Band 7 / 2026

Today and Tomorrow: Prospects for Peace and Pitfalls of Emerging Technologies

Christoph Bilban, Elena Mandalenakis, George Niculescu (Eds.)

Study Group Information

UNSER HEER

Study Group Information

Christoph Bilban, Elena Mandalenakis, George Niculescu (Eds.)

Today and Tomorrow: Prospects for Peace and Pitfalls of Emerging Technologies

30th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group "Regional Stability in the South Caucasus"

7/2026
Vienna, October 2026

Imprint:

Copyright, Production, Publisher:
Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence
Roßauer Lände 1
1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by:
National Defence Academy
Command
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Vienna, Austria

In co-operation with:
PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes
Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Study Group Information

Copyright
© Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence
All rights reserved

October 2026
ISBN 978-3-903548-32-9

Printing:
ReproZ W 26-4264
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Vienna, Austria

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments 3

Abstract 5

Introduction 7

PART I: New Geopolitical Trends in the South Caucasus.
From the Washington Deal to Regional Connectivity Realignment? 13

The EU's Strategic Challenge in the South Caucasus –
A Combination of Strategic Uncertainty and Democratic Struggle
Shalva Dzebisashvili 15

The Washington Summit Can Build Lasting Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan – If Threats and Challenges Are Managed Successfully
Vasif Huseynov 45

Russia's Retrenchment From the South Caucasus and how to
Maintain its Influence in the Region
Boris Kuznetsov 59

Regional Perspective towards "TRIPP":
What Choices does Armenia have?
Benyamin Poghosyan, Yeghia Tashjian 65

PART II: AI-Mediated Ontological Security.
National Identities and Sustainable Peace in the South-Caucasus 83

AI, Identity Narratives, and Implications for Ontological Security
Anna Nadibaidze 85

Ontological Security and the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict:
Post-2020 Identity Crises and Paths to Peace
Gulkhanim Mammadova 91

Conflict, Ontological (in)Security, Discursive Strategies and
Post-War Peace Perspectives in the South Caucasus
Levon Hovsepyan 103

PART III: Cyber-Domain Strategies for Peacebuilding in the South Caucasus. Counter-Disinformation, Collaborative Security, and Inclusive Governance 115

Cyber Operations and Cognitive Warfare: Human-Security Vulnerabilities in the South Caucasus
Andro Gotsiridze 117

Digital Connectivity and Confidence-Building across Eurasia: Azerbaijan's Multilateral Strategy in the Emerging Digital Order
Vusal Guliyev 145

Weaponized Information and Ontological Security: Strategies for Armenia
Armine Arzumanyan 177

PART IV: Policy Recommendations 197

Policy Recommendations 199

List of Abbreviations 207

List of Authors and Editors 211

Acknowledgments

This book reflects the output of the 30th workshop of the *Regional Stability in South Caucasus Study Group* of the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, which was held in Reichenau/Rax, Austria, on 23 – 26 October 2025. The meeting and its final product would not have been possible without the financial and technical support of the Austrian National Defence Academy (by means of Mag. Benedikt Hensellek) and the Austrian Ministry of Defence (thanks to the commitment of Mag. Andreas Wannemacher). The editors and co-chairs would furthermore like to thank the Secretariat at the PfP Consortium in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, especially LTC Olaf Garlich, Deputy Director of the PfP Consortiums's Secretariat, for their appreciation of the RSSC SG work and their logistical and financial support. The editors and co-chairs wish to extend their gratitude to all individuals who have contributed to the realization of this volume. This includes the distinguished participants and speakers who have contributed their work, policy recommendations, and constructive exchange of opinions during the discussions, which are included at the end of this volume. Moreover, this includes Mr. Nikolas Neubauer for his support as a rapporteur in the breakout group on Cyber & AI in the interactive discussion session. Finally, the editors would like to express their gratitude to Ms. Miriam Zeug for her indispensable assistance in the organisation of the workshop and to Ms. Agathe Formanek for providing invaluable support during the proofreading and compilation of this volume.

Abstract

Recent geopolitical realignments, such as the recalibration of Russia's regional role, the renewed interest of the United States, a volatile Iran, and Türkiye's expanding influence, as well as rapidly advancing technologies, are reshaping the security landscape of the South Caucasus. Some authors assess the opportunities and constraints facing Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan as they navigate a transforming landscape. Particular attention is given to the 2025 Washington Summit and the proposed TRIPP corridor, exploring their potential to recalibrate regional connectivity and advance the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. Others examine the renewed regional commitments of the United States under President Trump, Iran's ongoing strategic challenges, Türkiye's expanding regional influence as well as Russian plummeting influence on the South Caucasus republics. Combining the concept of ontological security with the opportunities and threats of Artificial Intelligence in shaping identities and narratives across the South Caucasus, some contributors analyse how AI-mediated discourses influence collective self-perceptions, exacerbate or mitigate post-conflict identity crises, and open new pathways for sustainable peace. These chapters highlight the interplay between technological change and deeply rooted factors of conflicts, offering insights into how digital tools can both stabilise and destabilise fragile post-war environments. Furthermore, several articles draw attention to the increasingly contested cyber domain, with a special focus on disinformation, cognitive warfare, and human-security vulnerabilities. Authors outline how weaponised information affects state and societal resilience, and propose frameworks for collaborative cyber governance tailored to the region's unique political and security context. Together, the chapters provide a comprehensive and multi-layered analysis, enriched by the wide range of perspectives included in this volume. In conclusion, the future of the South Caucasus will depend on the region's ability to strengthen infrastructural, political and informational connectivity, both internally and with external partners. By integrating geopolitical analysis with emerging technological perspectives, the volume provides a comprehensive assessment of the prospects for peace and the challenges posed by new domains of external competition across the South Caucasus region.

Introduction

Christoph Bilban, Elena Mandalenakis and George Niculescu

The South Caucasus has rarely offered its observers a moment of settled clarity. Despite an apparent breakthrough in the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process since August 2025 the region is still caught between the promise of a historic peace and the persistence of rivalries that have long defined it. The 8 August 2025, draft peace agreement between Yerevan and Baku, initialed in Washington, seemed to have resolved the issue of corridors and brought about the agreement to dissolve the OSCE Minsk Group, while a final peace treaty is yet to be signed. Coming on the heels of the first unmediated Armenian-Azerbaijani summit in Abu Dhabi in July 2025, these developments were widely hailed as significant steps towards peace in three decades. Yet, as several contributions to this volume caution, initialing a treaty is not the same as signing it, and a diplomatic breakthrough is not yet a durable settlement.

At the same time, the tools with which conflicts are now waged, mediated and remembered are themselves changing. Artificial intelligence (AI), generative language models, and cyber capabilities have moved from the margins of security policy to its core, shaping not only the physical battlefield but also the narratives, identities and perceptions on which peace ultimately depends. Following up on the outcomes of the 29th workshop of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus study group in Istanbul, Türkiye, in April 2025, the co-chairs decided to deepen the debate further. The central question of this volume is therefore twofold: how the geopolitical realignment set in motion in Washington might reshape the prospects for regional cooperation, and how emerging technologies – for better or worse – could support peace building and reconciliation efforts in the South Caucasus.

These questions guided the 30th workshop of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) of the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes (PfPC), convened under the title *"Today and Tomorrow: Prospects for Peace and Pitfalls of Emerging Technologies"* in Reichenau an der Rax, Austria, on 23–26 October

2025. The Study Group brought together experts and practitioners from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia alongside international scholars under the Chatham House rule. The present Study Group Information volume reflects the outcomes of their discussions. In keeping with the anthology character of the series, the contributions represent the views of their authors alone.

