefits of lower energy costs for Turkish consumers, the economic growth buttressed by Russian energy supplies, and new opportunities in the Russian market – far larger than the entire South Caucasus and Central Asia combined – for Turkish businesses (especially those located in the AKP's Anatolian heartland), Turkish construction firms, and agro-business companies.³⁰

<https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/turkeys-rise-as-a-regional-power-and-its-role-in-the-european-neighbourhood-ari/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

²⁹ Kevork Oskanian, *Turkey's Global Strategy: Turkey and the Caucasus*, IDEAS Reports (London: London School of Economics and Political Science [LSE], 2011), https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43497/1/Turkey%27s%20Global%20Strategy_Turkey%20and%20the%20Caucasus%28lsero%29.pdf (accessed 18 October 2024)

³⁰ Muhittin T. Özsağlam, "State-Centric Russian Energy Policy and Rapprochement in Russia-Turkey Relations", *Journal of Social Sciences* 06, no. 02 (October 2013): 164-66

The expanded economic relationship offered Turkey the opportunity to hedge against its Western partners, especially when the EU or the United States attempted to use economic tools to push for Turkish compliance with American preferences on a whole host of political matters. It also empowered a new “Russia lobby” in Ankara that preferred for Turkey to conduct its relationship with Moscow in a purely bilateral fashion, rather than advancing the equities of NATO and the EU.³¹

The Russian side accepted that any preconditions that Turkey leave NATO or abandon its relationship with the EU were non-starters. From that realisation, it was possible to then proceed to how to centre the relationship on a pragmatic, transactional basis.³² Maxim Suchkov identifies the “three principles” of Russian engagement with Turkey:

“The first principle is to treat issues that are important to Turkey’s security with understanding. The second is to clearly establish red lines and discuss from the outset a corridor of opportunities for cooperation on problem issues. The third is to take advantage of the mistakes of Turkey’s other partners, especially the United States.”³³

Both sides agree that the discussion on the “corridor of opportunities” starts from the recognition that – in the South Caucasus and in the Black-Caspian Sea region more generally – there are disagreements, tensions, and in some cases diametrically opposed policy preferences. Yet, Ankara and Moscow also believe that the best way to navigate this corridor is first via the personal relationship between Putin and Erdoğan, and then via bilateral mechanisms (such as the High Level Cooperation Council, inaugurated in 2010) or various informal “plus” formats (Russia-Turkey-Iran, Russia-Turkey-Azerbaijan, etc.) where the United States, the EU, or major European states are not included.³⁴ This has culminated in the 3+3 format – proposed and executed jointly by Erdoğan and Azerbaijan’s president, Ilham Aliyev – in which the Russia-Turkey-Iran trilateral intersects with the Armenia-Azerbaijan-Georgia one, without the participation of the “extra-regional” states.³⁵

³¹ Mustafa Akyol, “What the ‘Russian lobby’ in Ankara Wants”, *Al-Monitor* (online), 15 December 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/12/turkey-russia-what-russian-lobby-wants.html> (accessed 10 March 2024)

³² Suat Kınıklıoğlu, “The Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relations”, *Insight Turkey* 8, no. 2 (April-June 2006): 82

³³ Maxim Suchkov, *Turkey’s Erdogan: Flexible Rivals*, Commentary (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 March 2020), <https://carnegie Moscow.org/commentary/81330> (accessed 10 March 2024)

³⁴ Ilgar Mamedov, “Russia and Turkey Should Protect Their Interests, Working Together with Natural Partners”, *Vestnik Kavkaza* (online), 28 February 2019, at <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/interviews/Ilgar-Mamedov-Russia-and-Turkey-should-protect-their-interests-working-together-with-natural-partners.html> (accessed 10 March 2024); Krzysztof Strachota, *With Russia’s Future Uncertain, Turkey and the West Need Each Other* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute [MEI], 18 October 2023), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-future-uncertain-turkey-and-west-need-each-other> (accessed 10 March 2024)

³⁵ Ilham Aliyev President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, “Joint press statements of Presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkish”, Baku, 10 December 2020, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/50868> (accessed 16 October 2024)

In the South Caucasus, Russia would prefer that Turkey articulates its interests within the bilateral framework, not under the aegis of NATO or as an associate of an EU program. Ankara, for its part, stresses to its Russian interlocutors that any Turkish initiative in the region will be grounded in Turkish national interests. Given, however, the importance of NATO to overall Turkish defence and security interests, and the financial and business advantages that accrue to Turkey because of its economic framework with the EU, Moscow is well-aware that the prospects for a definitive break between Turkey and the West – a withdrawal from NATO, an abandonment of the EU Customs Union – is not a possibility. Therefore, the Russian preference to prevent and reverse the Euro-Atlantic connection in the South Caucasus – even with a good relationship between Ankara and Moscow – is not realistic, and the Kremlin must therefore find ways to limit and minimise what NATO and the EU intend in the region, guided by the logic of what Daria Isachenko has labelled “manageable interference”.³⁶

Erdoğan’s government has understood that imperative. When Putin declared in 2013, “Russia will never leave this region. On the contrary, we will make our place here even stronger”,³⁷ the Turkish calculation was both that Russia would have the leverage to make this claim stick, and that NATO and the EU would not collectively devote the necessary attention or resources to dispute this claim. Ankara recognised that Moscow wanted “to be an informal ‘veto’ player” in terms of the degree and extent to which the Euro-Atlantic institutions would be able to shape the region.

