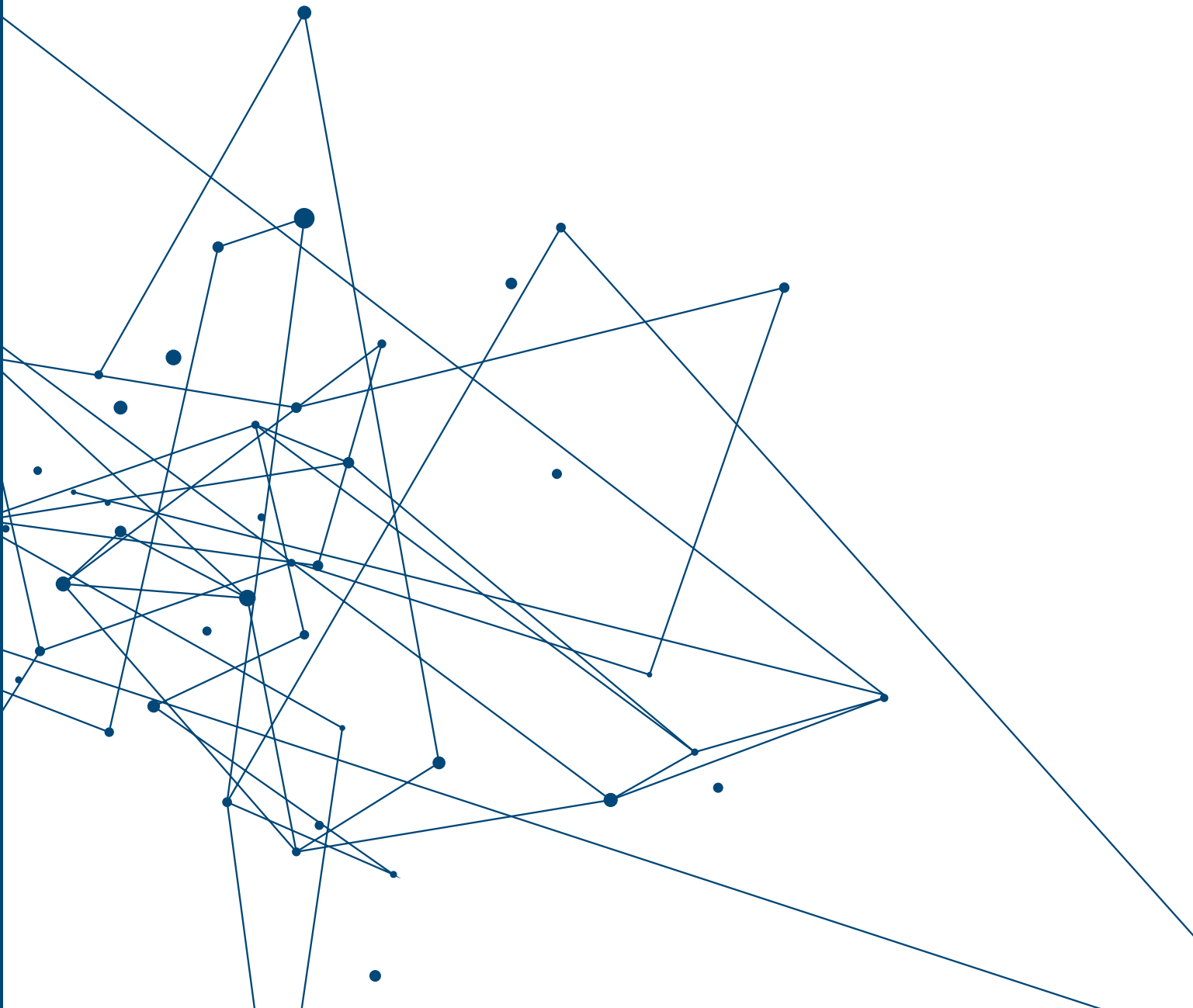


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America's Assessment of Turkey's Policy in the South Caucasus

Implications for the EU

Svante E. Cornell



The United States lacks a clear strategy toward either Turkey or the South Caucasus, but recent developments could lead Washington to see the benefits of coordination with Ankara in this part of the world.

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

Assessing America's perceptions of Turkish policy in the South Caucasus, let alone its implications for the EU, is a task that rests on several assumptions. For the US to even have an assessment of Turkish policy in the South Caucasus, it must be assumed that the United States has a strategy toward either Turkey or the South Caucasus, and that it even views the world in such a way as to view the South Caucasus as a region. As this article will discuss, these assumptions are problematic. Still, the United States does have policies toward the countries involved, policies that suffer from a distinct lack of coordination. Thus, US and Turkish interests in the region would appear to be aligned insofar as both powers seek to counter Russian and Iranian influence. But in practice, and in part for domestic reasons, American policies appear to diverge from these common interests, as with Washington prioritizing relations with Armenia over those with Azerbaijan and Georgia. This has been particularly salient during Democratic administrations.

2.