The current volume builds directly on the Istanbul workshop, deepening the enquiry into how conflict resolution and emerging technologies might advance hand in hand, while extending it into the less charted territory of ontological security, where through memories, narratives and self-images portrayed in the public debate, deeply rooted anxieties are increasingly exposed to AI-mediated manipulation. Therefore, this volume also complements the Study Group's handbook "Building Resilience against Human Security Threats and Risks", published in May 2025.

Three threads run through the analyses that follow. The first is that the Washington process, however promising, remains susceptible to political, socio-economic and geopolitical disruption. Neither Russia nor Iran welcome a settlement perceived to be reached at its expense. Domestic politics – in particular the upcoming Armenian parliamentary elections – could still stall the implementation. However, despite a possible victory of Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan in the June 2026 elections, the peace process might not lead into an undisputed track yet.

The second thread concerns ontological security – the need of states and societies for a stable and continuous sense of self. As several authors argue, the very identities that Armenia and Azerbaijan constructed around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict now make peace itself feel destabilising, since enmity has long supplied predictability and self-definition. Sustainable reconciliation, in this reading, requires not only treaties but new routines that can secure identity without perpetuating hostility.

The third thread is the ambivalence of technology itself. AI and cyber tools are neither inherently benign nor inherently malign: the same capabilities that can map narratives, monitor ceasefires or surface hidden common ground can also spread disinformation, condition perceptions and hollow out institutional trust. Their effect, the contributors suggest, depends on governance, human agency and contextual sensitivity rather than on the technology alone.

The present volume is therefore organised following these three argumentative lines reflecting the panel discussions in Reichenau, followed by the Study Group's policy recommendations.

Part I examines the new geopolitical trends set in motion by the Washington summit and their implications for regional connectivity. **Shalva Dzebisashvili** scrutinises the European Union's strategic posture towards the region, arguing that a persistent gap between strategic vision and the tools of membership conditionality – compounded by Georgia's democratic backsliding – undermines the EU's ability to shape outcomes, and that domestic political dynamics, not capability distribution alone, drive the behaviour of small states. **Vasif Huseynov** traces the road to the Washington summit and assesses its results, contending that it offers a genuine chance for lasting peace provided that domestic uncertainties in Armenia and the dissatisfaction of Russia and Iran are managed with care, restraint and strategic foresight. **Boris Kuznetsov** analyses Russia's retrenchment from the region and the narrowing of Moscow's room for manoeuvre, suggesting that a sustainable Russian presence would require abandoning "resource diplomacy" in favour of a more pragmatic, mutually beneficial model of engagement. **Benyamin Poghosyan and Yeghia Tashjian** map the positions of the regional and extra-regional actors – Russia, Iran, Türkiye, India and China – towards TRIPP, and weigh Armenia's options, cautioning that connectivity will only serve peace if all regional links are reopened simultaneously rather than selectively.

Part II turns to AI-mediated ontological security in order to achieve sustainable peace. **Anna Nadibaidze** conceptualises two intersections between AI and identity narratives – AI-related policies as part of a state's quest for a stable identity, and AI-enabled disinformation as a source of ontological insecurity – while warning against treating AI as a technological "silver bullet" for the deeply rooted dynamics of the region. **Gulkhanim Mammadova** reads the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict through the lens of ontological security, showing how the 2020 war produced asymmetrical identity shocks – affirmation for Azerbaijan, dislocation for Armenia – and proposing pathways, including educational and media reform and the careful use of AI that could anchor identity in something other than enmity. **Levon Hovsepyan** applies critical discourse analysis to Azerbaijani official rhetoric after 8 August 2025, arguing that a persistent dichotomy between external and internal

discourse points to the continued reproduction of anti-Armenian narratives, and hence to an ontological obstacle that still stands in the way of genuine reconciliation.

Part III addresses cyber-domain strategies for peacebuilding, spanning counter-disinformation, collaborative security and inclusive governance. **Andro Gotsiridze** analyses how cyber operations serve the ends of cognitive warfare, drawing on the experience of Georgia as a "laboratory" of cognitive state capture. He argues that resilience must be built around human security and a whole-of-society, regionally coordinated response rather than technical defences alone. **Vusal Guliyev** examines how Azerbaijan manages to become a norm and standard setting actor in the digitalization of the wider region reaching beyond the South Caucasus through the use of multilateral and minilateral platforms. Baku couples physical and digital connectivity to position itself as a Eurasian digital hub and to advance confidence-building in an increasingly contested digital order. **Armine Arzumanyan** considers the weaponisation of information as a threat to ontological security and sets out strategies for Armenia to counter it. Across the three parts, the authors converge on a common appeal: that cyber capabilities and emerging technologies be harnessed responsibly, for the advancement of peace in a region where historical grievances and unresolved conflicts leave little margin for error.

Part IV presents the Study Group's policy recommendations already published in a separate paper. Prepared on the basis of the participants' proposals, they call, among other measures, for a technology-agnostic regulatory approach grounded in principles of good governance rather than the regulation of particular technologies; for a research grant on "AI for Peacebuilding in the South Caucasus" pursued through multinational and interdisciplinary collaboration; for joint Armenian-Azerbaijani centres for peace studies, memory research and social psychology; and for a more pragmatic, issue-focused European engagement with the Georgian government while accession talks remain frozen.

The editors believe that the analyses gathered here contribute to the wider debate on the value of emerging technologies as instruments in the pursuit of peace, and that they should stimulate further research and exchange among scholars, policymakers and practitioners concerned with the South

Caucasus region. Technology alone cannot generate the political will that reconciliation demands; but, grounded in ethical principles, sound governance and inclusive engagement, it may yet help the region secure its identity without perpetuating its conflicts.

CRediT roles statement

Christoph Bilban: writing – original draft; Elena Mandalenakis: writing – review & editing, George Niculescu: writing – review & editing.

PART I:
New Geopolitical Trends in the South Caucasus. From the Washington Deal to Regional Connectivity Realignment?

The EU's Strategic Challenge in the South Caucasus – A Combination of Strategic Uncertainty and Democratic Struggle

Shalva Dzebisashvili

Abstract

The article examines the strategic nature of the EU's approach to the South Caucasus region and to Georgia in particular and attempts to uncover its inherent conceptual deficiencies and policy challenges given local political intricacies and priorities. Two major questions appear to be fundamental: Firstly, does the EU consider itself a strategic actor and therefore does it have a clear strategic vision and action plan to deal with the South Caucasus region? Secondly, is the mechanism of EU-membership conditionality strong enough to ensure a candidate country's compliance with membership criteria, both in terms of effective punishment (stick) and incentives (carrot)? Additionally, special attention is given to key aspects of the balance of power theory in relation to the behavioural (security) preferences of small states as an alternative explanation for policy outcomes. The assumption is that both elements (strategic vision and conditionality tools) can only work together and have a mutually reinforcing effect if sufficiently developed. Conversely, if decoupled or underdeveloped, they will always fall short of intended aims leading neither to strengthening the EU's strategic posture, nor to an effective application of the conditionality toolset. Drawing on the evidence and impact of the EU's engagement in the region, as well as the regional security dynamics and the war in Ukraine, the article concludes the analysis with a set of policy recommendations for the EU to bridge its conceptual deficits and improve its policy posture in the region.

