



NEW GEOPOLITICS OF THE CAUCASUS: CORRIDORS, CONNECTIVITY AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION

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Abstract

The Caucasus has historically served as a frontier of imperial rivalry, separating and connecting the competing spheres of the Ottoman, Russian, and Persian empires. Following Soviet rule and the emergence of independent republics after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the region remained largely within Russia's sphere of influence. However, the twenty-first century is witnessing a significant geopolitical and geoeconomic transformation of the Caucasus as competing powers seek greater influence over its strategic geography and connectivity potential. This paper examines the changing geopolitical role of the Caucasus through the conceptual transition from a frontier to a corridor and ultimately a crossroads. It argues that the traditional question of "who rules the Caucasus?" is increasingly being replaced by a more consequential question: "who connects through the Caucasus?" The study examines how the transition towards a multipolar world, competition over transport and energy corridors, and the growing involvement of major, middle, and smaller powers are reshaping the region. At the same time, it draws a comparative parallel between the Caucasus and the Middle East, particularly in relation to overlapping spheres of influence, unresolved territorial disputes, competing connectivity projects, external interventions, historical grievances, and shifting alliances. The paper argues that connectivity presents the Caucasus with a significant opportunity to emerge as a commercially successful crossroads of Eurasia, but the realization of this potential will depend on whether regional actors can manage geopolitical competition without allowing existing fault lines to undermine economic integration. The study



therefore explores whether the Caucasus can transform its strategic geography into an engine of regional connectivity and prosperity or whether it risks becoming another arena in which geopolitical rivalry overwhelms the promise of connectivity.

Keywords: Caucasus, geopolitics, geoeconomics, multipolarity, connectivity, transport corridors, energy corridors, Russia, Middle East, Eurasia.

Introduction

The Caucasus has historically been one of Eurasia's most consequential geopolitical spaces because of its location between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea and at the intersection of Europe, Central Asia, Anatolia, and the Middle East. (Pizzolo, 2020) Its geography made the region both a natural frontier and a passageway between competing empires and civilizations. For centuries, the Ottoman, Russian and Persian empires competed for influence and territorial control over the Caucasus, making it a zone of recurring imperial rivalry. Yet the region was never merely a military frontier; its mountain passes, valleys and routes also facilitated the movement of armies, merchants, goods and ideas between different parts of Eurasia. Russian expansion into the Caucasus gradually transformed the regional balance of power, while the incorporation of the region into the Russian and later Soviet imperial space consolidated Moscow's strategic position. (Strand, 2023) The Soviet collapse in 1991 fundamentally altered this arrangement with the emergence of independent Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, but it did not eliminate the region's geopolitical significance or Russia's strategic interests. Instead, it opened the Caucasus to a wider range of external actors and competing interests. Thus, the historical importance of the Caucasus lies not simply in its role as a contested frontier, but in its enduring function as a geographical space through which power, trade, energy and political influence have moved between major regions of Eurasia. (Tavadze, 2024) What has changed in the twenty-first century is therefore not the strategic importance of Caucasian geography, but the nature of the competition over it: the question is increasingly shifting from who controls the territory to who controls the flows that pass through it.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a fundamental geopolitical transformation of the Caucasus, bringing an end to decades of centralized Soviet control and creating three independent states—Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. (Malhotra, n.d.) Independence transformed the region from an internal space of the Soviet Union into an international arena in which newly sovereign states could pursue their own foreign-policy interests and develop relationships with competing external powers. However, political independence did not immediately translate into strategic autonomy. Russia retained significant economic, military and political influence across the region and continued to regard the Caucasus as an important component of its security perimeter and sphere of influence. (Blank, 2026) At the same time, the emergence of unresolved conflicts—particularly over Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia—created enduring sources of instability and provided opportunities for external powers to exert influence. Turkey expanded its political, economic and cultural engagement, Iran sought to protect its interests and regional access, while the United States and European states increasingly became involved through diplomacy,



energy and security initiatives. (Vatanka, 2022) The post-Soviet Caucasus therefore emerged not as a region liberated from great-power rivalry, but as a new geopolitical space in which Russia's established influence increasingly encountered competing regional and external interests. (Vatanka, 2022) This transformation laid the foundations for the contemporary contest over the region's security, energy resources and, increasingly, its transport and connectivity corridors.