US Engagement in the South Caucasus

For the better part of two decades, the United States has lacked any effective policy toward the South Caucasus and has tended to allow its relations with the states of the region to be dominated by other concerns. This was not always the case: from the early 1990s to around 2004, Washington was guided by a bipartisan approach to the region that viewed the South Caucasus as a key geographical corridor linking Europe to Central Asia and providing the United States with access to this large territory at the heart of the Eurasian continent.¹ This perspective led to a sustained US engagement with the region, and indeed an approach whereby the United States appeared to understand the South Caucasus as a small but coherent region, where the deep interlinked security situation of the three states of the South Caucasus.

However, there were important forces mitigating against a cohesive US approach to the region. First and foremost, there has been no clear institutional driver in US policy toward the region. Within the US government, different agencies and bureaus within the State Department have had diverging agendas. Outside of government, the focus of various interest groups has waxed and waned over time, with industry (particularly oil companies), ethnic lobbies (essentially pro-Armenian groups), and NGOs (especially human rights organizations) all pulling US policy in different directions.

Second, as a result, US policy priorities in the region have lacked consistency. The tug-of-war has pitted forces prioritizing a normative approach to US foreign policy against those focusing on pragmatic considerations of national interest. Interestingly, the divide in the United States has been not between the two major political parties but within them. The George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations leaned in the direction of a pragmatic, interest-based approach, while also paying due attention to normative issues such as democracy promotion and human rights. The George W. Bush administration did the same – initially. The breaking point came with the “Freedom Agenda,” enunciated by George W. Bush in 2004 and essentially continued

¹ S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *The Long Game on the Silk Road: U.S. and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Lanham, MD, 2018).

under President Obama.² For roughly a decade from 2004, the United States pushed the promotion of democracy at the expense of other priorities such as national security interests and trade relations. Around 2015, however, the Obama administration seemed to realize the pendulum had swung too far, and began to move back toward a more pragmatic approach. The first Trump administration stayed the new course, more openly, and the Biden administration followed in the face of the situation in Ukraine. Under a second Trump administration, there is every reason to expect this emphasis on national interests and pragmatic considerations to continue.

The South Caucasus was in some ways a test case for the normative foreign policy approach, and the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia was a not inconsequential event in this regard. By coincidence, it happened only weeks after Azerbaijan’s strongman Heydar Aliyev was succeeded by his son Ilham, providing a marked contrast between the two countries’ domestic political systems. But the gradual decline of Georgia’s domestic situation under tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili has led to disappointment and erstwhile advocates of US engagement with Georgia have largely moved on to other pastures. When Georgia actively distanced itself from the West in late 2024, Washington merely issued declarations deploring the development, but appeared unwilling or unable to do anything to affect Georgia’s trajectory.

Third, the United States, like many EU member states, has had to reckon with a civilizational approach toward the region among important domestic constituencies. Simply put, there has been a tendency to prioritize relations with Christian countries Armenia and Georgia over Muslim-majority Azerbaijan, the region’s largest and most powerful state. This factor has been exacerbated by the presence of a strong pro-Armenian lobby in the United States, with influential supporters at high political levels, mainly but not exclusively in the Democratic party. More recently, Azerbaijan’s close relations with Turkey have meant that the mounting dissatisfaction with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has had a contagion effect on perspectives of Azerbaijan. In other words, the close association between Turkey and Azerbaijan has led to negative views on Turkey spilling over to American perceptions of Azerbaijan.

There has also been a clear connection between the lobbying efforts and the normative aspects of US policy. The pro-Armenian lobby in the United States seized on the increasingly normative approach in US foreign policy in 2004–15, seeking to undermine US-Azerbaijan relations through a partnership with human rights advocates. This resulted in a sophisticated campaign that targeted the deficiencies in the country’s governing system and human rights record. The campaign was fairly

² In his second term, President George W. Bush made democracy promotion a central part of his foreign policy agenda. He made this clear in his second inaugural speech: “It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” White House, “President Sworn In to Second Term”, press release (Washington D.C., 20 January 2005), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html> (accessed 25 February 2025).

effective. In the 2000s the *Washington Post* editorial page famously produced almost a dozen articles slamming Azerbaijan's domestic situation in the 2000s, far more than for any similar-sized country.³ As a result, many American politicians' engagement with the South Caucasus became focused on Armenia and Georgia, while neglecting (or actively undermining) relations with the region's most important state. Such tendencies have been present once again following the Azerbaijani reassertion of control over the remainder of Karabakh in late 2023.

Overall, the United States has failed to approach the region as a cohesive entity. This was most clear during the Obama administration, whose only major initiative there was its effort to promote a normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey in 2009–10. As such, Armenia became an appendix to America's Turkey policy. Meanwhile, Georgia was practically contingent on Russia policy. When Obama championed the Russia "reset" policy in 2009–10, Georgia was a key point where Washington and Moscow "agreed to disagree" in order to reboot the relationship. This left Azerbaijan, which – depending on whom one spoke with in the US government – was treated either as an appendix to Afghanistan policy (as the Pentagon would see it, given the importance of the country's airspace) or as a human rights problem child (as the State Department's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the human rights lobby would have it).

The lack of a more strategic and cohesive approach to the region can in part be traced to organizational issues. In the mid-2000s – in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks – Central Asia was paired with South Asia in the State Department, which meant that it gained some bureaucratic attention. For example, several US Central Asia strategies were published, most recently in 2021. No such document was ever produced for the South Caucasus, which remains a somewhat forgotten corner of the very large Europe and Eurasia Bureau. Because of the limited resources and the large number of other priorities in the Europe and Eurasia area, senior bureaucrats have devoted very little attention to the region.