Key Words: EU, South Caucasus, Georgia, Security, Conditionality, Democracy

Introduction

By allowing Georgia to join the Eastern Partnership (EAP) initiative in 2007, granting it a candidate status in 2024 for future membership and intensively advancing differentiated approaches to Armenia and Azerbaijan, the European Union did in fact make a strategic statement about the major relevance of the South Caucasus region for Europe. Although the history of European engagement with the region starts in the early 1990s, the true challenges presented themselves as Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. Furthermore, since Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine in 2022, the dilemma of the EU's strategic action towards the South Caucasus and Georgia, in particular, became even greater as the heightened security concerns in the region could no longer be trumped by benefits of European engagement. The problem also manifested itself in the growing authoritarianism of the ruling party in Georgia (the Georgian Dream – GD), leading to a much more confrontational approach of the Georgian government towards the EU, and the inability of EU-institutions to enforce Georgia's compliance with democratic standards (conditionality failure). Since the political crisis in Georgia in the aftermath of parliamentary elections in 2020, and especially after the violent crackdown since November 2024, the GD refuses to implement any major recommendations formulated by the EU that serve as necessary preconditions to open up the membership negotiation process. This deadlock could indicate two possible explanations for GD's behavioural motives: either the EU lacks significant leverage over Georgia to ensure its compliance, i.e. there are no effective "sticks"; or the GD is genuinely no longer interested in EU-membership, given its openly autocratic nature and the real possibility of punishment by Russia (security concerns and domestic agenda trump incentives associated with the EU-membership). Whether a combination of external and internal factors motivates the current Georgian government to adopt a balancing approach towards big powers to offset perceived threat(s) and reach a power equilibrium remains to be investigated.[1] However, the principles of mutual cooperation and competition, which are the integral element of the balance of power (BOP) theory, do not negate the need to examine the deficit of EU's strategic posture in the region given its envisioned goals, existing

[1] Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 1979; John Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Powers, 2001.

political economic and security commitments as well as institutional mechanisms. Consequently, while focusing on European engagement, careful attention should be paid to the relevance of the democratic vs. autocratic nature of the national political system and the (in)capacity to prevent, stop or punish autocratic advances as an essential element of EU's strategic toolset. Furthermore, the aforementioned strategic claim of the EU begs for investigation into whether it can offer meaningful security mechanisms that can positively impact regional security arrangements and through that motivate more positive internal political dynamics in Georgia, as well as in Armenia. The aim is to see whether the EU's policies and tools make the South Caucasus nations rationally seek closer cooperation and integration with the EU (positive conditionality) or whether, outbalanced by the security fears and priorities of the domestic political agenda, they will choose a balancing approach (negative conditionality).

Hence, we will first briefly investigate major tenets of the neorealist BOP theory, its conceptual shortcomings relevant to the formation of the national security threat perceptions, as well as to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In particular, the aims of the enlargement policy on the security dimension as well as existing mechanisms of membership conditionality will be investigated. Institutional aspects of NATO-EU cooperation and competition will also be highlighted to distil major deficits of the existing security arrangements and their conceptual and policy related (ir)relevance for small states security concerns. Ultimately, the EU's current engagement with the South Caucasus region will be scrutinised, in which three variables, namely political, economic and security incentives (key elements of conditionality) will serve as major analytical factors. Eventually, the formation of the regional security dynamics, and hence, the success or failure of respective EU-policies will be assessed, and ensuing policy recommendations formulated.

BOP-Theory and its Conceptual Criticism

There are several key elements the neorealist school of thought refers to, and the notion of balance of power (BOP), a concept that centres around the relevance of relative (state) power while rejecting the unit (state) level analysis, is the most important one. In essence, in an anarchic environment, states will choose balancing strategies against those whom they perceive as a threat

and therefore mobilize resources internally (military and state capacity) and externally (ad-hoc alliances).[2] According to this logic, states always try to maximize their power due to the fear of rising power and its dominance (hegemony). Therefore, because of the balance of power, hegemonies do not form in a multistate system.[3] Furthermore, the prevalence of state security degrades the role of international organizations (IOs) to a minimum. IOs, in fact, are regarded as mere tools that serve states' interests.[4] From this perspective, the liberal institutionalist view of the world order, in which states enter an increasingly interdependent set of institutional frameworks that often can lead to the change of original state preferences, appears nothing else but wrong. According to Mearsheimer, institutions are ineffective against states because they lack cohesive power.[5]

Critics of the neorealist claims point to multiple areas where the balance of power or the formation of hegemonies do not necessarily follow the neorealist logic.[6] Based on a careful analysis of historical evidence, they argue that since the balance of power is not a static phenomenon but rather unfolds in a certain period of time, in which the (potential) hegemonic power must be checked, the complexity of the processes accompanying the balancing act within and outside of the states involved must be given attention. Deudney and Ikenberry speak very clearly when they insist that the democratic industrial world exhibits "patterns of political order that lie between traditional images of domestic and international politics, thus creating an unusual and distinctive subsystem in world politics."[7] Similarly, Isabel Burmester points to the macro and micro levels of analysis, while conceptualizing the hegemon-small states interrelation. The micro level, specifically, is directly

---

2 Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 1979; and Stephen Walt, The Origins of Alliances 1987; Robert O. Keohane (ed.), Neorealism and its Critics, 1986.

3 Jack Levy, What Do Great Powers Balance Against and When, in T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz and Michel Fortmann (eds.), *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, 2004, p.37.

4 The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy: Stephen Walt. Farrar, Straus and Giroux/Macmillan, New York, 2018, p.71.

5 John Mearsheimer, The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities. 22018, p.131.

6 William C. Wohlforth et al., Testing the Balance of Power Theory in World History, European Journal of International Relations, 2007 Vol.13(2), p.156.

7 Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry, The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order, Review of International Studies (1999), 25, p.195.

related to the interests of small states that are generated by domestic actors and shaped by governments.[8] Furthermore, social structure and cultural environment represent key factors that are crucial to understand and often result in cognitive biases that in turn shape states' (rational choice based) behaviour and preferences in response to hegemon's influence (coercion, prescription and co-option).[9] Randal Schweller joins the critique by highlighting the huge relevance of domestic politics in forming relative power, i.e. power distribution. Furthermore, the perception of threat by elites, the societal cohesion and the degree of state cohesion that causes vulnerability of the political system (cohesion of state) radically influence state's capacity to perform balancing act.[10] Consequently, states are able to (counter)balance only when the complete cohesion of society and states is provided. This represents a radical departure from both structural and classical realism as well. In line with Schweller's conclusions, other scholars criticize the BOP concept for avoiding the variables that determine the power and influence of a hegemon such as administrative capacity, state (polity) identity, and normative aspects of international socialisation.[11]

Neorealists dismiss the aspect of human involvement in forming foreign policy, and therefore, the role of political ideologies and the nature of a state's political structure becomes irrelevant as well. Foreign policy then becomes a truly sterile matter in which only anarchy and systemic pressures are important.[12] The rest can be regarded as mere anomaly or unscientific. Robert Jervis strongly disagrees with the (neorealist) points mentioned above and is confident about the huge role of morality and moral consensus among nations for creating a well-functioning international order.[13] Even Waltz cannot avoid admitting the relevance of the varying texture of states, i.e. system

---

8 Isabel Burmester, EU and Russian Hegemony in the „Shared Neighborhood": Between Coercion, Prescription and Co-optation, 2024, p.40.

9 Ibid. p.41.

10 Randal L. Schweller, Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power, 2006, p.200.

11 Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, William C. Wohlforth, The Balance of Power in World History, 2007.

12 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp.99–102.