The question of how to respond to Georgian NATO aspirations is an excellent example of the complicated balancing act that Turkey has engaged in.³⁸ Despite its emerging partnership with Russia, Turkey did not veto the 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration that Georgia “will become” a member of the alliance at some point in the future. Not only does that document not block NATO exercises in Georgia with the Georgian military, but it also establishes that Turkey will (or at least could) take part and (could) provide security assistance to the Georgian armed forces. None of these are particularly welcome actions from Moscow’s perspective. At the same time, the amount of aid provided by Turkey is relatively modest, and Turkey certainly plays no role in helping to upgrade Georgian forces to the level that would be needed to militarily change the current status quo vis-à-vis Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Turkey has made it clear that it would not offer any sort of security guarantees to Georgia and quietly advised Tbilisi not “to court confrontation with

³⁶ Daria Isachenko, “Türkiye, Russia, and Their Rules-Based Competition”, *Baku Dialogues* 06, no. 04 (2023): 46

³⁷ President of Russia, “Speech at Meeting of the Russian-Armenian Interregional Forum”, Moscow, 02 December 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19733> (accessed 17 October 2024)

³⁸ Eugene Kogan, “Georgian-Turkish Relations and Their Impact on Russia”, *European Security and Defense* (online), 24 October 2023, <https://euro-sd.com/2023/10/articles/34752/georgian-turkish-relations-and-their-impact-on-russia/> (accessed 10 March 2024);

“Turkish Foreign Minister Calls for Enlarged NATO, Georgia Membership”, *Reuters* (online), 23 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1ZM1HB/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

Russia over Georgia's NATO membership aspirations".³⁹ Moreover, the Turkish government has also informally counselled post-Mikheil Saakashvili governments to maintain economic ties with Moscow.⁴⁰ And in response to Western criticisms of Turkey's relations with Russia, then-Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in January 2020 challenged the rest of the alliance to activate a membership action plan for Georgia. He suggested that criticisms of Turkey's partnership with Russia were invalid if other NATO member states were unable and unwilling to shoulder the strategic costs of moving ahead with enlarging the alliance to bring in Georgia. Turkey's efforts to have its coordination with Russia "coexist with a continued participation in NATO activities" had led, by 2020, to an assessment that, because of this balancing, "Turkey [was] a vastly more difficult partner for NATO, the EU and the US".⁴¹

Turkey understands that its expected role is to serve as a "mediator", brokering EU and NATO activities in the region in a form that is least objectionable or threatening to Russian interests. For much of the last two decades, therefore, Turkey has sought to balance its Euro-Atlantic associations with its Russia partnership in the South Caucasus according to three broad imperatives:

- Turkey will emphasise to its European partners that any initiative or project in the South Caucasus should not exclude Russian participation, and that Russian involvement helps to stabilise the region (and thus serve European interests);
- Turkey's attempts to convince its European partners that working *through* the Russia-Turkey relationship in the South Caucasus, rather than *around* it, is a better way to achieve EU goals for the South Caucasus, including political stability and security of energy exports;
- To reassure Moscow that Ankara's policy choices are guided by Turkish national interests, Turkey is prepared to accept criticism from its Euro-Atlantic partners when Turkish actions conflict with their preferences.⁴²

Moscow has seen ample proof of this last point. Turkey's pre-2022 willingness to develop new energy projects that would directly link Russia to Turkey and provide alternate access for Russia to European markets was criticised both for undermining the EU preference that maintaining "Ukrainian transit is of strategic importance for

³⁹ Eugene Kogan, "Georgian-Turkish Relations and Their Impact on Russia", *European Security & Defense* (online), 24 October 2023, <https://euro-sd.com/2023/10/articles/34752/georgian-turkish-relations-and-their-impact-on-russia/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Marc Pierini, "New Power Struggles in the Mediterranean", in *An Unexpected Party Crasher: Rethinking Euro-Mediterranean Relations in Corona Times, 25 Years After the Barcelona Process*. IEMed *Mediterranean Yearbook 2020*, ed. European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) (Barcelona, 30 July 2020): 107, <https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/IEMed-Mediterranean-Yearbook-2020.pdf> (accessed 17 October 2024)

⁴² Muhittin T. Özsağlam (October 2013): 170; Eleni Fotiou, *Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform: What Is at Stake for Regional Cooperation?*, ICBS Policy Brief 16 (Athens: International Centre for Black Sea Studies [ICBS], June 2009), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/104737/PB_16.pdf (accessed 10 March 2024)

the EU and is the key requirement of European energy security”, as well as for possibly complicating other projects designed for Central Asian energy to bypass Russia.⁴³ Erdoğan’s efforts to create bilateral mechanisms with Russia for regulating conflict in the South Caucasus were criticised by the United States and other NATO allies for not securing a “transatlantic consensus”.⁴⁴

Moscow is also reassured that Turkey counsels and supports the regional governments in their efforts to follow this paradigm. Ankara, for instance, has encouraged post–Saakashvili governments in Georgia to maintain a pragmatic approach to Russia that is grounded in a much more realistic assessment of the pace and direction of the country’s aspiration towards Euro–Atlantic integration. But Azerbaijan – Turkey’s closest regional partner and sole formal ally – has also paralleled much of the Turkish approach in developing a new relationship with Moscow that is centred on “transactional neutrality”.

After the turn of the century, Presidents Heydar Aliyev and then Ilham Aliyev came to a similar assessment. Erdoğan and his team concluded that, in spite of optimistic Western appraisals, Russia’s power was stronger than expected, Turkey could not on its own free the South Caucasus from Russian influence, and Western support would be haphazard – a conclusion reinforced by the outcome of the 2008 Russia–Georgia conflict, which demonstrated that the West could not counter Russian power projection or provide meaningful security guarantees.⁴⁵ For Azerbaijan, Baku’s disappointing experience with the EU over the stillborn Nabucco pipeline project contributed to this assessment, reinforcing Baku’s preference for taking a cautious approach.⁴⁶ In testing the “say/do” gap between Western rhetorical commitments and substantive action, Aliyev concluded that “Western security guarantees came to be seen as the opposite of robust”, and that Western assistance in the event of a major clash with Russia “would be limited to diplomatic support and economic aid”.⁴⁷

Putin’s offer to reconceptualise Russia–Azerbaijan relations on a “balance of interests” found a receptive interlocutor in Baku. Simply put, Putin’s proposals represented a trade-off in which Russia would not attempt to interrupt Baku’s

⁴³ “Energy Projects Pave Way for Stronger Turkey–Russia Rapport”, *Daily Sabah* (online), 04 October 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2019/10/04/energy-projects-pave-way-for-stronger-turkey-russia-rapport> (accessed 10 March 2024);

Joshua Posaner, “Šefčovič: Ukraine–Russia Gas Deal Should Put Nord Stream Criticism in ‘Perspective’”, *Politico* (online), 21 December 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/maros-sefcovic-ukraine-russia-gas-deal-should-put-nord-stream-criticism-in-perspective/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁴⁴ Eleni Fotiou (2009): 16

⁴⁵ This realisation has also been an important driver for the stance taken by the Georgian Dream party, and was reinforced with its October 2024 election campaign, which stressed the risks to Georgia of taking a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis Russia.