The rise of multipolarity is fundamentally altering the geopolitical environment of the Caucasus by weakening the dominance of any single external power and creating space for multiple actors to pursue competing strategic interests. (Sukiasyan & Davtyan, 2025) The post-Cold War period was characterized by considerable American and Russian influence, but the emergence of China as a major economic power, the growing strategic autonomy of Turkey, the expanding role of the European Union, and Iran's efforts to preserve its regional influence have contributed to a more complex distribution of power. (Sukiasyan & Davtyan, 2025) Russia remains a central security actor, but its influence increasingly operates alongside competing economic, diplomatic, and connectivity initiatives promoted by China, Turkey, the United States, and European states. For the three South Caucasus republics, this emerging multipolarity creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities: they can diversify their external partnerships, attract investment and enhance their strategic autonomy, but they must also navigate competing great-power interests without becoming instruments of geopolitical rivalry. Consequently, the Caucasus is evolving from a predominantly Russia-centered geopolitical space into a multipolar arena where power is exercised not only through military presence and territorial influence, but increasingly through trade, infrastructure, energy, investment and connectivity. (Linderman, 2026) This transformation is making the region progressively more important to the emerging geopolitical architecture of Eurasia.

Increasing Competition Over Connectivity

The rise of multipolarity is making connectivity one of the principal arenas of geopolitical competition in the Caucasus. As the region connects the Black Sea and Caspian Sea with Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe, competing powers increasingly view transport infrastructure not simply as an instrument of trade but as a source of strategic influence. (Rentschler et al., 2025) Railways, highways, ports, pipelines and transit routes can determine how goods, energy and investment move across Eurasia and, consequently, which states gain economic leverage and political influence. The competition is particularly visible in the development of alternative routes linking China and Central Asia with European markets while bypassing or reducing dependence on traditional Russian routes. (Aguiar, 2025) Turkey seeks to strengthen its position as a bridge between Central Asia and Europe; China is expanding its connectivity through the Belt and Road Initiative; the European Union is seeking diversified routes and energy supplies; while Iran is promoting alternative connections between the Persian Gulf and the Black Sea. Russia, meanwhile, seeks to preserve its traditional role in regional transit and strategic connectivity. Consequently, the Caucasus is increasingly becoming a contested geography of connectivity, where the construction and control of infrastructure may be as strategically important as territorial control itself. (Arduino, 2026) The emerging competition raises a fundamental question: will connectivity transform the



Caucasus into a commercially integrated crossroads of Eurasia, or will competing connectivity projects become another instrument of geopolitical rivalry?

Energy and Transport Corridors

Energy and transport corridors are emerging as two of the most important dimensions of the Caucasus's new geopolitical significance. The region's location between the Caspian Sea, Black Sea, Central Asia, Turkey and Europe gives it the potential role to serve as a critical transit hub for both energy and trade. Azerbaijan's oil and gas resources, Turkey's position as an energy gateway to Europe, Georgia's access to the Black Sea, and Armenia's potential role in alternative connectivity routes have increased the strategic value of the Caucasus. (Wilson, 2026) At the same time, railways, highways and maritime connections are creating new routes for the movement of goods between Asia and Europe. The Middle Corridor, or Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, is particularly significant because it provides an alternative connection between China and Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.) Other emerging projects, including the TRIPP corridor linking Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan through Armenia and the Persian Gulf–Black Sea corridor promoted by Iran, illustrate the growing competition to establish alternative east–west and north–south routes. (van Dreven & Zarantonello, 2026) Consequently, competition over corridors is no longer simply an economic contest over trade and transit revenues; it is increasingly a contest over strategic access, energy security, infrastructure influence and regional connectivity. The power that can shape these flows will acquire not only economic benefits but also greater geopolitical leverage, making the Caucasus an increasingly important crossroads in the emerging Eurasian order.