But moving Central Asia from the Europe and Eurasia Bureau to the South and Central Asia Bureau also meant that the link between Central Asia and the South Caucasus – which had been key to US engagement during the Clinton administration – was severed. The "New Silk Road" announced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Chennai in 2012 did not initially include the South Caucasus. It was a mainly Afghanistan-centric document focused on the connection from Central Asia to South Asia, a north-south logic that diverged from Washington's traditional east-west

³ Rachel Avraham, "Washington Post Hostile Coverage of Israel, Azerbaijan, Must End", *The Jewish Press* (online), 06 November 2024, <https://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/opinions/washington-post-hostile-coverage-of-israel-azerbaijan-must-end/2024/11/06/> (accessed 25 February 2025).

logic.⁴ In addition, the South Caucasus continued to be treated separately from Iranian affairs, which came under the remit of the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau.

Individual analysts, within and outside of government, have made solid arguments for the importance of the South Caucasus to US national interests, given the region's position as a bridge or barrier to Central Asia, as well as its proximity to Iran and Russia.⁵ But no champion strong enough to have an impact on US policy has emerged in the US government. Instead, the United States continues to be pulled between forces with very different priorities regarding the region, and its actual diplomacy in the region has been reactive and *ad hoc*. This is not to say that the United States has been absent from the South Caucasus: during the Biden administration, the Secretary of State and National Security Adviser were personally involved in negotiations for a lasting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Still, this initiative was an isolated matter, a targeted involvement that appeared disconnected from any broader US strategy toward the region.

There is one further aspect of US policy that has had negative implications for the South Caucasus. That is the policy adopted by the Biden administration that prohibits US officials from supporting fossil fuel projects. As a result of the priority put on countering climate change, the Biden administration in 2021 issued an executive order on climate change that not only prohibited most funding of fossil fuel projects, but also curtailed bilateral, multilateral and technical assistance involving fossil fuels.⁶ As a result, the United States has locked itself out of the crucially important process of diversifying Central Asia's energy exports. The region's states, particularly Kazakhstan, are putting serious effort into reducing their dependency on Russian export routes. While Turkey is actively involved in these efforts, the United States has effectively abdicated any role in assisting these countries in reducing their dependence on Russia for the export of their most valuable commodity. Given that the main alternative to Russian routes is through the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus to Turkey, this shift in US policy was a dramatic turn, compared to its active role in promoting the East-West corridor two decades ago. It remains to be seen whether the Trump administration will reverse this mistake in any meaningful way.

⁴ S. Frederick Starr, Svante E. Cornell, and Nicklas Norling, *The EU, Central Asia, and the Development of Continental Transport and Trade*, Silk Road Paper (Washington D.C., Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, December 2015): 33, https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2015_12_SRP_Transport.pdf (accessed 25 February 2025).

⁵ Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr and Mamuka Tsereteli, *A Western Strategy for the South Caucasus*, Silk Road Paper (Washington D.C., Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, February 2015), <https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/publications/1502Strategy.pdf> (accessed 25 February 2025).

⁶ Sara Schonhardt, "Biden to End Fossil Fuel Financing Abroad", *E&E News* (online), 10 December 2021, <https://www.eenews.net/articles/biden-to-end-fossil-fuel-financing-abroad/> (accessed 25 February 2025).

3.

Changing Turkish Engagement

Turkey's engagement in the South Caucasus has also gone through a number of phases in the past two decades, and has paralleled the shifting balances of Turkish domestic politics. Compared to US policy, however, Turkey's approach to the region has developed increasing coherence in recent years. This is no doubt related to the fact that Turkey neighbors the South Caucasus and the region is thus a more prominent concern than it is for the United States. Turkey's engagement with the South Caucasus has been guided largely by the shifting political balances within the country, but also Ankara's growing tendency to project power abroad.

The impact of Turkey's domestic politics on the South Caucasus can be understood through a summary view of major ideological constituencies in Turkish politics – all of which have been influential at some point during the two-decade tenure of President Erdoğan and his AKP. Turkey's nationalists prioritize relations with Azerbaijan, which shares close linguistic and cultural ties with Turkey – so much so that leaders of the two countries refer to the relationship as one of “one nation, two states.” By contrast, Turkey's liberals have focused largely on Turkey's integration with EU institutions, and not accorded particular priority to ethnic or cultural proximity. If anything, liberals have tended to seek to atone for Turkey's stance toward the massacres of Armenians in the late days of the Ottoman Empire, and the country's refusal to accept that these events amounted to genocide. As such, liberals have tended to see Turkey's relationship with Azerbaijan (and the Turkic world more generally) as an impediment to EU integration.⁷ Finally, Turkey's Islamists have tended to identify with the Sunni Arab Middle East, and prioritize Turkey's relationship with the broader Muslim world. In this, post-Soviet Muslim-majority states have not figured prominently, given their secularist policies and, for the most part, secular populations.