⁴⁶ “Don’t Cry for the Nabucco Pipeline”, *Reuters* (online), 09 May 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/opinion/dont-cry-for-the-nabucco-pipeline-idUS2328538655/> (accessed 16 October 2024)

⁴⁷ Svante Cornell, “Between Eurasia and the Middle East”, *Baku Dialogues* 04, no. 01 (2020): 14

economic, political, and even security relationships with Turkey, the EU, NATO, and the United States – provided that certain Russian equities were respected.⁴⁸ The Azerbaijan model consisted of the following items:

- Azerbaijan joined the Non-Aligned Movement in May 2011, adopting a position of formal neutrality (and eschewing any option of joining NATO, but without having to terminate its participation in NATO’s “Partnership for Peace”). However, Baku retained the right to pursue bilateral security relationships, especially with Turkey, to achieve a degree of military self-sufficiency;
- Azerbaijan committed to using Russia as one of its options for export and trade, and to offer Russian firms opportunities for investment in Azerbaijan, while retaining the freedom to use corridors and export routes that bypass Russia;
- Azerbaijan would take part in the organisations co-led by Russia and Turkey for dealing with regional issues, rather than turning to outside entities;
- Every major interaction with a Western institution would be accompanied by a balancing initiative towards a Russian-led organisation. Azerbaijan’s continued cooperation with NATO, as a “key partner nation”, would be offset by its role as a “dialogue partner” within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Azerbaijan would seek to have relationships both with the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union;
- Azerbaijan will facilitate the development of the Middle Corridor between Asia and Europe, relying both on the investment and support of the EU’s Global Gateway initiative and China’s Belt and Road Initiative, while also working with Russia, Iran, and India to develop the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

This “strategic hedging” allows Baku to satisfy Moscow’s most pressing concerns while avoiding full absorption into Russian-led institutions, but it also gives Baku options vis-à-vis Turkey, the EU, and the United States.⁴⁹ Anar Valiyev and Narmina Mamishova characterise this as the “pursuit of neutrality” that leads to “an ‘interest-based’ multidimensional policy” which allows for balanced relations with Russia and Turkey, and with the larger Euro-Atlantic world.⁵⁰

By the end of the 2010s, there was optimism in Moscow that, with Turkish help, Azerbaijan could maintain – and Georgia might evolve towards – this type of relationship with Russia, while a Turkish-Russian condominium could set the agenda

⁴⁸ “Russia-Azerbaijan Relations Based on Good Neighborliness and Mutual Respect”, *Vestnik Kavkaza* (online), 27 September 2018, <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/news/Vladimir-Putin-Russia-Azerbaijan-relations-based-on-neighborliness-and-mutual-respect.html> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁴⁹ Zaur Shiriyev, *Azerbaijan’s Relations with Russia: Closer by Default?*, Research Paper (London: Chatham House, March 2019), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-03-14-Azerbaijan2.pdf> (accessed 10 March 2024);
Nikolas K. Gvosdev (2019) 10–12

⁵⁰ Anar Valiyev and Narmina Mamishova, “Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy towards Russia since Independence: Compromise Achieved”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019): 271

for the broader Black-Caspian Sea region, which would channel Euro-Atlantic activities in the South Caucasus region into formats that Moscow would be able to manage, even if not fully endorse. The Turkish-Russian understanding survived the annexation of Crimea in 2014: Although Turkey did not recognise this act and continued its security cooperation, it eschewed imposing any sanctions on Russia or otherwise interrupting ongoing initiatives. The crises of 2015–16, starting with the Russian intervention into Syria, the shoot-down of a Russian jet by the Turkish Air Force, and the attempted coup against Erdoğan also seemed to validate the “five reassessments” discussed above, which had started the Turkey-Russia rapprochement at the turn of the century.

Many Western policymakers operate from a mental map in which events in Syria and the Middle East are categorised as separate and unrelated to developments in the Black-Caspian Sea region. For both Turkey and Russia, however, the theatres are interconnected.⁵¹ Turkey’s support for Syrian rebels against the rule of Bashar al-Assad – a position that was generally supported and encouraged by its Euro-Atlantic partners – directly clashed with Russian assistance to the regime in Damascus, which increased dramatically when Russia undertook a direct limited military intervention to bolster Assad’s fortunes. In November 2015 the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian fighter that had crossed into Turkish airspace from Syria. This raised the prospect of a wider armed conflict between Turkey and Russia, and the Russians responded by imposing a series of sanctions impacting the continuation of joint projects and the suspension of tourism. But the gaps between promises of support from Turkey’s European partners and actual assistance – from security guarantees to overcoming the impact of the Russian sanctions – reinforced Erdoğan’s fears of Turkey being left alone to absorb the consequences of directly challenging Russia. Only after Erdoğan sent a personal “letter of regret” for the incident was the comprehensive political dialogue restored. Turkey’s at the time newly installed prime minister, Binali Yıldırım, also backed away from the United States and general European position that only Assad’s departure or overthrow could end the Syrian civil war, paving the way for a new set of Russia-Turkey dialogues on finding compromise strategies for Syria, but also creating distance between Ankara and its NATO allies. Adding to this, the 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan heightened suspicions on his part that the West, if not actually supporting his forcible removal from power, would not be particularly troubled by it. The Russia-Turkey dialogue over Syria was durable enough to survive any fallout from a Russian air strike in 2020 that killed Turkish

⁵¹ Daria Isachenko, *Turkey and Russia: The Logic of Conflictual Cooperation*, SWP Research Paper 7/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], October 2021), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2021RP07_TurkeyAndRussia.pdf (accessed 17 October 2024); Svante Cornell (2020): 15

soldiers in Idlib – aided again in part by a Turkish analysis that support from its Western partners to confront Russia more forcefully would not be forthcoming.⁵²

While this suggests a high degree of durability in the relationship, how solid is the Turkey–Russia rapprochement? Here, two factors are quite crucial. The first is any erosion of Russian power; the second is a change in the commitment of the Western world to more energetically pursue a South Caucasus strategy. Either – or both – could change the calculus on which rests the two-decade-long Turkey–Russia understanding. None of this was a secret to Moscow. It highlighted to the Kremlin that any changes in the status quo – whether in the region itself, in Russia, in Turkey, or in Europe – would revise the entire jury-rigged arrangements that defined the South Caucasus in the first two decades of the 21st century, and not in Russia’s favour.