13 Robert Jervis, "Hans Morgenthau, Realism, and the Scientific Study of International Politics," *Social Research* 61, no. 4 (Winter 1994), pp.867–69.

units.[14] Nonetheless, his idea contrary to Jervis's is that since the international system dominates states, the systemic forces that generate state interests and behaviour must be the same. Consequently, if the opposite is true, the formation of states' interests and behaviour must follow a different logic and pattern, considering differing unit (state) qualities. By ignoring states' socio-political context, the analytical lens is reduced to the technical aggregation of state interests, a stark parallel to the critique of Althusser by Thompson.[15] This is insofar problematic as it allows one to claim that there is no difference in organizing and implementing foreign policy objectives between states with a complex democratic structure and consensus building and those with totalitarian structures. This is exactly the case with the countries of the South Caucasus that occupy very different positions across the spectrum of democratic vs. autocratic governance, and the role the head of the state plays in defining the very fabric of a state's power structure. It also implies that states, like atoms in a sterile environment (and not as living, complex and historical entities), should enter alliances based on a mere balance of power relations. These alliances (in which policy coordination unfolds), logically, must be short-lived. Lastly, the very role statesmen can play in forming foreign policy through their individual *Wahrnehmung* (perception) and improvisation must receive little to zero attention. Yet exactly the immense importance of the shared *Wahrnehmung* is acknowledged by Stephen Walt, as he unexpectedly highlighted the power of individuals in the US foreign policy formation, while emphasizing the power of Washington elites (from State Department to think-tanks and prestigious universities), their networking and ability to preserve their cause and shared foreign policy consensus.[16] If size and essence do not matter, the states of the South Caucasus region should have the same set of interests, identical behaviours and would pursue similar objectives in the region as their larger neighbours Russia, Türkiye, Iran and even

---

14 Barry Buzan and Richard Little, "Waltz and World History: The Paradox of Parsimony," in *Realism and World Politics*, Ken Booth (ed.) (New York: Routledge, 2011), p.290.

15 Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory or an Orrery of Errors* (London: Merlin Press Ltd, 1995), https://rosswolfe.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/e-p-thompson-the-poverty-of-theory-or-an-orrery-of-errors.pdf.

16 The Hell of Good Intentions: A Conversation with Stephen Walt, by *Meghan McGee,* Georgetown Security Studies Review, Report: Nov.2, 2018, available https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2018/11/02/report-the-hell-of-good-intentions-a-conversation-with-stephen-walt/.

the EU, leading to a mere power competition, security calculations and capability distribution in the South Caucasus.

That said, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan would have no other option but to counterbalance the interests of their powerful neighbours jointly or to succumb to their rivalling objectives and legitimize claims on creating *buffer zones* or exclusive *spheres of influence*, as per the neorealist idea of *offshore balancing*.[17] Given that the core of the offshore balancing concept implies restraining a hegemon's action to basically building the local line of defence by supporting local forces or regional powers, the result of such actions would typically mirror a situation of proxy wars.[18] Geography and geographic proximity (to aggressive regional power) appear essential here. This is also critical in defining the nature of states' behaviour, along with the factor of side payments (assistance or bribery) that define donor recipient relations.[19] Here Walt's argument of threat perception collides with Waltz's claim about the irrelevance of individual beliefs and perceptions of statesmen. This collision cannot be simply dismissed due to the fundamental importance of the question – who/what or rather where and how a threat perception is typically formed? Supposedly unitary and faceless states in reality still have different perceptions, which cannot be simply interpreted by a mere distribution of power (capabilities) and without the deeper look into the power structure of a state (oligarchy, democratic polity, polyarchy, tyranny etc.), which Schweller terms as unit-level variables and scope conditions.[20] Therefore, if the nature and structure of the political regime in a state is fundamental in forming and shaping national interests, the internal drivers for foreign policy decisions must acquire much higher attention and may serve as major explanations for states' behaviour.

---

17 John Mearsheimer and Stephen M.Walt.2016."The Case for Offshore Balancing." Foreign Affairs 95 (4), pp.70–83.

18 Stephen Walt, The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy, 2018, pp.262–263.

19 Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985), pp.28–29, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540.

20 Randall L. Schweller, "New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997), pp.927–30.

EU-Enlargement and the Shadow of (In)Security

Since the late 1990s, the European enlargement has been largely regarded as a process in which geopolitics was increasingly overshadowed by the necessity of technical compliance. Since everybody was inclined to believe in the "end of history", the Copenhagen criteria, friendly neighbourly relations and the stable functioning of democratic institutions were regarded as the cornerstone of any successful enlargement. From a strategic perspective, the enlargement drive had to address two fundamental issues relevant for both the EU as organization and for its future members: that of a common security vision of the EU-members, as well as of the mechanisms available to provide security and stability in the EU-neighbourhood. That has resulted in introducing the concepts of CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy) as well as ESDP/CSDP (European/Common Security and Defence Policy) by the Amsterdam and Lisbon treaties (1997, 2009). However, despite repeated assertions about the increased role and capacity of the EU to provide its own security, actual defence responsibilities were still delegated to NATO and careful efforts were made to avoid the duplication of efforts. However, the institutional deficiencies, i.e., the inability to provide a secure path of membership, became increasingly visible, especially after the Bucharest NATO summit declaration in April 2008 having promised NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine. Nevertheless, nothing was done to prevent the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, and the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. It became apparent that the idea of membership of the strongest military alliance in the world would, in reality, bear a significant security risk for candidate countries and thus nullify the prospect of membership itself.

Being in an eternal quest for regional stability and security (especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union), Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan exhibited differing strategies for establishing security frameworks that would best suit their respective interests. Squeezed between much stronger Türkiye and Azerbaijan, Armenia had no other choice but to align (militarily) with Russia and open up for a closer relationship with Iran. In contrast, due to the permanent Russian support to separatist regions of Georgia since the early 1990s, Tbilisi broke diplomatic relations with Moscow off after the military invasion in 2008. Together with Azerbaijan, Georgia initiated multiple

transregional energy projects (that linked Caspian oil and gas fields with Europe), opened up for a more economic cooperation with Türkiye and decided to engage intensively with the EU and NATO with an eye on future membership. In contrast, building on a more authoritarian type of governance, Azerbaijan enhanced its strategic security cooperation with Türkiye based on the concept of "one nation, two states", maintained economic ties with Russia, and adopted a cautious approach to Iran. This dynamics remained mostly unchanged until several key events took place: Pashinyan's democratic (velvet) revolution in Armenia in 2018, Azerbaijan's military victory in Karabakh in 2020 and 2023, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Europeanization, Struggle for Democracy, and the Challenge of Security Deficits

It must be noted that the prospects of EU-membership acquired a much higher relevance for Georgia as the Bucharest NATO Summit in April 2008 and the consequent Russian invasion in July/August of the same year eliminated any prospects of quick NATO-accession and left the EU-membership as the only potential institutional mechanism to deal with the security dilemma. Ever since then, Georgian governments actively engaged EU-authorities across a variety of cooperation areas. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party continued the European trajectory since it came to power in 2012. It signed the Association Agreement (incl. DCFTA) and reached the Visa-free travel regime with the EU. The strategy pursued by the EU in Georgia was to develop a tailored cooperation framework that would bring Georgia closer to Europe via the Eastern Partnership (EAP) framework and its respective areas such as energy, communication, infrastructure, education, environment etc.[21] However, the signs for the increasingly authoritarian policy reversal could no longer be ignored as the parliamentary elections in 2020 revealed massive manipulation by GD and resulted in a political crisis. The personal involvement by Charles Michel (former president of the European Council) to broker a political solution ended up with the Georgian govern-

[21] "The European Union and Georgia," Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, September 7, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/georgia/european-union-and-georgia_en?s=221.

ment violating not only the agreement itself, but all the consequent EU conditions to be fulfilled in order to open up the membership negotiations.[22] Yet, despite growing doubts about increasing Russian influence, Georgia was still able to show progress in 2023 in a number of areas.[23]

The Russian invasion of Ukraine aggravated the fears of losing European perspective. Given relentless Russian attempts to abolish Ukrainian statehood, the European perspective objectively provides an increased sense of security for the Georgian populace, only to be threatened by the growing anti-EU stance of the ruling party. Hence, pushed by a massive pro EU-rally, the ruling Georgian Dream/GD party quickly followed the opening of negotiations on future EU-membership with Ukraine and Moldova and applied for the EU-candidacy status in March 2022.[24] However, starting from the failure of the so called *Charles Michel agreement* and the persistent rejection of the Commission's nine step requirements by the GD (necessary for initiating membership negotiations), it became increasingly obvious that the ruling party succumbed to the Kremlin pressure and distanced itself from the objective of the EU-membership. Nonetheless, the European Council unexpectedly granted candidate status to Georgia (*pro bono*), thus acknowledging the deep pro-European aspiration of the Georgian society.[25] Despite the clear favourable gesture on the EU-side, the worrying signs continued to

---

22 "2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (Extract about Georgia)," EEAS, Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, November 8, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy-extract-about-georgia_en.