Growing involvement of Russia, China, US, EU, Turkey and Iran

The Caucasus is increasingly emerging as a contested arena of overlapping great-power and regional-power interests, reflecting the broader transition toward a more multipolar Eurasian order. Russia, historically the dominant external power, is seeking to preserve its strategic influence and connectivity networks despite the erosion of its regional leverage. China has expanded its economic and diplomatic presence through infrastructure, trade, investment and connectivity projects linking the Caucasus with Central Asia and Europe. (Zeming, 2025) The United States and European Union, meanwhile, are seeking greater engagement to diversify regional energy and transport routes, strengthen the sovereignty of the South Caucasus states, and reduce their dependence on Russian-controlled corridors. (Rumer et al., 2017) The EU's recent initiatives to develop the Trans-Caspian/Middle Corridor demonstrate the growing geo-economic importance attached to the region. Turkey has emerged as an increasingly influential regional actor through its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, defense cooperation, trade, and its pivotal position in the Middle Corridor, while Iran seeks to protect its northern borders, maintain access to regional transit routes, and prevent the emergence of arrangements that could undermine its geopolitical position. (Colibasanu, 2024) Therefore, the Caucasus is no longer simply a zone of Russian-Western competition; it is becoming a multipolar geopolitical crossroads where Russia, China, the United States, the EU, Turkey and Iran compete and, at times, cooperate over security, energy, connectivity and regional influence.



From Geopolitics to Geoeconomics

Geopolitics

The geopolitical significance of the Caucasus can be understood through the classical theories of Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman, both of whom emphasized the relationship between geography and the distribution of global power. Mackinder's Heartland Theory identified the Eurasian interior as the potential pivot of world power, while Spykman's Rimland Theory emphasized the strategic importance of the coastal and peripheral zones surrounding the Eurasian landmass. (Strachan, n.d.) Although developed in different historical contexts, these perspectives provide a useful framework for understanding the Caucasus as a strategic space situated between the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Anatolia, Russia, Iran and Central Asia. The region's importance derives not simply from its territory but from its position as a bridge and buffer between major geopolitical centers. Its mountain passes, maritime access points, transport routes and proximity to the Black Sea and Caspian Sea give it importance as a network of strategic chokepoints and corridors. (Olteanu, 2017) From this perspective, control, access or influence over the Caucasus can provide states with opportunities to project military power, secure borders, influence neighboring regions and shape Eurasian connectivity. The geopolitical competition involving Russia, Turkey, Iran, the United States, China and the European Union can therefore be interpreted partly as a struggle to shape the strategic geography of the region. (Olteanu, 2017) Therefore, the Caucasus is showing a natural transition from classical geopolitics toward the study of geoeconomics.

Geoeconomics

The Caucasus landscape demonstrates how economic instruments can be transformed into instruments of geopolitical power, making geoeconomics an essential complement to traditional geopolitical analysis. Geopolitics emphasizes territory, military power, and strategic location; geoeconomics focuses on how states employ trade, investment, infrastructure, energy, and connectivity to pursue strategic objectives. (Estrin & Hancké, 2026) The Caucasus is particularly suited to this framework because its location between Europe and Asia has made it a critical arena for competing connectivity projects. Infrastructure development, trade routes, energy pipelines, railways and ports increasingly determine who can access regional markets and influence the movement of goods, energy and resources. Major transport initiatives such as the Middle Corridor seek to connect Central Asia with Europe through the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus. At the same time, energy pipelines linking the Caspian basin with Turkey and European markets have reduced dependence on traditional routes controlled by Russia. Investment in ports, rail networks and logistics infrastructure can create long-term economic dependencies and strengthen the political influence of the investing state. Economic interdependence, therefore, is not necessarily politically neutral; it can generate both mutual benefits and strategic leverage. Russia has historically used energy and economic linkages to maintain influence, China increasingly employs infrastructure investment and connectivity to expand its Eurasian presence, while the EU, United States and Turkey promote alternative routes and energy networks to diversify regional dependencies. (Skalamera, 2022) The Caucasus consequently illustrates how control over flows—of capital, energy, goods, infrastructure and connectivity—can become as strategically significant as control



over territory, marking the transition from traditional geopolitics toward an increasingly geoeconomic form of power competition. (Skalamera, 2022)

The Caucasus in the Emerging Multipolar Order

Russia

Russia remains a central but increasingly contested power in the Caucasus, where its traditional regional hegemony and influence are being challenged by competing regional and extra-regional actors. Historically, Moscow regarded the South Caucasus as part of its strategic sphere of influence and as a critical security buffer along Russia's southern frontier. Its military presence, political relationships, economic ties, and involvement in regional conflicts provided important instruments of influence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russia's relationship with the three South Caucasus states, however, has developed along markedly different trajectories, Armenia has traditionally been Russia's closest security partner, although relations have deteriorated considerably in recent years; Azerbaijan has pursued a more independent and multi-vector foreign policy while maintaining pragmatic relations with Moscow; and Georgia has moved increasingly toward the West, culminating in the rupture of relations following the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. (Pantsulaia, 2025) The war in Ukraine has further complicated Russia's position, imposing military, economic and diplomatic pressures while creating opportunities for other actors to expand their presence in the region. (Pantsulaia, 2025)