⁵² “Why Turkey Can’t Expect Military Support from NATO over Attacks in Syria”, *The Conversation* (online), 06 March 2020, <https://theconversation.com/why-turkey-cant-expect-military-support-from-nato-over-attacks-in-syria-132838> (accessed 10 March 2024); Mona Yacoubian, *In Syria, Russian–Turkish Deal Is a Game Changer on the Ground, Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 23 October 2019), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/10/syria-russian-turkish-deal-game-changer-ground> (accessed 10 March 2024); Jack Stubbs and Dmitry Solovyov, “Kremlin Says Turkey Apologised for Shooting down Russian Jet”, *Reuters* (online), 27 June 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0ZD1NW/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

4.

What Changed after February 2022

Lavrov consistently asserts that Russia-Turkey cooperation and coordination has a “genuinely strategic character” because the “direct engagement” between Moscow and Ankara is grounded in “practical collaboration”.⁵³ This, however, rests on the enduring stability of the balance of power between Russia and Turkey, the limitations on how much support the West is willing to provide to Turkey to challenge Russia, and the extent to which core Turkish interests are better served by cooperation or confrontation with Russia.

The Russian decision to restart full-scale military operations against Ukraine in February 2022 – and the subsequent developments, namely the imposition of major, wide-ranging sanctions against Russia by both the United States and the EU, and the inability of Russia to quickly and swiftly bring the conflict to an end on its terms – represents a critical diminution of Russian power. This resulted in the first major shift in the political calculus that has guided the Turkish-Russian rapprochement. In addition, one impact of the Ukraine war has been to upgrade the importance of the South Caucasus to the level of Russia’s core national interests.

For instance, in 2020, when Nord Stream I was still operational and Nord Stream II appeared to be headed towards final completion, the threat that an ongoing Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict could end up damaging the infrastructure of the Southern Gas Corridor was an important pressure point for Russia to utilise in order to convince both parties – as well as Turkey – to accept the deployment of Russian peacekeepers into parts of Karabakh as part of the Moscow-brokered ceasefire agreement. Four years later, the cessation of all Russian gas flows via Nord Stream, combined with Russia’s own economic needs, has changed Russia’s interest. As Azerbaijan increases gas exports to Europe, opportunities are created for Russian firms to supply gas to the South Caucasus to free up more Azerbaijani production for European export. Far from being a major threat to Russian economic interests, the very same southern corridor infrastructure is now seen as vital to any effort to bypass

⁵³ Elena Teslova, “Lavrov Says in Some Areas Russian-Turkish Cooperation ‘Genuinely Strategic’”, *Anadolu Ajansı* (Anadolu Agency) (online), 12 October 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/lavrov-says-in-some-areas-russian-turkish-cooperation-genuinely-strategic/3017263> (accessed 11 March 2024)

Western sanctions on direct purchases of Russian energy. In addition, the Turkish routes now provide the only major pipeline connections for Russian gas to reach EU consumers, especially if this gas is “mixed” and repackaged within a Turkish energy hub. This, in turn, has reduced the incentive but also the ability of Russia to contest Turkish and Azerbaijani preferences for the region and demonstrated the lack of circumstances in which Russian power could be deployed.⁵⁴

There are now three overriding interests for which Russia needs the active cooperation of Turkey and the South Caucasus.

- “The Eurasian roundabout”: One of Russia’s most vital trading routes now runs via Turkey and the South Caucasus, not only to permit the indirect export of Russian commodities when direct sales to Western countries have been sanctioned, but even more for obtaining goods, particularly technological components, which the United States, the EU, and the G7 states will no longer sell to Russian enterprises. Turkey and the South Caucasus have become vital intermediaries to facilitate the flow of European industrial equipment and other critical products to Russia. Not having these countries join U.S. and EU sanctions on Russia is now a vital national interest.
- The relocation imperative: For Russian professionals and firms that cannot operate under the new sanctions regime by remaining in Russia, the potential to relocate to the South Caucasus or Turkey to reconstitute their business operations – and to retain the ability to move personnel and goods, and to send and receive financial flows – makes the ability of Russian passport holders to enter these countries a critical priority.

⁵⁴ Mamuka Tsereteli, *Escalation in Karabakh: Implications for the Southern Gas Corridor* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute [MEI], 28 October 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/escalation-karabakh-implications-southern-gas-corridor> (accessed 10 March 2024); David O’Byrne, “Azerbaijan–Armenia Conflict Poses Threat to Regional Energy Corridor”, *Eurasianet* (online), 09 October 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-armenia-conflict-poses-threat-to-regional-energy-corridor> (accessed 10 March 2024); David O’Byrne, “Azerbaijan’s Russian Gas Deal Raises Uncomfortable Questions for Europe”, *Eurasianet* (online), 22 November 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijans-russian-gas-deal-raises-uncomfortable-questions-for-europe> (accessed 10 March 2024); John Roberts and Julian Bowden, “Europe and the Caspian: The Gas Supply Conundrum”, *Atlantic Council* (Blog), 12 December 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/energysource/europe-and-the-caspian-the-gas-supply-conundrum/> (accessed 10 March 2024); Dimitar Bechev, *Closer Ties to the West Don’t Mean Turkey Will Give Up on Russia*, Carnegie Politika Commentary (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 07 February 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91571> (accessed 10 March 2024)

- The keystone imperative: Russia needs the countries of the South Caucasus to not only guarantee access to the east-west Middle Corridor, but also to facilitate the INSTC's operation. The new geopolitical realities that have emerged since February 2022 mean that this latter trading corridor is vital for Russia to be able to access the Persian Gulf, and thus the wider regions of western, southern, and southeast Asia.⁵⁵