23 "Commission Opinion on Georgia's Application for Membership of the European Union," COM(2022) 405 final (Brussels: European Commission, June 17, 2022), https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en.

24 Joshua Kucera, "Georgia Formally Applies for EU Membership," Eurasianet, March 3, 2022, https://eurasianet.org/georgia-formally-applies-for-eu-membership.

25 "Commission Adopts 2023 Enlargement Package, Recommends to Open Negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, to Grant Candidate Status to Georgia and to Open Accession Negotiations with BiH, Once the Necessary Degree of Compliance Is Achieved," European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, November 8, 2023, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2023-enlargement-package-recommends-open-negotiations-ukraine-and-moldova-grant-2023-11-08_en.

grow with regard to GD's general stance. The rift between official representatives from Tbilisi and Brussels continued to grow, especially as the Georgian government reintroduced the draconian *Russian law* to limit media and civil activism, conducted parliamentary elections with grave manipulations (highlighted by OSCE/ODIHR) in October 2024 and used excessive police force and brutality to counter massive popular protests permanently held since November 28, 2024, a day on which the GD decided to suspend temporarily membership negotiations with the EU.[26] The speech by the informal leader of GD, Bidzina Ivanishvili, at a mass rally before the parliamentary elections in October 2024 highlighted critical elements of his vision of internal politics and global affairs. All western critics of GD were literally branded as the global war party (GWP). The majority of opposition parties were labelled as the *collective National Movement* (a former ruling party) to be prosecuted once a parliamentary victory was secured.[27] The sudden decision to suspend membership negotiations with the EU until 2028 sparked huge protest waves in Georgia.[28] All of this, along with the intensive disinformation and anti-EU-propaganda, left the EU and the Biden administration no other choice but to start sanctioning key Georgian officials.[29] Among these officials are the former prosecutor general Otar Partskhaladze (with close ties to the Kremlin, now in Moscow), Grigol Liluashvili (former head of state security), Vakhtang Gomelauri (former minister of interior) and other senior GD-party and government members. In contrast to all regimes in Georgia since 1991, for whom the primary motivation in pursuing the Euro-Atlantic course was the looming threat from Russia, the GD-government de-facto no longer

---

26 Lucy Davalou and Andrew Naughtie, "Georgian Prime Minister Suspends EU Membership Talks until End of 2028," EuroNews, November 28, 2024, https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/28/georgian-prime-minister-suspends-eu-membership-talks-until-end-of-2028.

27 Lucy Papachristou and Felix Light, "Georgian Ruling Party Founder Vows to Ban Opposition at Final Pre-Election Rally," *Reuters*, October 23, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgian-ruling-party-founder-vows-ban-opposition-final-pre-election-rally-2024-10-23/.

28 Thomas Mackintosh, Maia Davies, and Rayan Demytrie, "Police Use Water Cannon as Georgia EU Protests Erupt for Second Night," *BBC*, November 30, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62jp68p315o.

29 "Sanctioning Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs Officials Involved in Serious Human Rights Abuses against Protesters," U.S. Department of State, December 19, 2024, https://2021-2025.state.gov/sanctioning-georgian-ministry-of-internal-affairs-officials-involved-in-serious-human-rights-abuses-against-protesters/.

viewed Russia as a "mortal" enemy. On the contrary, it has seen the European Union as an external threat (often termed as "deep state") willing to push Georgia in conflict with Russia.[30] This is a radical departure from the long-standing tradition of Georgian foreign and security policy since 1991. Always regarded as a powerful leverage to counterbalance regional powers in the South Caucasus, officials in Tbilisi strengthened economic and political ties with European capitals to grow the European footprint in the region and thus generate certain effects of deterrence. Since 2020, this has no longer been the case, even though the European integration remained a top priority for the vast majority of Georgian population.[31] With no NATO-membership in sight and voluntary suspended EU-negotiations, Georgia arrived at the point of which its strategic isolation from its western partners became almost complete.

The increasingly autocratic character of the ruling regime in Georgia has created a very uncomfortable situation for Prime Minister Pashinyan and his government in Armenia as well. Forced to negotiate a peace treaty with Azerbaijan after the military defeat in the separatist region of Karabakh, Armenia felt geopolitically encircled by strategically unfriendly regimes in Georgia and Azerbaijan, which made the continuation of Armenia's pro-EU foreign policy and its earlier version of *complementarity* questionable. Hence, Yerevan made some steps to re-establish the damaged ties with the Kremlin out of purely rational calculation of national survival.[32] Similarly, the increasingly (pro-Russian) nature of the political regime in Georgia might be difficult for Baku to tolerate in the long run, given the risk of the emboldened Russia if given the *carte blanche* in Ukraine and the growing uncertainty with regard to the political situation in Türkiye, a major ally and security guarantor for Azerbaijan. The increasingly pro-EU policies of Pashinyan's government were demonstrated by Armenia's limited participation in the Russian-led CIS

---

30 Lela Kunchulia, "Georgian Dream Takes On The 'Global War Party,'" *Radio Liberty*, May 18, 224AD, https://www.rferl.org/a/global-war--party-georgian-dream-bidzina-ivanishvili/32951749.html; "Twists and Turns: Georgian Dream Rhetoric on the EU," EUvsDisinfo, October 23, 2024, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/twists-and-turns-georgian-dream-rhetoric-on-the-eu/.

31 "Annual Survey 2024: Georgia," EU Neighbours East, November 1, 2024, https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2024-georgia/.

32 "Moscow Encouraged By Armenian Media Reports," *Radio Liberty*, March 21, 2025, https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33355233.html.

(Commonwealth of Independent States) structures, invitation of the EUMM-mission to observe the interstate borderline with Azerbaijan and officially initiating the political agenda with the EU about the prospects of Armenia's cooperation and integration with the Union.[33] Armenia's quest for security and territorial survival is inherently associated with the policy of complementarity, in which, due to the Russian broken promises to defend Armenian security and statehood (Russia and Armenia are both CSTO/Collective Security Treaty Organization-allied nations), Yerevan is simply forced to look for other existing elements that would augment its security architecture. Hence, it was not a surprise that the inability of the West to respond to the Russian invasion in Ukraine and effectively sanction the Kremlin quickly led to another (tactical) correction of the Armenian foreign policy towards Russia, in which Armenian officials were officially instructed to re-establish friendly and cooperative relations with their Russian counterparts.[34]

Armenia formally appears now as the key European ally in the region, effectively replacing Georgia in this status and consequently attracting even some Georgian NGOs to move their offices to Yerevan, due to the draconian sanctions by the newly adopted laws in Georgia. However, without strong security guarantees from the West and increasingly aggressive demands from Azerbaijan to settle the territorial disputes on Baku's terms (as well as towards EU's general stance in the region), Armenia is forced to look everywhere for possible support, regardless of its symbolic or practical nature.[35] Thus, despite noticing Yerevan's behavioural adjustment, Russia strategically rejected Pashinyan's attempts to establish closer ties to Brussels as an addi-

---

33 "EU – Armenia Relations," European Commission, Enlargement and Eastern Neighborhood, September 9, 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/armenia_en; "Armenia Is Considering Seeking EU Membership, Foreign Minister Says," *Reuters*, March 9, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenia-is-considering-seeking-eu-membership-foreign-minister-says-2024-03-09/.