China

The Caucasus is particularly important to China because it provides an alternative westward route that can connect the Caspian region with Turkey and Europe, thereby supporting diversification of China's Eurasian trade networks. (Avdaliani, 2024) The Middle Corridor, linking China and Central Asia across the Caspian Sea through Azerbaijan and Georgia toward Turkey and Europe, has consequently acquired greater strategic significance. China's approach differs substantially from Russia's traditional emphasis on military and political influence: Beijing's principal instruments are investment, infrastructure development, trade, logistics, and economic partnerships; China plans to extend its role as a major economic actor without requiring a substantial military presence. (German, 2022) Nevertheless, China's geoeconomic engagement carries geopolitical consequences, as infrastructure and connectivity can create strategic dependencies, influence regional alignments, and provide Beijing with greater access to European markets. Thus, China's rise in the Caucasus illustrates how economic connectivity itself can become a source of geopolitical power, contributing to the growing competition and likely conflicts. (Popkhadze, 2021)

United States

US policy increasingly emphasizes connectivity and economic integration, particularly projects that strengthen east-west transportation and trade routes and provide alternatives to networks vulnerable to Russian influence. (van Dreven & Zarantonello, 2026) The Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) is particularly significant in this regard, linking regional connectivity to broader strategic objectives by seeking to promote peace, transit, investment, and economic



integration between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The United States also sees greater regional connectivity as a means of strengthening the sovereignty and economic resilience of the South Caucasus states while reducing their dependence on Russia. At the same time, Washington's engagement must be understood within its wider competition with China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's traditional regional influence. (van Dreven & Zarantonello, 2026) Rather than seeking to establish a conventional military sphere of influence, the United States increasingly employs diplomacy, economic partnerships, infrastructure initiatives and support for regional stability to shape the emerging order. The Caucasus therefore represents an important arena in which Washington can pursue a broader strategy of strategic balancing through connectivity, economic integration and political partnerships, rather than through direct territorial or military control. (Hill, 2001)

Turkey

Ankara's relationship with Azerbaijan forms the cornerstone of its Caucasus strategy, reflected in extensive political, military, economic, and security cooperation and encapsulated in the concept of “two states, one nation.” Beyond bilateral ties, Turkey increasingly views the Caucasus as a critical bridge connecting Anatolia with the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. The Middle Corridor is particularly important to Ankara because it can transform Turkey into a major transit hub linking China and Central Asia with European markets while reducing reliance on northern routes through Russia and strengthening east-west connectivity. (Çalışkan, 2026) Ankara's Caucasus policy is not simply about expanding influence in a neighbouring region; it forms part of a broader pursuit of regional strategic autonomy, in which Turkey seeks greater freedom of action independent of Russian, Western or Iranian dominance. The Caucasus therefore occupies a pivotal position in Turkey's emerging geopolitical vision, linking its Turkic identity, connectivity agenda and aspiration to become an autonomous regional power. (Isachenko & Kaymak, 2024)