⁷ USC Dornsife Institute of Armenian Studies, University of Southern California, *Turkish and Azerbaijani Public Opinion on Armenia and Armenians* (Los Angeles, n.d.), <https://dornsife.usc.edu/armenian/turkish-and-azerbaijani-public-opinion-on-armenia-and-armenians/> (accessed 25 February 2025); “More Turkish dissidents Fight for Genocide Recognition”, *France 24* (online), 24 April 2015, <https://www.france24.com/en/20150424-turkish-residents-recognition-armenian-genocide-exhibition> (accessed 25 February 2025).

That is the background to understanding the shifting sands of Turkey's approach to the South Caucasus. Liberal priorities dominated in the early years of the AKP's tenure, leading to a rather lukewarm approach to the South Caucasus. This also made possible the Turkish-Armenian normalization process, which was strongly opposed by nationalist forces. Then, following the Arab upheavals, Turkey embarked on an expedition of Islamist adventurism in the Middle East, as it sought to bring the Muslim Brotherhood to power across the countries affected by the "Arab Spring" upheavals. This ill-fated endeavor petered out by the late 2010s, and was replaced by a nationalist ascendancy in both Turkey's domestic politics and its foreign policy.

The decline of Islamism as an organizing principle of Turkish politics and foreign policy was strongly related to the internal conflict within the Islamist movement that pitted Erdoğan against the movement led by Fethullah Gülen, a self-exiled preacher whose followers came to dominate large parts of the Turkish bureaucracy. The conflict between them, culminating in the failed coup of 15 July 2016, led to the crumbling of the Islamist movement and forced Erdoğan to ally with nationalist forces to counter Gülen and his followers.

The nationalist ascendancy in the country is clearly visible not only in the government but also in public opinion polling, which shows that nationalism – in various formats – has established itself as the dominant ideology in Turkish society.⁸ In turn, this has meant that Turkish foreign policy in the South Caucasus has returned to the strong emphasis on a close relationship with Azerbaijan that was first formulated during an earlier period of nationalist ascendancy in the 1990s.

In parallel, Turkish elites have responded to the shifting realities of great power politics in the past two decades by transitioning, so to speak, from defense to offense. Traditional Turkish foreign policy was largely reactive in nature, emphasizing restraint and the necessity of avoiding entanglement in foreign trouble spots. But since the 1990s, Turkish national security elites have concluded that the norms governing international relations have eroded, and that this poses exceptional and even existential dangers for Turkish national security.⁹ In particular, the collapse of important states in the Middle East – like Iraq and Syria – has had direct implications for Turkey, given the primacy of the Kurdish question in Turkish security policy. The collapse of central authority in Baghdad and Damascus allowed the emergence of Kurdish state-like entities on Turkey's borders, in turn risking a contagion effect into Turkey itself. Turkey managed to find a *modus vivendi* with the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, largely because it is dominated by Kurdish forces

⁸ Max Hoffman, Michael Werz and John Halpin, *Turkey's "New Nationalism" Amid Shifting Politics, Further Analysis of Polling Results* (Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress [CAP], February 2018), https://www.stiftung-mercator.de/content/uploads/2020/12/Turkeys_New_Nationalism_Amid_Shifting_Policy.pdf (accessed 25 February 2025).

⁹ Personal conversations with former and current Turkish officials, Ankara, 2015–2023.

opposed to the Marxist-Leninist PKK that is the dominant Kurdish force within Turkey itself. By contrast, northern Syria came under the control of PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish groups, causing considerable alarm in Turkey.

Turkey's experience with the Kurdish question since the mid-1990s was the major factor driving the transition in Turkish foreign and security policy, with an emphasis on the rise of power projection beyond Turkey's borders. In the late 1990s, Turkey conducted regular incursions into northern Iraq to target the PKK operating there. More recently, Turkey has similarly staged incursions into northern Syria to protect its interests in that country, with Turkish-supported forces finally ousting the regime of Bashar al-Assad in late 2024. At the same time, Turkey witnessed the tendency of other regional powers to project power into conflict zones and nearby states to advance their interests – be it Russia in Georgia and Ukraine, Iran in the corridor from Syria and Lebanon over Iraq to Yemen, or Saudi Arabia into other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Against this background, a new consensus emerged: in a dog-eat-dog world Turkey also had to engage in power projection, particularly as the Turkish leadership saw itself presiding over Turkey's return to what it viewed as a natural position as a major player on the international scene, including in the Muslim world.

Combined, the nationalist ascendancy and the growing tendency toward power projection help explain Turkey's decision in 2020 to encourage and support Azerbaijan in its effort to restore its territorial integrity through the 44-day Second Karabakh War. Turkey's direct participation (without, however, going so far as to put boots on the ground in combat situations) in the conflict, including the deployment of F-16 fighters to an Azerbaijani airbase to deter Moscow or Tehran from coming to Armenia's rescue, was a major departure from its previous stance. In 2023, Ankara enthusiastically supported Azerbaijan's assertion of full control over the remaining areas of Karabakh, which had been administered by the separatist Karabakh Armenian authorities and been under the nominal protection of Russian peacekeeping forces. As we shall see, this put Turkey on somewhat of a collision course with American policy in the South Caucasus.

4.