In assessing the impact of the Ukraine war, Eugene Rumer concluded:

“The war and the Western sanctions have altered the stakes for Russia and its post-Soviet neighbours in their trading relationships. For the former, it is a critical lifeline to sustain economic performance and defence production. For the latter, it is an unprecedented opportunity to boost economic growth and gain leverage with Moscow in relationships that previously were tilted heavily in its favour. Trade and economic relations are the area where they have gained the most agency as a consequence of the war.”⁵⁶

But this situation also produces a new set of troubling questions for the Kremlin:

- Have any of the elements of the circa 2000 assessments (in terms of relative power wielded by Turkey and Russia; Turkey's dependence on Russia for energy and other goods and services; the reluctance of the EU and NATO to guarantee Turkish or South Caucasian interests) been rendered moot by recent developments?
- How situational is the “flexible partnership” between Russia and Turkey? Does Turkey see an opportunity to renegotiate the terms with Moscow as Russia faces new problems? Does Ankara believe that its Euro-Atlantic allies are now prepared and able to be Turkey's partner in reshaping the South Caucasus?

⁵⁵ Gulnara Mamedzade, “The Processes of Caspian Integration Will Increase Now”, *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 29 June 2022, <https://en.vestikavkaza.ru/interviews/Gulnara-Mamedzade-The-processes-of-Caspian-integration-will-increase-now.html> (accessed 10 March 2024);

Evgeny Y. Vinokurov, Arman Ahunbaev and Alexander I. Zaboev, “International North-South Transport Corridor: Boosting Russia's “Pivot to the South” and Trans-Eurasian Connectivity”, *Russian Journal of Economics* 8, no. 2 (2022): 159–73;

Maxim Chupilkin, Beata Javorcik and Alexander Plekhanov, *The Eurasian Roundabout: Trade Flows into Russia through the Caucasus and Central Asia*, Working Paper 276 (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, February 2023), <https://www.ebrd.com/publications/working-papers/the-urasian-roundabout> (accessed 10 March 2024);

IntelBrief: Russia Tries to Parry Western Sanctions (New York: Soufan Center, 21 February 2023), <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-february-21/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁵⁶ Eugene Rumer, *Russia's Wartime Foreign Policy: Regional Hegemony in Question*, Paper (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 August 2023): 18, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/08/17/russia-s-wartime-foreign-policy-regional-hegemony-in-question-pub-91107> (accessed 10 March 2024)

- How closely tied is it to specific personalities and figures within the AKP, and therefore subject to future political shifts in Turkish domestic politics?
- Under the right set of circumstances, would Turkey abandon its pragmatic, transactionalist approach both to relations with Russia and its policies in the South Caucasus in favour of returning to the 1990s dynamic, whereby Turkey and the main Western countries would push Russian power and influence back (and perhaps even out of the region altogether) and pave the way for Euro-Atlantic enlargement in at least parts of the South Caucasus?
- Do the countries of the South Caucasus expect that Russia's losses are so great that Russia has been reduced as a factor, or that Russia still retains sufficient clout to compel a degree of accommodation? In other words, should the focus be on rebalancing the relationship with Russia, or actively soliciting the aid of other powers to actively displace Russia?
- Finally, does an ambitious EU agenda for the region – in terms of promoting conflict resolution, bringing in new investment, and encouraging closer association with Euro-Atlantic institutions – permit accommodation of Russian interests? Or does it represent a new effort to retard Russian influence?⁵⁷

Western interlocutors suggest that Russia's position in the region is fragile and, under the right conditions, can be significantly reduced. For instance, Western officials have noted that Armenian leaders consistently signalled in private that their close dependence on Russia – and the ability it has given Moscow to frustrate the region's closer integration into the Euro-Atlantic world – was a strategic necessity forced by circumstance and that, under the right circumstances, if the West could underwrite a Turkey-Armenia rapprochement, this would “open up trade routes and lessen the country's dependency on Russia”.⁵⁸ Similarly, then-Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's 2020 comments on Georgia and NATO were interpreted by some to implicitly suggest that, if other members of the alliance were willing to compensate Turkey for the rupturing of its relationship with Russia and to provide the guarantees that Ankara is looking for (and which it did not receive in 2002–03 or 2015–16), Turkey would be less concerned about Russian objections to Euro-Atlantic enlargement in the region.⁵⁹ Building on these conclusions, Western policy advisors have argued that Russia's growing entanglement in Ukraine provides the opportunity

⁵⁷ Eldaniz Gusseinov, “Evaluating EU's Central Asia Strategy: Five-Year Mark and Future Expectations”, *Astana Times* (online), 23 May 2024, <https://astanatimes.com/2024/05/evaluating-eus-central-asia-strategy-five-year-mark-and-future-expectations/> (accessed 16 October 2024)

⁵⁸ Fiona Hill, Kemal Kirişçi and Andrew Moffatt, *Armenia and Turkey: From Normalization to Reconciliation*, Commentary (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 24 February 2015), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/armenia-and-turkey-from-normalization-to-reconciliation/> (accessed 10 March 2024); Aslı Aydıntaşbaş and Richard Giragosian, *Acts of Normality: The Potential for Turkey-Armenia Rapprochement*, Policy Brief (Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations [ECFR], 15 March 2022), <https://ecfr.eu/publication/acts-of-normality-the-potential-for-turkey-armenia-rapprochement/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁵⁹ “Turkish FM Calls for Georgian NATO Membership in Davos: ‘Georgia Needs Us’”, *Agenda.ge* (online), 23 January 2020, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/219#gsc.tab=0> (accessed 10 March 2024)

to rally the countries of the region to erode, limit, and contain Moscow's influence and to deepen connections to the West.⁶⁰