34 Arshaluys Barseghyan, "After Years of Deterioration, Armenia's Relations with Russia Appear to Be Warming," *OC Media*, March 24, 2025, https://oc-media.org/after-years-of-deterioration-armenias-relations-with-russia-appear-to-be-warming/.

35 Ruzanna Stepanian, "Pashinyan Meets Vance At White House," *Radio Liberty*, February 7, 2025, https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33306914.html; "Aliyev Warns Of 'New Military Confrontation' With Armenia," *Radio Liberty*, March 9, 2025, https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33378466.html.

tional tool of strategic balancing. Furthermore, Russia is intensifying its efforts in Armenian society and politics (open or covert) to overthrow the current government.[36]

Azerbaijan also dislikes the prospect of a stronger European presence in Armenia. President Ilham Aliyev frequently criticised the European position on the Karabakh conflict and generally towards Azerbaijan and did not hesitate to disparage the French government on several occasions.[37] Similarly, foreign (western) support to anti-government parties and societal activism in Georgia is met with harsh criticism in Baku. The language used is often escalatory to the level of highlighting the strong bond existing between the governments in Tbilisi and Baku and accusing the European countries of preserving a colonial mentality of interference while dealing with the countries of the region.[38] In fact, Aliyev always rejected a stronger European influence on the conflict-resolution and negotiation process with Armenia due to the fears of increased European support to Armenia and the ensuing possibility of a strong Armenian entrenchment. Therefore, the OSCE Minsk Group, the only multilateral format of negotiations on Karabakh conflict, remained unchanged despite its utter ineffectiveness. A somewhat different stance, however, was adopted towards the EU as an institution. The reason is a high degree of cooperation existing especially in transport and energy sectors, in which both sides (the EU-Commission and Azerbaijan) recognised the ben-

---

36 After the Armenian military defeat and Russian brokered cease-fire in the separatist region of Karabakh, Moscow instigated several attempts of forcing president Pashinyan to resign, all of which failed.

37 LeMonde, Azerbaijan President Aliyev blasts France for reaction to New Caledonia protests, Nov.13, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/11/13/azerbaijani-president-aliyev-blasts-france-for-reaction-to-new-caledonia-protests_6732706_4.html; Caucasus Watch, Aliyev Denounces Foreign Influence in Georgia, Criticizes Macron and USAID, Dec.20, 2024, https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/aliyev-denounces-foreign-influence-in-georgia-criticizes-macron-and-usaid.html, Civil Georgia, President Aliev Denounces French President Macron's Engagement in Georgia, Dec. 18, 2024, https://civil.ge/archives/646153.

38 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, International Forum themed "Facing the New World Order" was held at ADA University with participation of Ilham Aliyev, April 9, 2025, https://president.az/en/articles/view/68514.

efits of sectoral economic cooperation and growing mutual interdependence.[39] This "duality" of Azerbaijan's foreign policy is a result of Aliyev's strong personal engagement, which is clearly visible in each and every statement made by him on a respective occasion.

Regardless of the semi- or fully authoritarian nature of governance in the South Caucasus, the fact is that regional leaders, Shevardnadze, Saakashvili, Pashinyan and Aliyev, personally control(led) the country's foreign policy and played a key role in establishing strong links to the political elites and decision-makers in the EU and USA. It was Eduard Shevardnadze who utilised his personal friendship with the US State Secretary James Baker (and Germany's foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher) and invited him to Tbilisi in 2003 (Genscher even before, in 1992). Something similar happened as President Saakashvili was quick to organize George Bush's visit to Georgia in 2005, just two years after the Rose Revolution. President Pashinyan also enjoys significant political support from Brussels, mirrored in a series of high-level meetings.[40] In general, the pro-European policies in the region (in Georgia and Armenia) are associated with the drive for more democratic reforms often delegated to young western educated individuals placed in key positions. Even under the repressive authoritarian rule of the Georgian Dream party, opposition leaders perfectly utilised their thick networks of individual connections in various top to mid-level position of EU-institutions (Commission, Parliament, European parties, Council etc.) to persuade decision makers in Europe and USA to adopt anti GD-policies and restrictive measures (e.g. sanctions).[41] Nonetheless, it must be mentioned that a grow-

---

39 Euronews, Baku energy talks strengthen EU–Azerbaijan partnership on gas and long-term energy security, April 11, 2025, https://www.euronews.com/business/2025/04/11/baku-energy-talks-strengthen-euazerbaijan-partnership-on-gas-and-long-term-energy-security. More under https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/cooperation-gas-clean-energy-transition-focus-eu-azerbaijan-energy-dialogue-brussels-today-2025-06-13_en.

40 "Joint EU-US-Armenia High Level Meeting in Support of Armenia's Resilience," European Commission, Enlargement and Eastern Neighborhood, April 5, 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-eu-us-armenia-high-level-meeting-support-armenias-resilience-2024-04-05_en.

41 Frontnews, UNM leaders urge EU to target sanctions at Ivanishvili, allies, Sept. 25, 2025, https://frontnews.ge/en/news/tina-bokuchava-briuselshi-evroparlamentis-tsevrebs-evrokomisiis-tsarmomadgenlebsa-da-kaia-kalasis-ophisis-tsarmomadgenlebs-shekhvda,

ing apathy and lack of European engagement in the region could risk Pashinyan's rule becoming increasingly authoritarian and authoritarianism in Georgia becoming fully consolidated, with respective policy change in various sectors of state governance.

Power Dynamics in the South Caucasus Region

Since the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, followed by Azerbaijan's reintegration of the Karabakh region in 2020/2023 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the use of military power as a primary tool in the post-soviet area has become apparent. Facing Azerbaijan's overwhelming military power, Armenia intensified its military rearmament program, significantly increased its military budget and started reassessing its strategic priorities (starting with Türkiye and Russia).[42] Yerevan initiated significant changes. For instance, Russian border guard units were moved out of crossing checkpoints to Iran and Turkey and had left the Zvartnots international airport.[43] The major Russian military base in Giumri, however, remained untouched, despite the frequent Russia-critical rhetoric of Armenian officials. The reasons can be attributed to the insistent demands made by Azerbaijan to remove implicit territorial claims against Azerbaijan from the Armenian Constitution. Not least, the fate of the so-called Zangezur corridor remains unclear, even though the historical agreement was reached in Washington on August 8, 2025, when the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) project was unveiled. As Yerevan's control over transit flows will be limited, Tehran has become very much concerned about the presence of US involvement in the corridor and Azerbaijan's demands to have direct access to its exclave Nakhichevan via Armenia's Syunik region.[44] Consequently, Yerevan was forced to maintain Russia in its security calculations as Russia

1TV.ge – Georgian Public Broadcaster, UNM leadership hold meetings in Berlin, Sept.26, 2025, https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/unm-leadership-hold-meetings-in-berlin/.

42 "Armenian Defense Spending Set For Further Rise," *Radio Liberty*, September 26, 2024, https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33136331.html.

43 "Russian Border Guards Leave Yerevan Airport," *Radio Liberty*, July 31, 2024, https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-russia-guards-airport-withdrawal/33058381.html.