The Decline of Turkish–American Relations

Turkey and the United States have been allies in NATO since the 1950s, with a strong but occasionally contentious relationship developing between the two countries. While military-to-military ties remained the backbone of the relationship up to the second Iraq war in 2003, bilateral ties were occasionally rocked by disagreements, most notably perhaps over the Cyprus issue. Turkey's 1974 invasion led to significant discord between Ankara and Washington, as did the 1980 military coup in Turkey. But relations were rebuilt under Turgut Özal's leadership in the late 1980s, and Turkey emerged as an important American ally in the post–Cold War era. Yet relations were consistently marred by a divergence of priorities, particularly regarding Middle Eastern affairs. America's two wars in Iraq had strong detrimental effects on Turkey's economy and security. While Turkey lost considerably from a decline in trade with Iraq, the bigger problem was arguably America's embrace of the Iraqi Kurds as an important ally. Matters ended up being even worse in Syria, where the United States built military ties with Syrian Kurdish groups that it explicitly acknowledged were linked to the PKK – an organization that Washington itself classifies as a terrorist group.

While the US purpose of this was to combat the Islamic State caliphate's terror, Washington – at least in Turkish eyes – appeared to maintain excessively close ties with the Syrian Kurds long after the Islamic State had been defeated. In Turkey this generated strong suspicions about American intentions, which were exacerbated by the coup attempt in July 2016, which appeared to have been masterminded by the Pennsylvania-based preacher Fethullah Gülen. The twin challenges to the government – Gülenist and Kurdish – both appeared connected to the United States, and this led to the deepest slump in Turkish–American relations in modern history. It also led Turkey to purchase Russian S-400 missiles, which in turn led Ankara to be booted from the F-35 fighter jet program.

From the American perspective, meanwhile, Turkey under Erdoğan had become a highly difficult ally, whose actions frequently went against American interests. Far from being an ally that coordinates its policy within NATO, Washington came to see Turkey as a regional power that acts independently, with policies that were occasionally in line with US interests but frequently at odds with them. Turkey, in

American eyes, was becoming more unpredictable and thus more undependable. It could no longer be counted on to align with American priorities, and instead frequently opposed what Washington saw as American interests in Turkey's neighborhood.

In Syria, Turkey was seen as actively opposing American priorities. American policymakers questioned Turkey's laxity regarding the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, and its ties to radical Islamist groups in the Syrian opposition that ultimately succeeded in overthrowing the Assad regime. Turkish military incursions targeting the Syrian Kurdish forces almost put two NATO allies in direct conflict with one another. More broadly, Turkey's support for Muslim Brotherhood forces across the region did not rhyme with American priorities. And Turkey's gunboat diplomacy in the late 2010s in the Eastern Mediterranean, where it sought to prevent the Greek Cypriot government from developing offshore gas fields, further cemented the perception of Turkey as unhelpful at best. In the meantime, Erdoğan's frequent anti-American diatribes made matters worse, particularly in the US Congress where strong forces now began to be mobilized against Turkey.

As far as the South Caucasus is concerned, the general climate of US-Turkish relations in the past decade has been a far cry from the situation two decades ago, when Ankara and Washington coordinated closely on developing the East-West corridor and pipeline projects linking the Caspian Sea to Turkey.¹⁰

¹⁰ Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "William J. Clinton, Remarks at a Signing Ceremony for the Baku-Ceyhan and Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline Agreements in Istanbul", The American Presidency Project (online), Istanbul, 18 November 1999, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-signing-ceremony-for-the-baku-ceyhan-and-trans-caspian-gas-pipeline-agreements> (accessed 25 February 2025).

5.

American Perspectives on Turkey's South Caucasus Policy

In theory, Turkey's active entry into the geopolitics of the South Caucasus should be considered to be in the interest of the United States. The conclusion of a mutual defense treaty between Turkey and Azerbaijan through the June 2021 Shusha Declaration means that a South Caucasus country now has a defense treaty with a power other than Russia – and with a NATO member state, to boot – for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Turkey is also an active proponent of Ukrainian and Georgian membership in NATO.¹¹ Thus, even though Turkey is behaving more independently than in the past, its active role in the South Caucasus has the effect of reducing Russian and Iranian influence there – effectively balancing Russia and Iran in the region in a way that the United States itself has proven unwilling or unable to do. In turn, this new Turkish role offers possibilities to strengthen the independence of the regional states and consolidate the security of the East-West corridor connecting Turkey and Europe to Central Asia.

However, this is not the way Turkey's engagement in the South Caucasus has been received in Washington. Instead, the United States – and particularly the US Congress – has exhibited a knee-jerk negative reaction to Turkey's entry into the South Caucasus. Against the background of the discussion above, Turkey's actions have been interpreted in influential quarters as an irresponsible projection of power that has destabilized the region, as well as participation in an assault on Armenia.

The failure of the Turkish-Armenian normalization process in the early 2010s was a further factor fueling negative attitudes toward Turkey in Washington.¹² It was a major initiative of the Obama administration, and its failure clearly contributed to the

¹¹ Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *II. Turkey's and NATO's Views on Current Issues of the Alliance* (Ankara, n.d.), https://www.mfa.gov.tr/ii---turkey_s-contributions-to-international-peace-keeping-activities.en.mfa (accessed 25 February 2025).