Iran

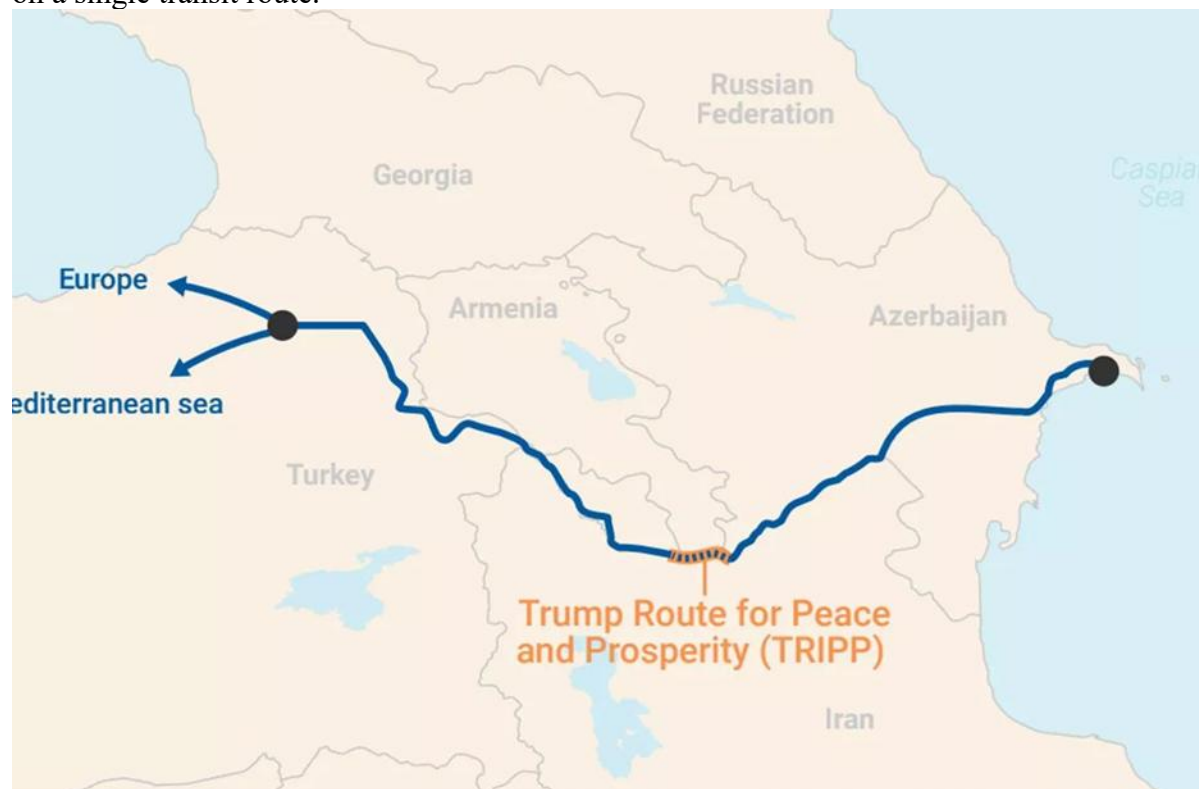
Iran's engagement with the Caucasus is shaped by a combination of geographical security, strategic access, regional connectivity and the need to prevent its northern frontier from becoming dominated by rival powers. (Ratelle, 2026) The South Caucasus is particularly important to Tehran because Armenia and Azerbaijan directly border Iran, while developments in the region can affect its access to the Black Sea, Russia, Europe and the wider Eurasian transport network. Armenia occupies a particularly important position in Iranian strategy, as maintaining strong relations with Armenia provides Tehran with an important northern partner and helps prevent the emergence of a contiguous Turkish-Azerbaijani sphere of influence along Iran's northern border. Tehran seeks to develop Persian Gulf–Black Sea connectivity, using Iranian territory as a potential transit route linking India and the Persian Gulf with Armenia, Georgia, Russia and European markets. (Conzato, 2024) Projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor and emerging road, rail and energy connections provide Iran with opportunities to overcome economic isolation and enhance its role as a Eurasian transit state. (Shahcheragh, 2025) Iran's Caucasus policy is consequently both defensive and geoeconomic: it seeks to avoid Turkish and Azerbaijani strategic encirclement,

preserve access to Armenia and the wider Caucasus, and convert its geographical position into economic and geopolitical leverage. In the emerging multipolar order, Tehran therefore views the Caucasus not as a peripheral region but as a critical component of its strategy for maintaining strategic depth and connectivity between Iran, Russia, Central Asia, the Black Sea and Europe. (Wallshein, 2025)

The Contest for Connectivity

The Middle Corridor / TITR

The Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian Transport Route (TTR), is a multimodal trade and connectivity network linking China and Central Asia with Europe through the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Turkey, broadly bypassing Russia. (Nijhar, 2024) It connects China to Europe through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. The strategic importance of this corridor is in the alternative connectivity it provides. The traditional China–Europe land route passes through Russia. The Middle Corridor provides an alternative following the geopolitical disruption caused by the Russia–Ukraine war. The route complements China's Belt and Road Initiative, giving Beijing another pathway into European markets while reducing dependence on a single transit route.