However, the answers given by officials in Turkey and the South Caucasus states suggest that, for now, they prefer to modify their arrangements with Russia, rather than cancel them altogether. As of this writing, none of them have committed to enact policies that would effectively shut down the "Eurasian roundabout". Erdoğan has consistently and publicly defended Ankara's modus vivendi with Moscow by stressing that Turkey has different interests than those of the EU. This point is reinforced by the fact that Turkey's equities in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean can be positively or negatively impacted by Russian actions. Cooperation with Russia for conflict management to prevent negative consequences, especially for Turkey's southern and eastern borders, is not a luxury, but a necessity. As the West seems unable to intervene in the Middle East in a fashion that addresses the pressing concerns of Turkey, "Moscow and Ankara are dependent on each other for preserving vital interests in the Levant no less than in the Caucasus."⁶¹ As a result, Erdoğan feels he is under no obligation to bring Turkey's approach to Russia into closer conformity with European preferences. Turkish policies towards Russia, therefore, will be guided by an assessment of what best serves Turkish interests. In his 2023 interview with PBS NewsHour host Amna Nawaz, he asked, "Are we supposed to do what the EU members are doing? Turkey has a different position in the world. And the EU member states have their different positions."⁶²

Similarly, the then-head of the Georgian Dream party, and then prime minister of Georgia, Irakli Kobakhidze, rejected calls that Georgia should move away from its tacit stance of transactional neutrality in favour of joining Western efforts to pressure Russia over Ukraine. In rejecting calls for Georgia to impose sanctions on Russia, prevent Russians from traveling to Georgia to do business, or even consider more direct action to pressure the Kremlin, Kobakhidze bluntly said such measures "will bring the most severe consequences to our country and its population".⁶³ Georgia continues to benefit from its current role as part of the Eurasian roundabout, while

⁶⁰ Mary Glantz and Noah Higgins, *Russia's Ukraine War Could Offer Chance to Resolve South Caucasus Conflicts*, Analysis (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 05 May 2022), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/russias-ukraine-war-could-offer-chance-resolve-south-caucasus-conflicts> (accessed 14 November 2024); Justin Tomczyk, *Strategic Erosion: Russia and the South Caucasus after the Invasion of Ukraine*, (Stanford: Stanford University, 04 December 2023), <https://fsi.stanford.edu/sipr/strategic-erosion/> (accessed 14 November 2024)

⁶¹ Daria Isachenko (2024): 28

⁶² "Turkey's Erdogan Says He Trusts Russia 'Just as Much as I Trust the West'", *PBS NewsHour* (online), 18 September 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/turkeys-erdogan-says-he-trusts-russia-just-as-much-as-i-trust-the-west> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁶³ "Irakli Kobakhidze: The authors of the xenophobic campaign want to somehow drag Georgia into the military conflict," *InterPressNews* (online), 05 August 2022, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/121152-irakli-kobakhidze-the-authors-of-the-xenophobic-campaign-want-to-somehow-drag-georgia-into-the-military-conflict/> (accessed 20 November 2024)

Russia, despite its setbacks in Ukraine, still retains sufficient capabilities to protect its interests in the South Caucasus – and that the West would not shield Georgia from the consequences.⁶⁴ It is critical to note that these realities would not change in the event of the opposition coming to power in Georgia, as the West would not have spare capabilities or resources to either compensate Georgia for interrupting its current trade roundabout with Russia or to offer meaningful protection from Russian retaliation. This, in turn, is informed by the Armenian experience whereby an initial burst of enthusiasm that the West could replace Russia is starting to change due to a sober realisation that the existing ties and links to Russia cannot be easily or cleanly severed – and that neither the United States, France, nor any other European state will make Armenia a geopolitical priority.

Lavrov, in turn, has publicly praised the countries of the region for continuing to maintain this pragmatic approach, that in evaluating their relations with Russia “[they will] be guided by one’s own interests and the interests of one’s economy” rather than Western dictates.⁶⁵ Moscow is encouraged by any signs that these relations are grounded in enduring interests and realities and that they would continue even if there were to be changes in leaders or administrations, especially in Turkey.⁶⁶ In short, because the West has often been inconsistent in its approach to the region or in fulfilling its own promises (for instance, in terms of bringing Turkey into the EU or Georgia into NATO), Turkey and the states of the South Caucasus believe their interests are best served by hedging their relationships with both Russia and the West in pursuit of their own interests.⁶⁷

But the Kremlin is concerned that the longer-term trends could be negative for Russian interests. The West has already increased pressure on Ankara and the regional capitals to close loopholes that allow Russia to evade its sanctions, and compliance is starting to increase. For instance, Turkey started in 2024 to enforce US financial secondary sanctions, causing Turkish banks to sever their links with Russian financial institutions and complicating Turkish purchases of Russian energy.⁶⁸ To the extent that relations are highly personalised, especially in the case of Turkey, Russian analysts question whether, for instance, Erdoğan’s worldview and perspective on

⁶⁴ “Ruling Party Head Vows Gov’t Will ‘Do Everything’ to Prevent Country from Being ‘Dragged into War’”, *Agenda.ge* (online), 05 August 2022, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2022/2977#gsc.tab=0> (accessed 14 November 2024)

⁶⁵ “Лавров рассказал о способности Грузии противостоять Западу [Lavrov Discusses Georgia’s Ability to Stand against the West]”, *RIA Novosti* (online), 18 January 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230118/gruziya-1845689045.html> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁶⁶ Daria Isachenko (2024): 29

⁶⁷ As Erdoğan told PBS NewsHour (2023), “[...] to the extent the West is reliable, Russia is equally reliable. For the last 50 years, we have been waiting at the doorstep of the EU, and, at this moment in time, I trust Russia just as much as I trust the West. [...] just as I have good relations with the US, similarly, I will have good relations with Russia. I will continue to have a relationship with the EU member states based on the same approach as well, win-win.”

⁶⁸ Olga Sherunkova, Maksim Builov, Natalia Skorligina and Yevgeny Khvostik, “Unkind Awakening for the Lira”, *Kommersant* (online), 17 January 2024, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6454712> (accessed 10 March 2024)

Russia have been sufficiently imprinted on the Turkish political establishment so as to incline a post-Erdoğan leader to follow the same course.⁶⁹

But the principal concern is whether the EU is planning an ambitious strategy for working with Turkey on expanding and deepening the Middle Corridor for the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Can recent proposals coming out of ongoing European – Turkish dialogues on cooperation in the South Caucasus and Central Asia be accepted and operationalised by governments and the EU as a whole, as part of the overall EU Global Gateway initiative?⁷⁰ This would include financing new projects in infrastructure construction and energy development (hydrocarbons as well as renewables): offering opportunities for implementing Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies to problems surrounding food and water security; developing and strengthening supply chains linking critical raw material sources in the region with Turkish and European industries; and working on confidence-building measures and new dialogues for resolving conflicts as well as boosting the capabilities of the local states to secure these new projects.⁷¹ On this last point, much will depend on the extent to which the EU, on its own or in partnership with NATO, is able to develop “a comprehensive security dimension linking resilience, connectivity, and defence policy” alongside its connectivity agenda for the South Caucasus.⁷²

How Russia will react to this will depend on how three scenarios unfold over the next several years.