¹² Joris Gjata, *Lessons from the Turkish-Armenian Protocols*, Turkey Analyst (Washington D.C., Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 12 April 2010), <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/207> (accessed 25 February 2025).

approaches of the Biden administration in the region. Indeed, while working on the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, the United States also supported restarting Turkish-Armenian negotiations on normalizing relations and opening the common border between the two countries.¹³

There is no doubt that the pro-Armenian lobby was influential during the Biden administration, in particular through the US Congress. For example, the most senior visit of a US official to the South Caucasus since President George W. Bush went to Georgia in 2005 occurred in September 2020, during the Second Karabakh War. This was when Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the House of Representatives, visited Armenia accompanied by ethnic-Armenian representative Jackie Speier, with the explicit purpose of “showing support for Armenia.”¹⁴ Pelosi did not visit Azerbaijan on the trip. As a result, the United States appeared to be taking a side in the conflict, which immediately undermined its ability to influence the course of events. This was particularly notable given that the fighting (and the underlying conflict) did not take place on the soil of Armenia – but only on lands internationally recognized as belonging to Azerbaijan that had been under Armenian occupation for almost thirty years. As such, Pelosi appeared to be advocating for continued Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani lands.

Following the Second Karabakh War, border skirmishes ensued in areas that now formed the presumed border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where previously no such border had existed in practice because the lands on the Azerbaijani side of the border had been under Armenian occupation. Disputes emerged over demarcation, and both sides sought to control tactical heights. During these skirmishes, US officials expressed strong support for Armenia’s territorial integrity, but at the same time took an active role in the peace process between the two countries.¹⁵ Turkey remained a steadfast supporter of Azerbaijan’s position.

However, the peace process did not go as planned. From Baku’s perspective, the American and EU efforts were undermined by the pro-Armenian bias of key actors – specifically the US Congress (in the case of America) and France (in the case of the EU). As a result, Azerbaijan increasingly felt that the Western-assisted peace process was unlikely to achieve results unless it was coupled with the threat of further military action. In September 2023, with strong Turkish support, Azerbaijan went ahead and

¹³ “USA Supports the Process of Normalization of Armenia-Turkey Relations: Deputy Assistant Secretary of State”, *Armenpress* (online), 17 April 2023, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1108912> (accessed 25 February 2025).

¹⁴ Jen McAndrew, “Historic Visit Underscores U.S. Support for Armenia”, *State Magazine*, November 2022, <https://statemag.state.gov/2022/11/1122itn05/> (accessed 25 February 2025).

¹⁵ Nigar Göksel and Philip Gamaghelyan, “Seizing the Moment: Armenia and Azerbaijan at a Crossroads”, *War on the Rocks* (online), 05 December 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/12/seizing-the-moment-armenia-and-azerbaijan-at-a-crossroads/> (accessed 25 February 2025); U.S. Embassy in Armenia, *Administrator Samantha Power Arrives in Armenia* (Yerevan, 25 September 2023), <https://am.usembassy.gov/samantha-powers-arrives/> (accessed 25 February 2025).

took control over the remainder of Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁶ This led to an outcry in the United States and parts of the European Union, with senior officials condemning Azerbaijan's offensive and raising the prospect of sanctions.¹⁷

The Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement of November 10, 2020, that ended the Second Karabakh War also included a provision that the sides work for the restoration of transport corridors. This clause was included at the behest of Baku, as it sought to pressure Armenia to permit the restoration of a land route from mainland Azerbaijan via the southern Armenian region of Syunik (the so-called Zangezur corridor) to its exclave of Nakhchivan, which in turn has a border with Turkey. This would provide Ankara and Baku with a shorter transportation route than the existing one through Georgia, and thus diversify transport routes linking Turkey to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. This led Ankara to put pressure on Yerevan for the realization of this corridor, something that has still to occur.¹⁸ But Armenia expressed fears that if it failed to grant extraterritorial control over such a transport route to Turkey and Azerbaijan, then the two powers would assert direct control of southern Armenia by military means. Such Armenian fears found a receptive audience in Washington, where senior officials began to sound the alarm. In November 2023, the United States threatened Azerbaijan with "serious consequences"¹⁹ if it violated Armenia's territorial integrity, and emphasized that there would be no "business as usual" in bilateral relations.²⁰ In so doing, Washington was seemingly oblivious to the irony of having largely ignored Armenia's large-scale occupation of Azerbaijani territories for twenty-eight years, and never warning Armenia of consequences for this violation of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

¹⁶ "Turkey Supports 'Steps Taken by Azerbaijan' in Nagorno-Karabakh: Erdogan", *Al Jazeera* (online), 20 September 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/turkey-supports-steps-taken-by-azerbaijan-in-nagorno-karabakh-erdogan> (accessed 25 February 2025).

¹⁷ U.S. Embassy in Armenia, *Statement by Secretary Antony J. Blinken* (Yerevan, 19 September 2023), <https://am.usembassy.gov/statement-by-secretary-2/> (accessed 25 February 2025); Brad Dress, "Congress Calls for Sanctions on Azerbaijan after Military Takeover of Disputed Region", *The Hill* (online), 28 September 2023, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4228590-congress-calls-for-sanctions-on-azerbaijan-after-military-takeover-of-disputed-region/> (accessed 25 February 2025).

¹⁸ Arshaluys Barseghian, "Turkey Renews Calls for 'Zangezur Corridor'", *OC Media* (online), 09 December 2024, <https://oc-media.org/turkey-renews-calls-for-zangezur-corridor/> (accessed 25 February 2025).