44 Murad Abiyev, "Azerbaijan Reaffirms Demand for Zangezur Corridor," *Caliber*, February 2, 2025, https://caliber.az/en/post/azerbaijani-leader-s-demands-armenian-pm-s-rhetorical-maneuvers-trump-s-peace-plan.

still remained a potent regional military power (despite its staggering war casualties and sanctions) while Iran could not offer a symmetric response to the Turkish-Azerbaijan alliance, established in 2010.[45] Given Iran's radically decimated capacity to come to Armenia's aid and confront Türkiye and Azerbaijan due to the devastating results of the twelve days Israel-Iran war, Yerevan has actively looked for alternative options such as India, with whom the military cooperation (technology and arms delivery) was regarded as the critical element of strategic security complementarity.[46]

Obviously, Baku is willing to exploit the current "window of opportunity" and exclude all foreign powers that it deems are acting against its interests. These powers are, first and foremost, particular European nations actively engaged in political and security cooperation with Armenia (especially France). Furthermore, European criticism of Azerbaijan stimulated Baku to revoke accreditation for the BBC and Voice of America and close several international organization offices.[47] Nonetheless, for non-security related subjects, Baku is not averse to growing closer relations with the EU and is actively working on enhancing its energy (e.g. green energy) and transport ties with Europe.[48] Very sensitive to the changing regional dynamics, Azerbaijani leadership adjusted its regional policy accordingly. For instance, Baku is no longer actively pushing for the 3+3 format in the region (as done in the past), which effectively excluded any option of European or US-participation. However, like Armenia, it tries to augment its national security architecture by adding other tangible mechanisms of security cooperation. The strategic cooperation between Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Pakistan has grown

---

45 "Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Baku," Treaty Series 2936, pp.55–80 (United Nations Office of Legal Affairs, August 16, 2010), https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210477086s002-c004.

46 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Albert Vidal Ribe, Armenia broadens procurement horizons in drive to modernise armed forces, July 14, 2025, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2025/07/armenia-broadens-procurement-horizons-in-drive-to-modernise-armed-forces/.

47 Farhadova, "Azerbaijan Revokes Accreditation of Bloomberg," *OC Media*, February 28, 2025, https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-revokes-accreditation-of-bloomberg/.

48 "Commissioner Jørgensen in Azerbaijan to Reinforce Energy Cooperation," European Commission, April 3, 2025, https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/commissioner-jorgensen-azerbaijan-reinforce-energy-cooperation-2025-04-03_en.

beyond mere political importance and acquired the relevance of trilateral military alliance with the significant element of military and technology transfers (JF-17 deal etc.) as well as strategic (interregional) nuclear deterrence.[49] Given the troubling internal situation of Türkiye, as well as the not less difficult situation of Pakistan internally or externally, the longevity of this trilateral alliance cannot be assumed automatically. However, it proved to be strong enough to persuade the Kremlin to revise its current anti-Azerbaijan rhetoric, adopt a far more friendly style, stop persecuting Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia and compensate all the victim families of the Azerbaijani plane shot down over Grozny by Russian air defence units in December 2024.

Georgia appeared to increasingly mimic Azerbaijan's strategic approach, as during the visit of the de-facto president of Georgia in Azerbaijan, Mikheil Kavelashvili, both presidents directly expressed their criticism of foreign (European) efforts to interfere in regional political affairs.[50] However, contrary to Azerbaijan, Georgia is much more vulnerable in terms of military strength and has little internal coherence and stability to support its claims. Georgia has the smallest defence budget in the region, the smallest army and a deepening political crisis, which increasingly puts the current GD-regime in danger.[51] Not ready yet to switch the sides and openly take a pro-Russian stance, the GD-government still insists that it is ready to open up negotiations with the EU on membership, although only on its own terms. In practice, however, Russia enjoys freedom of economic cooperation with Georgia in key sectors, pro-Russian organizations are openly active, facing no restrictions whatsoever, and Russian disinformation and propaganda is actively proliferating in Georgian media space, as well as it is frequently replicated by GD-sponsored media outlets. As long as the Russian army is fully committed

---

[49] President of the Republic of AzerbaijanIlham Aliyev, Lachin hosted Summit of Azerbaijani President, Turkish President, and Pakistani Prime Minister, May 28, 2025**,** https://president.az/en/articles/view/69001; Caspian post, June 2, 2025, Azerbaijan–Türkiye–Pakistan Alliance Poised to Reshape Regional Geopolitics, https://caspianpost.com/analytics/azerbaijan-turkiye-pakistan-alliance-poised-to-reshape-regional-geopolitics.

[50] "Joint Press Statements of Presidents of Azerbaijani and Georgia," president.az, April 16, 2025, https://president.az/en/articles/view/68593.

[51] Brawley Benson, "Georgian Dream Policies Damaging Tbilisi's National Security – Experts," *Eurasianet*, July 24, 2024, https://eurasianet.org/georgian-dream-policies-damaging-tbilisis-national-security-experts.

on the Ukrainian front, Georgia has little to worry about. Things, however, will turn very dangerous, if some sort of peace agreement or truce is achieved, and Russia will have the capacity and space to move its armed forces elsewhere where results are expected to be achieved much quicker. From the perspective of balance of power or capability distribution, Georgia appears a natural weak spot to be exploited immediately. Given its severe vulnerability in multiple areas, such as military, economy or foreign malign (Russian) propaganda and disinformation, this conclusion gets an additional validation.[52] Nonetheless, formally, the EU-membership is not yet dismissed from the GD-agenda. Hence, although the EU monitoring mission in Georgia provides some rudimentary support of monitoring the occupation line (or administrative border line – ABL), officials in Tbilisi have not yet expressed any desire to cancel the EUMM. President Aliyev, while heavily criticizing the US and European funded NGOs in Georgia, also refrained from any remarks about EUMM in Georgia, a stark contrast to his demands to cancel and withdraw the same mission in Armenia.[53] It seems that the nature of political regimes in the South Caucasus predicates not only the formats and areas of cooperation with the West (Europe for this matter), but in fact, strictly limits strategic calculations solely to the domains of security and economic cooperation. This is also very much valid to Türkiye, as Ankara is not willing to face Russia in the region alone, and seeks therefore for more security cooperation with the EU and US but rejects their role in domestic affairs. With the new administration in the White House, and the suspension of the US strategic partnership with Georgia, the region faces a significant degradation of the US regional footprint with a tendency of delegating it to regional powers.[54]

---

52 RVAT-Resilience/Vulnerability Assessment Tool: Resilience Index of the Georgian Political System against the Foreign (Russian) Propaganda and Disinformation, UGSPN, Oct.2024, available www.ugspn.org.

53 "Aliyev Denounces Foreign Influence in Georgia, Criticizes Macron and USAID," *Caucasus Watch*, December 20, 2024, https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/aliyev-denounces-foreign-influence-in-georgia-criticizes-macron-and-usaid.html.

54 POLITICO, US suspends strategic partnership with Georgia after EU membership talks halted, Nov. 30, 2024 https://www.politico.com/news/2024/11/30/us-suspends-partnership-georgia-00192044.