- Meeting the Erdoğan criteria. In his interview with PBS NewsHour hosted by Amna Nawaz,⁷³ Erdoğan quietly introduced the criteria on which any re-evaluation of Turkish policy might be based. At present, nearly half of the natural gas used in Turkey is sourced from Russia, and Turkey’s plans to generate more of its electricity from nuclear power rest on a contractual relationship with Rosatom to construct, service, and supply the necessary plants, starting with the complex at Akkuyu. Russia remains a critical partner for high-technology projects, especially in the defence field. Given Turkey’s past unreliable and unpredictable relationships with both the EU and the United States, Erdoğan – and much of the Turkish establishment – wants to retain Russia as a hedge against economic and political

⁶⁹ Maxim Suchkov (2020)

⁷⁰ Based on discussions with Samuel Doveri Vesterbye, Director of the European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), on these developments.

⁷¹ Tuba Eldem, *Russia’s War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity: Connecting Europe and Asia via Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey*, SWP Comment 2022/C 64 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], October 2022), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C64/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁷² Stefan Meister, Milan Nič, Iskra Kirova and Steven Blockmans, *Russia’s War in Ukraine: Rethinking the EU’s Eastern Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy*, DGAP Report (Berlin: German Council on Foreign Relations [DGAP], 19 January 2023), <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/russias-war-ukraine-rethinking-eus-eastern-enlargement-and-neighborhood> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁷³ PBS NewsHour (2023)

instability. Right now, “at this moment in time”,⁷⁴ Turkey still depends on Russia for energy and technology, and its assessment is that the Russian military still retains significant capabilities and that the West is not in a position to alter this situation, both in terms of capabilities as well as political will, and both in the Eurasian space and in Syria. If EU efforts lessen Turkish dependence on Russia while providing sustainable new opportunities via the Middle Corridor, this would have profound impacts, since “Turkey’s future geopolitical orientation, as well as its industrial and trade strategies, is tied to the country’s energy policies.”⁷⁵ If this is accompanied by a closer EU-Turkey relationship and new Euro-Atlantic security guarantees for Turkey both in the Caucasus and the Middle East, then this could lead to a new “moment in time”.

- Fate of the Pashinian test balloon. In contrast to Kobakhidze’s assessments, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian has a different view of Russian capabilities in the wake of the Ukraine operation. Due to the shift in the regional balance in Turkey’s favour, and Russia’s need for Azerbaijani and Turkish support for the Eurasian roundabout, Russia could not uphold the Karabakh status quo, leading to the termination of the unrecognised, secessionist Karabakh republic in September 2023. Despite Lavrov warning that Armenia would not be able to solve its problems “with the help of Western players” and that Yerevan should continue to rely on Moscow to provide “the way out of the difficult situation” Armenia finds itself in,⁷⁶ Pashinian is re-evaluating the utility of Armenia’s close institutional relationship with Russia and whether or not Armenian interests are now better served by turning to the West to broker arrangements with Turkey and Azerbaijan. At the 2024 Munich Security Conference, Pashinian announced that, despite Armenia’s formal status as a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Yerevan was practically no longer a member of either organisation, adding that Armenia would work to accelerate its efforts to integrate with the West and have the EU play a greater role in regional stabilisation efforts.⁷⁷ Pashinian hopes that the United States and Europe will provide sufficient help, and, over a long-enough term, result in a reduction of Armenia’s isolation as well as giving it more economic and security options to lessen dependence on Moscow. In particular, the Armenian government is gambling that the West can deliver a credible peace agreement that “would mean Armenia would have more options and would be able to lessen its historical dependence on Russia and pursue a stronger partnership with the West” – which

⁷⁴ *ibid*

⁷⁵ Francesco Siccardi, *Understanding the Energy Drivers of Turkey’s Foreign Policy*, Paper (Brussels: Carnegie Europe, 28 February 2024), <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2024/02/28/understanding-energy-drivers-of-turkey-s-foreign-policy-pub-91733> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁷⁶ “Lavrov: West Does Not Want to Bring Peace to South Caucasus”, *Report News Agency* (online), 28 December 2023, <https://report.az/en/region/lavrov-west-does-not-want-to-bring-peace-to-south-caucasus/> (accessed 10 March 2024)

⁷⁷ Konstatin Prokhorov, “Pashinian Admitted: Armenia Is Not an Ally of Russia”, *Vestnik Kavkaza* (online), 19 February 2024, <https://vestnikavkaza.ru/analytics/rossia-bolse-ne-souznik-armenii.html> (accessed 10 March 2024)

would include being fully integrated into the regional corridors.⁷⁸ Against this backdrop, the Armenia–France defence arrangement and the annual US–Armenia peacekeeping exercise (Eagle Partner) created an impression in summer 2024 of a fundamental reorientation of Armenia’s relationships with both Russia and the West.⁷⁹ However, the limits of what the United States and its European allies can do to fundamentally dislodge Russia’s position in Armenia was illustrated by the lack of any real Western defence capacity being made available to Armenia or any prospect of lessening Armenia’s economic and energy dependence on Russia.

- Adoption of the principle of “keystone neutrality”? One of the rationales for the Middle Corridor is its potential for serving as a keystone interconnector among different economic and political blocs across the greater Eurasian space. To the extent that the northern interconnectors (the land route across Russia and the northern maritime sea route) face difficulties due to the ongoing process of direct European–Russian decoupling, the Middle Corridor could strengthen the Eurasian roundabout, and the Middle Corridor cannot be divorced from the INSTC. But this depends on whether the EU would support the notion that any state, including Russia, can access and utilise the corridor as well as take part in various projects connected to the corridor in addition to EU financing and investment. A long-standing principle of the Azerbaijani and Turkish approaches has been to recognise Russian equities in such projects in return for Russian guarantees not to disrupt their operations. It is unclear whether the EU would see the prudence in doing the same.