¹⁹ "Azerbaijani Experts Critique Recent Statements by U.S. Legislators and the White House", *Turan* (online), 17 November 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250215060550/https://turan.az/en/social/azerbaijani-experts-critique-recent-statements-by-us-legislators-and-the-white-house-774482> (accessed 25 February 2025).

²⁰ "No Chance of Business as Usual with Azerbaijan as Long as Peace Agreement' James O'Brien Tells Lawmakers", *Turan* (online), 15 November 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250305115714/http://turan.az/en/politics/no-chance-of-business-as-usual-with-azerbaijan-as-long-as-peace-agreement-james-obrien-tells-lawmakers-774406> (accessed 25 February 2025).

To sum up, in the past decade Turkey's policy in the South Caucasus has been focused on Azerbaijan – in part as a result of nationalist proclivities, but in equal measure because of the strong economic and energy relations linking the two countries, and Azerbaijan's role as a bridgehead for Turkish influence in Central Asia. Meanwhile, the hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 and 2023 contributed to pushing the United States into an increasingly pro-Armenian position. While this initially applied mainly to the US Congress, the US government followed suit – in particular following the 2023 events – in part because it viewed Azerbaijan's offensive as undermining a Washington-led peace process. For its part, Armenia has sought to distance itself from Russia, a step that has led the United States and France, in particular, to move in and seek to bolster Yerevan. Following the 2023 events, Washington also allowed the lapsing of a waiver that had been in place since 2001 to a 1992 law sanctioning Azerbaijan over its conflict with Armenia.

The lines in the conflict are thus reminiscent of the standoff in the Eastern Mediterranean in the late 2010s and early 2020s. In that instance, France took a particularly active role in backing the Greek Cypriot government against Turkey in disputes concerning the exploration of natural gas, with the United States also stepping in to seek to reduce tensions – with Congress taking a strongly anti-Turkish position. Similarly in the South Caucasus, France again took the opportunity to assert its opposition to Azerbaijan and Turkey. Meanwhile, the United States initially appeared as a facilitator of negotiations, but gradually – again under pressure from Congress and domestic constituencies – tilted against Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The notion of Azerbaijan and Turkey as a balancing force against Russia and Iran is strangely absent from the American discourse on the South Caucasus. Washington certainly views Turkey through that lens in other contexts. America's Black Sea Security Act of 2022 calls Turkey a “key ally in the Black Sea region and a bulwark against Iran.”²¹ Yet the American discourse rarely treats Turkey this way. Following the 2020 war, Iran held large military exercises along the Azerbaijani border to underline its displeasure over Azerbaijan's military operation. This prompted Turkey and Azerbaijan to conduct their own exercises in response on the Azerbaijani side of the border, and Azerbaijan's official statements concerning Iran's role in the region became more outspokenly negative than they had been since the time of nationalist firebrand Abulfaz Elchibey's short-lived and tumultuous presidency in 1992–93.²² Meanwhile, Turkey's relations with Iran soured further as Iranian intelligence

²¹ U.S. Senate, *Black Sea Security Act of 2022*, S.4509, 117th Congress, 2nd session (Washington D.C., 12 July 2022), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-117s4509is/html/BILLS-117s4509is.htm> (accessed 25 February 2025).

²² Michael Scollon, “Iran's Relations with Azerbaijan Get Heated over Attacks, Baku's Ties to Israel”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* (online), 08 June 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-azerbaijan-fraying-relations/32450502.html> (accessed 25 February 2025); Heydar Isayev, “Azerbaijan's President Blames Iran for Embassy Attack”, *Eurasianet* (online), 21 February 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijans-president-blames-iran-for-embassy-attack> (accessed 25 February 2025).

repeatedly targeted Iranian exiles in Turkey, forcing Turkey to respond.²³ It would have seemed natural for the United States to capitalize on this growing rift to restore cooperation with Ankara and Baku on regional security issues, but this did not happen.

Similarly, it would have seemed natural for the United States to jump on the fact that Turkey's presence in the South Caucasus led to a reduction of Russian influence in the region. Right at the end of the 2020 war, the Azerbaijani side was enraged by the firing of a Russian Iskander missile at its capital Baku. A direct hit on a civilian area was avoided only because the missile was intercepted by an Israeli-made Barak-8 missile defense system.²⁴ Because the Iskander missiles were operated by a joint Russian-Armenian command center, Baku concluded that Moscow must have approved of the missile launch. Again, this would have provided an excellent opportunity for the United States to capitalize on Azerbaijani frustration with Moscow by stepping in and rebuilding the relationship. Instead, Washington found itself in the unexpected position of having a South Caucasus policy that aligns more closely with its Russian and Iranian adversaries than it does with NATO ally Turkey.

In other words, Washington's policy in the region, and its perception of Turkish policy, does not appear to be guided by a strategic approach to the region, which would assess Turkish actions in relation to the stated American interest of countering Russian and Iranian influence. If it had been, Washington would have been expected to embrace (and perhaps influence) Ankara's active policy in the South Caucasus. In reality, instead, American perspectives both on events in the South Caucasus and Turkish policy there appear to have been colored by a reactive approach, which has been guided more by the influence of domestic special interests than by calculations of national interest.