Source: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/armenia-says-tripp-transport-corridor-project-advancing-rapidly-2025-12-30-0/>



Source: <https://aze.media/the-middle-corridor-a-route-born-of-the-new- Eurasian-geopolitics/>

TRIPP — Trans-Regional Infrastructure Partnership Program

In the Caucasus/Black Sea geopolitical context, TRIPP refers to the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity. It is a proposed connectivity initiative centered on the South Caucasus, particularly the transport link through Armenia. (Nijhar, 2024) TRIPP is designed to create a transport and connectivity route linking Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenian territory, potentially connecting the wider route to Turkey, Central Asia and Europe. The important analytical point is that TRIPP should not be treated as a completely separate corridor. It can become a critical component of the wider Middle Corridor architecture because TRIPP gives the Middle Corridor an additional western/southern connectivity option and increases the strategic importance of Armenia. (Nijhar, 2024) The emergence of TRIPP demonstrates how connectivity has become an instrument of geopolitical competition in the Caucasus. Infrastructure is no longer merely an economic undertaking; competing transport corridors are increasingly being used to redistribute strategic influence, reduce dependence on Russia, connect Central Asia with European markets, and reshape the regional balance of power. (Nijhar, 2024)

The Middle East–Caucasus Parallel



The geopolitical dynamics of the Caucasus increasingly mirror those of the Middle East, particularly in the way geography, competing security interests, external intervention, and connectivity intersect to produce a fragmented but highly strategic regional order. (Chausovsky & Giragosian, 2024) Like the Middle East, the Caucasus has become an arena where regional powers and external great powers compete for influence without necessarily seeking confrontation. Turkey, Iran and Russia pursue overlapping but competing strategic interests, while the United States, European Union and China seek to shape the emerging regional balance through diplomacy, security partnerships, investment and connectivity. The parallel is particularly visible in the growing importance of strategic corridors, energy routes and competing spheres of influence. (International Crisis Group, 2018) Just as the Middle East has witnessed competition over energy infrastructure, maritime routes and strategic chokepoints, the Caucasus is experiencing competition over the Middle Corridor, TRIPP, INSTC and Persian Gulf–Black Sea connectivity. However, the Caucasus differs from the Middle East in one important respect: connectivity rather than hydrocarbons and ideological conflict is increasingly becoming the principal currency of geopolitical competition. (International Crisis Group, 2018) This suggests that the Caucasus may develop a form of “Middle Easternization”—characterized not by permanent conflict, but by overlapping alliances, strategic hedging, external balancing and intense competition among regional powers for influence.

Frontier, Corridor or Crossroads?

The evolving geopolitics of the Caucasus raises a fundamental question: is the region still a frontier between competing powers, or is it becoming a corridor and crossroads connecting wider geopolitical spaces? Historically, the Caucasus functioned primarily as a frontier and buffer zone, separating the Russian, Ottoman, and Persian spheres of influence. Today, however, its strategic importance increasingly derives from its ability to connect rather than simply separate. The emergence of the Middle Corridor/TTR, TRIPP, INSTC, and Persian Gulf–Black Sea connectivity is transforming the region into a potential bridge between Europe, Russia, Türkiye, the Middle East, Central Asia and China. (International Crisis Group, 2018) This transformation does not eliminate the region's traditional frontier character; rather, it adds a new dimension to it. The Caucasus is simultaneously a frontier of geopolitical rivalry, a corridor of economic connectivity, and a crossroads where competing strategic interests intersect. (O’Riordan, 2026) Its future will therefore depend on whether connectivity can generate interdependence and cooperation or whether competing powers will turn these corridors into instruments of strategic competition. In this sense, the Caucasus may no longer be merely the borderland between geopolitical orders—it may become one of the principal junctions through which those orders interact and compete.

Possible Future Scenarios

Scenario I: The Commercial Caucasus

In the Commercial Caucasus scenario, the region successfully transforms from a zone of geopolitical rivalry into a hub of trade, transit and economic interdependence. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia capitalize on their strategic geography by developing complementary transport, energy and digital infrastructure, while competing powers recognize that cooperation provides greater



benefits than confrontation. (Cenusa, 2026) The Middle Corridor/TTR, TRIPP, INSTC and Persian Gulf–Black Sea Corridor evolve into interconnected rather than competing networks, linking Europe with Central Asia, the Middle East and China. Increased trade and investment create incentives for the regional states to maintain political stability and protect critical infrastructure. Turkey, Iran and Russia retain important interests in the region but increasingly compete through commerce, investment and connectivity rather than coercion. For the European Union and China, the Caucasus becomes an essential bridge to wider Eurasian markets. (Kharshiladze, 2025) In this scenario, economic interdependence gradually reduces the region's traditional role as a buffer zone and transforms it into a commercial crossroads. The Commercial Caucasus would therefore represent the most optimistic outcome of the region's geopolitical transformation: geography becomes an asset for cooperation rather than a source of perpetual rivalry.