Developments around the Zangezur Corridor – an effort to create an integrated land transport bridge between Turkey and Azerbaijan’s autonomous Nakhchivan republic with mainland Azerbaijan (and then to the rest of Central Asia) via Syunik province in Armenia – can act as an important barometer testing these assumptions. As long as this route remains effectively closed, the perception that the Middle Corridor remains threatened by geopolitical instability – even if the practical import is only to add some delays to transport – will remain. In the immediate aftermath of the 2020 Second Karabakh War, the Russian government floated the possibility that Moscow would serve as the guarantor of the Zangezur Corridor (this was fully consistent with the terms of the Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement that ended the war), ensuring that Russia would retain supervision and influence over its operations. A Western-sponsored peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the conclusion of a lasting rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia would reduce the need for a Russian role. Ostensibly, the Kremlin supports the opening of the corridor as part of its efforts

⁷⁸ Thomas de Waal, *Armenia Navigates a Path Away from Russia*, Paper (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/armenia-navigates-a-path-away-from-russia?lang=en¢er=russia-eurasia%E2%80%99> (accessed 17 October 2024)

⁷⁹ “Russia Says Armenia’s Warmer Ties with NATO Risk Destabilising Wider Region”, *Reuters* (online), 18 July 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-armenias-warmer-ties-with-nato-risk-destabilising-wider-region-2024-07-18/> (accessed 16 October 2024)

to guarantee “new reliable routes” that are not impacted by Western sanctions.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, Russian experts worry that, unless a Russian role in the corridor is explicitly defined, “Russia will have to brace for certain risks”, including the possibility of being excluded from its operations.⁸¹ How plans for the Zangezur Corridor materialise in coming years will demonstrate the extent of Moscow’s compellent abilities and how much it will have to trust that Ankara and Baku will respect its core equities.

⁸⁰ Vasif Huseynov, “Putin’s Visit to Baku Stirs Up Iran–Russia Tensions on Zangezur Corridor”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (online), 12 September 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/putins-visit-to-baku-stirs-up-iran-russia-tensions-on-zangezur-corridor/> (accessed 17 October 2024)

⁸¹ Anri R. Chedia, *Zangezur Corridor: Economic Potential and Political Constraints*, *Russia in Global Affairs* 22, no. 01 (2023): 207

5.

Balancing Russian Equities with EU Interests

Any policy grounded in a strategic assessment predicated on anything resembling a Russian collapse is foolhardy. While the long-term trajectory may end up predicting a much weaker Russian position, Moscow retains capabilities in the short- and medium terms to disrupt EU plans and impose costs on Turkey and the regional states. Russia's resilience when faced with Western sanctions and ability to keep its operations in Ukraine going means that any policy, as Erdoğan himself has advised, should not be based on an assumption of the disintegration of Russian capabilities and Moscow's removal as a factor in the politics of the region.⁸² At the same time, the EU does not have the luxury to write off its engagement with core Eurasia. The disruptions of the last five years – the COVID-19 pandemic, the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a series of climatic and environmental challenges (which, for instance, has impacted the Panama Canal), and now the interruption of commerce in the Red Sea – highlight the strategic imperative of the Middle Corridor project. For its own economic and energy security, the EU cannot walk away from its geo-economic and geopolitical engagement in this region.

If Russia remains a factor, and European disengagement from this region is not an option, then EU policymakers must address the following three policy queries:

- Is the push to develop the Middle Corridor connected to EU policy on Ukraine (including sanctioning Russia), or a separate, stand-alone initiative? In particular, are EU policy objectives connected to US interests to use the Middle Corridor to both deliberately isolate Russia and provide economic support for Ukraine?⁸³

⁸² PBS NewsHour (2023)

⁸³ Per comments of Marsha McGraw Olive for the panel, "The Middle Corridor Linking Asia and Europe", (Washington, D.C.: Center for the National Interest [CFTNI], 16 October 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CD3WprbKdo> (accessed 17 October 2024)

- Are EU interests better served by incentivising Russia to see how it can benefit from the Middle Corridor, following past Turkish and Azerbaijani practices, or can the EU credibly guarantee that it can shield the region and compensate the states to protect them from Russian efforts to serve as a spoiler and disrupter?
- Despite their failure to end the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, are there elements in the Istanbul proposals on how EU actions can be balanced with Russian security concerns? Can Western security concerns be addressed beyond the binary of exclusive relationships either with the West or with Russia (and China beyond it)?

To the extent that the EU itself cannot definitely answer these questions, then Turkey will continue its dual approach to balancing EU and Russian equities in the South Caucasus – and Russia will acquiesce to serve as the best of a set of less desirable options. For the states of the region, their plans for growth and development are directly tied to core Eurasia becoming an integrated keystone between the main engines of the global economy in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific basins. Their governments are keenly aware that “future Eurasian connectivity depends on these corridors, and how they grow will be influenced by the shifting power dynamics among important international players.”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Umid Shokri, *Geopolitical Rivalries in the South Caucasus: Evaluating the Aras Corridor as an Alternative to Zangezur* (Dubai, Trend Research and Advisory, 13 October 2024), <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/geopolitical-rivalries-in-the-south-caucasus-evaluating-the-aras-corridor-as-an-alternative-to-zangezur/> (accessed 17 October 2024)

Abbreviations

AKP	<i>Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)</i>
BTK	<i>Baku-Tbilisi-Kars</i>
CIS	<i>Commonwealth of Independent States</i>
INSTC	<i>International North-South Transport Corridor</i>
NATO	<i>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</i>
TANAP	<i>Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline</i>
USSR	<i>Union of Soviet Socialist Republics</i>

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The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the Federal Foreign Office. CATS is the curator of CATS Network, an international network of think tanks and research institutions working on Turkey.

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SWP Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs
Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4, 10719 Berlin
www.swp-berlin.org
www.cats-network.eu
ISSN 2941-4466