²³ Salim Çevik, "The End of a Détente: Turkish-Iranian Relations after the Iranian Presidential Elections," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), 10 June 2021, <https://www.fes.de/en/referat-naher-mittlerer-osten-und-nordafrika/iran-elections/artikelseite-iranelections/das-ende-der-entspannung-die-tuerkisch-iranischen-beziehungen-nach-den-iranischen-praesidentschaftswahlen> (accessed 25 February 2025);

Hamidreza Azizi and Daria Isachenko, *Turkey-Iran Rivalry in the Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus*, SWP Comment 2023/C 49 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], 27 September 2023), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C49/> (accessed 25 February 2025).

²⁴ "Israeli Defense System Shot Down Russian Missile in Karabakh War – Reports," *Moscow Times* (online), 02 March 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/03/02/israeli-defense-system-shot-down-russian-missile-in-karabakh-war-reports-a73116> (accessed 25 February 2025).

Turkish and American interests could also have aligned in the field of oil and gas, had the United States not tied its hands by refusing to engage even in discussions about fossil fuel projects. American diplomats understand very well the objective common interest in assisting Central Asian states in diversifying export routes, and the commonality of interests with Turkey in this regard, but they are powerless to do anything about it. This represents another missed opportunity for a constructive US approach to the region, and a missed opportunity to improve Turkish-American coordination and cooperation.

6.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the discussion above. First, the deepening of security and military cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan – cemented in a mutual defense treaty – has been a stepping-stone for Turkish influence in the South Caucasus and for greater Turkish engagement with Central Asian states in the defense and security area. In parallel, expanding Turkish influence in the region increases the likelihood that Central Asian states will be able to diversify their energy export infrastructure and reduce their dependence on Russia. Given that this makes Turkey the only country aside from China or Iran to rival Russian influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, it is definitely a development that benefits the European Union and the United States.

The foregoing conclusion is mitigated by the fact that this development has taken place at the expense of Armenia, under a seemingly pro-Western prime minister seeking to distance his country from Moscow. But American and EU officials should consider two factors: First, Moscow's military presence in Armenia, its deep connections in the Armenian political system, and its economic ownership of key Armenian infrastructure (including the country's energy sector and railway system) imply that Yerevan will not find it easy to extricate itself from Russian influence any time soon. Second, the effective resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is a prerequisite for the development of a stable South Caucasus capable of liberating itself from Russian influence.

But European and American leaders have failed to understand that the liberation of Armenia from Russian influence is predicated on the ending of the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories and the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict through the signing of a peace agreement. Indeed, for as long as Armenia held large parts of Azerbaijan, it was Moscow's support for Yerevan that sustained the occupation. It is no coincidence that Yerevan's efforts to turn to the West came *after* it lost control over the territories it had occupied in Azerbaijan. The outcome of the Second Karabakh War now makes it possible to reduce Russian influence in the region. While the defeat caused major trauma in Armenia, it also made it possible for Yerevan to escape from the Russian embrace in which it had found itself – whether Armenian leaders realize this or not.

In other words, if they are to help Armenia and pursue the common goal of peace and stability, the United States and the European Union need to work with Turkey and Azerbaijan rather than against them. This requires a level of strategic thinking about the region that has been missing so far. It also requires American and European leaders to overcome the noisy lobbying efforts by supporters of one side of the conflict. While they have sometimes succeeded in this in the past, they have appeared unable to do so more recently – despite the stakes being higher than ever, given the situation in Ukraine. Tentative steps have been taken to achieve greater US-Turkish coordination, as evidenced by meetings within the framework of the US-Turkey Strategic Mechanism, where the South Caucasus has been a matter of discussion. Yet there is little to indicate that serious coordination is happening.²⁵

What is required is therefore nothing less than a complete reassessment of American and European priorities in the South Caucasus, and their intimate connection with the role of the South Caucasus as a gateway to Central Asia. In the long term, Western objectives in this region cannot be achieved if America and the EU position themselves in opposition to Azerbaijan (as the strongest state in the South Caucasus) and Turkey (as a NATO member state and Azerbaijan’s main external partner). Only if the United States and the European Union change their approach their commonalities of interest with Ankara and Baku can they develop a constructive approach to the South Caucasus

The return of President Trump to the White House presents an opportunity for change, but expectations in Ankara and Baku are likely low. At the very least, the Republican takeover of the Senate and the White House will decrease the influence of the Armenian lobby on U.S. policy, given its outsized influence in the Democratic party. Whether the Trump administration will look strategically at the region remains in doubt, however, given how little of significance occurred during the first Trump administration. The positive personal relations between Trump and Erdoğan could provide an opportunity for improvement, but are likely to have very limited impact on the day-to-day interactions among bureaucrats that continue to largely determine the bilateral relationship. With Trump also comes greater unpredictability, as the US approach to Iran is likely to change significantly – possibly providing a new angle to American policy toward Turkey and the South Caucasus.

²⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Joint Statement on the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism”, 09 March 2024. (<https://tr.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-turkiye-strategic-mechanism-2/>). (Accessed 21 March 2025)

Abbreviations

AKP	<i>Justice and Development Party</i>
NATO	<i>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</i>
PKK	<i>Kurdistan Workers' Party</i>

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