Scenario II: The Competitive Crossroads

In the Competitive Crossroads scenario, the Caucasus becomes an increasingly important connectivity hub, but instead of producing cooperation, its strategic geography intensifies great-power and regional competition. (Kharshiladze, 2025) Competing corridors—including the Middle Corridor/TTR, TRIPP, INSTC and Persian Gulf–Black Sea route—become instruments through which Russia, Turkey, Iran, China, the European Union and the United States seek to expand their respective influence. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia attempt to hedge among competing powers, using their geographic importance to maximize economic and strategic benefits while avoiding excessive dependence on any single actor. (Kharshiladze, 2025) However, competition over routes, ports, infrastructure and energy networks generates new geopolitical fault lines. Russia seeks to preserve its influence, Turkey promotes east–west connectivity, Iran seeks to prevent strategic encirclement and secure northern access, while Western powers attempt to reduce Russian influence and strengthen alternative routes toward Central Asia. China focuses primarily on maintaining reliable Eurasian connectivity. (Kharshiladze, 2025) In this scenario, the Caucasus does not descend into major conflict, but neither does it achieve comprehensive regional integration. Instead, it becomes a contested geopolitical crossroads where connectivity itself becomes a form of strategic competition. The region's central dilemma is therefore whether its geographic advantage can be converted into strategic autonomy or whether connectivity will create new forms of dependence and rivalry.

Scenario III: The New Geopolitical Frontier

In the New Geopolitical Frontier scenario, the Caucasus becomes a major arena of strategic confrontation as competing powers increasingly view control over the region's territory, corridors, energy infrastructure and political alignments as essential to their broader geopolitical objectives. Connectivity projects cease to function primarily as instruments of commerce and become tools of strategic influence and containment. (Kharshiladze, 2025) Russia seeks to prevent further erosion of its traditional sphere of influence; Türkiye expands its strategic reach toward Azerbaijan and Central Asia; Iran attempts to preserve its northern access and prevent encirclement; while the United States and European Union seek to consolidate Western influence and reduce Russian dependence.



(Kharshiladze, 2025) China, meanwhile, seeks to protect its westward connectivity and investment interests without becoming directly entangled in regional security competition. Under such conditions, unresolved disputes and competing corridor projects could generate militarization, proxy competition, economic pressure and diplomatic polarization. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia would face increasing pressure to align with competing geopolitical blocs, narrowing their room for strategic autonomy. (Tsereteli, 2025) The Caucasus would consequently revert, in a modern form, to its historical role as a frontier between rival geopolitical orders. The key danger is that the region's transformation from buffer zone to crossroads could ultimately make it more—not less—strategically contested, turning connectivity infrastructure into potential targets and the Caucasus into a new fault line in the emerging multipolar international order.

Conclusion

The Caucasus is undergoing a profound geopolitical transformation. Historically viewed as a frontier and buffer zone between competing Russian, Ottoman and Persian spheres of influence, the region is increasingly emerging as a corridor and crossroads connecting Europe, Russia, Türkiye, the Middle East, Central Asia and China. The growing importance of the Middle Corridor/TTR, TRIPP, INSTC and Persian Gulf–Black Sea connectivity demonstrates that infrastructure and geography have become central instruments of contemporary geopolitical competition. The region therefore stands at a strategic crossroads of its own. The Commercial Caucasus offers the possibility of economic interdependence, regional integration and shared prosperity; the Competitive Crossroads points toward sustained but manageable rivalry among regional and external powers; while the New Geopolitical Frontier carries the danger of polarization, militarization and renewed conflict. Which trajectory ultimately prevails will depend on whether the states of the region can convert their geographical importance into strategic autonomy and cooperative connectivity, rather than allowing external powers to transform their geography into another arena of confrontation. The central paradox of the emerging Caucasus is therefore clear: the same geography that makes the region a bridge between continents also makes it a prize for competing powers. Its future will be determined by whether the Caucasus becomes a bridge between geopolitical orders or a battleground between them.



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