War in Ukraine, Balance of Power and the Strategic Window of Opportunity

Trump's decision (expressed including in the newly released National Security Strategy) to radically reduce the US role in Europe's security and thus distance himself from actively supporting Ukraine militarily and resource-wise, sent shockwaves across the European continent. Even worse, by declaring that Greenland would become part of the US "this or another way", and that the EU was created to "screw" the US, Washington openly indicated that the Euro-Atlantic alliance is no longer a given, and security guarantees are in fact not automatically granted.[55] Consequently, two major pillars of European security are being gradually eroded, such as the physical presence of US-forces in Europe, and US-nuclear guarantees. The EU found itself in a dilemma: either it will rapidly establish its defence structures to replace the US-command structure and forces in Europe, or it will be forced to face Russia militarily on its various flanks, provided the Kremlin decides to freeze the Ukrainian frontline and seeks its military luck elsewhere against much weaker opponents than Ukraine. From this perspective, a potential Russian attack on the Baltic states appears quite probable. This scenario is very much relevant to Georgia and the South Caucasus as well, as Georgia is incomparably weaker than Ukraine (or even Azerbaijan and Armenia) and is anyway drifting towards Russia by implementing increasingly authoritarian policies and showing pro-Russian sentiments. Since the US is no longer interested in global alliances and the EU finds itself busy with the fundamental challenge of its own security architecture, the decline of geopolitical relevance of the South Caucasus for the West seems inevitable. To support this claim, the major strategic document of the EU, the Strategic Compass, can be drawn into consideration. While dealing with the European security and defence dilemma, the document says little if anything about the South Caucasus, and the increased threat of Russian military intervention on the EU's eastern flank makes any serious strategic move in the South Caucasus almost unimaginable. Hence, a certain window of opportunity has opened for Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, in which a vision of shared security and cooperation can be initiated and implemented. Since Russia is militarily fully engaged

[55] Seb Starcevic, "US Will Take Greenland 'One Way or the Other,' Trump Says," POLITICO, March 5, 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/us-will-take-greenland-one-way-or-the-other-donald-trump-says/.

in Ukraine, Türkiye has not presented a coherent strategy towards the region yet (it is hesitant to contain Russia's advance in the region alone), while Iran is facing serious challenges in the economy as well as long-term consequences of military confrontation with Israel. Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku have theoretically acquired a unique opportunity to increase their individual value (in geopolitical calculation) by pursuing stronger regional integration and creating much greater collective value for external partners and the rest of the world. This option is further enhanced by the EU-initiated interregional connectivity project (connecting Central Asia with Europe) as well as the Chinese involvement in building transport and communication infrastructure in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.[56] Hence, it seems that the best possible option for enhancing regional security is the concept of an integrated South Caucasus with shared views and policies in economy and security and vested interests of foreign powers, so that any unilateral external attempt to dominate the region would destroy the established balance of interests and result in much higher losses for everybody, costs of which would by far outweigh the benefits of the established status quo.

Conclusion

As this analysis suggests, the European engagement in the South Caucasus region, whether technically or politically, has always been linked to the democratic spirit of transformation in Georgia and Armenia. This tradition, in fact, could even be enhanced by the EU's continuing efforts to support democracy locally. If the EU disengaged from the region it could lead to a more authoritarian type of regime, with the risk of turning Georgia quickly and Armenia (in the future) into consolidated autocracies. Commitment to democratic rule and governance appears to be the major threat and reason why Baku has taken a more critical stance towards EU-policies in the region and its criticism of Georgian civil society. Armenia, on the contrary, while adopting pragmatic approaches to the ill-legitimised and authoritarian government of Georgia, clearly sees its only chance to enhance the European presence in the region (and counterbalance stronger powers) via its adherence (at least formally) to the democratic principles of governance. If Georgia manages to

[56] "First EU-Central Asia Summit, 4 April 2025," European Council, Council of the European Union, n.d., https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/04/04/.

return to the path of democratic development, the created synergy between Yerevan and Tbilisi would inevitably create a strong sense of shared interests, a more cooperative approach to their European perspectives, and respective responses from the EU in the fields of economic and security collaboration.

There is strong evidence that the alignment of Georgian and Armenian pro-European perspectives is caused by the factor of democratic aspirations of political elites, which is at least as strong as the security calculations to include the EU under various formats in the regional power architecture. The neo-realist logic would suggest several options, i.e. levels of power balancing in the region. Either Georgia and Armenia will have to pull resources together (incl. support of external powers) to prevent Azerbaijan as the most powerful (still small) nation to dominate in the region, or all three nations will collaborate to use the historic opportunity created by the absence of single dominant external power (big nation) and pull capabilities, resources and efforts together to prevent any external big power from taking over the region. Obviously, perceptions and especially threat perceptions matter here. While official Baku regards the EU suspiciously as a threat to its internal political legitimacy, for Yerevan it is a significant and needed element in its regional (security) counterbalancing act. As for Tbilisi, the internal political crisis in Georgia forces the ruling party (GD) to adopt a critical stance towards the EU, while not fully abandoning European aspirations due to the high risk of significant backlash and consequences even from its own supporters (around 80% of the Georgian population support EU-membership).[57] Hence, even though all three nations in the South Caucasus generally share similar factors of security calculations, other variables such as internal political dynamics, internal power struggle and adherence to democratic style of governance decisively define the process of interest and policy formation, thus the logic of state (foreign policy) behaviour.

Additionally, the dynamics of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, internal political crisis in Georgia (struggle for democracy and government's peculiar stance to EU and Russia) and Türkiye's internal as well as external policy calculations (trilateral alliance with Azerbaijan and Pakistan) that result from

[57] EU Neighbors East, Most Georgians support EU membership, according to latest opinion poll, Sept. 2, 2025 https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/opinion-polls/most-georgians-support-eu-membership-according-to-latest-opinion-poll/.

the increased risk of the US abandoning NATO and its security guarantees, illustrate the continuing importance of security perceptions in the region. Consequently, the standard neorealist lens applied to the South Caucasus without a deeper look onto the fabric of domestic politics in the region would risk producing an overly non-contextual approach (based on overly generalised factors) and mechanical manipulation with even greater risk of uninformed political decisions. Security concerns matter, but security perceptions and the mechanisms of their formation matter even more.

The "3+3" format of regional cooperation couldn't explain anything in particular from the neorealist perspective, except for the option that three larger regional powers basically dictate everything to the three smaller nations of the region. This can hardly be acceptable for every nation involved, even in the context of capability distribution. Moreover, there is a good reason to agree with that, since none of the big powers involved applied decisive pressure on Georgia or Armenia to finally make this format happen. Pretty much in line with the claims of the Kantian peace, the democratic nature of governance or the lack of it, seems to have played a big role in forming significant similarities in threat perceptions, hence turning the factor of capability distributions sometime overly irrelevant (as in the case of EU vs. Azerbaijan). As a result, a unique and historical opportunity of inter-regional cooperation in the South Caucasus can be created, in which a serious balancing act of small nations enhanced by multilayered integrational efforts would cause an objective acceptance of big external powers, owing to a strange combination of balance of interests and power parity. With no other security alternatives in place, due to the objective limitations of a single power domination and the still developing strategy of the EU towards the region, a cooperative/collaborative approach of nations to regional security appears as the most rational option to minimize disruptive external influences and power domination.

As for the stronger incentives within the conditionality concept of the EU membership, the inherent (security related) deficits in the Europeanization process must be acknowledged first, before starting to contemplate the effects of glaring imbalances between the absence of effective sticks and the low degree of compliance. It is evident that, despite the seminal statement by Chancellor Scholz about a united Europe from Lisbon to Tbilisi, the EU still lacks clear strategic vision and goals towards the South Caucasus and

Georgia in particular.[58] This uncertainty is even more visible, as no coherent concept of the Black Sea security cooperation had been ever formulated. The strategic challenge of European security and its future architecture is entirely subsumed by the Russian aggression of Ukraine and the radical reversal of the US-policy towards Europe, which turns the subject of the EU-South Caucasus security relations even more amorphous, if not peripheral. Nonetheless, despite multiple "trojan horses" within the EU and the long tradition of shaping the cooperation efforts into a more practical, economic type of interrelations, significant steps can be initiated to address both strategic as well country related policy deficiencies. A clear vision of the future security architecture of Europe (regardless of the outcomes of the war in Ukraine) must be drafted and the idea of Europe's strategic security autonomy from the USA must be structurally formulated. This strategic clarity must include a clear EU membership perspective for Georgia, with strong security and deterrence mechanisms available for candidate countries before the actual membership was approved. Obviously, these "preventive measures" would imply Europe's takeover over NATO, allow for an effective security provision for candidate countries in the future (avoid the Bucharest spell of 2008 and MAP-fallacy) and develop EU-comprehensive support for South Caucasus sectoral integration (Europeanization) in accordance with EU-standards and policies.

In the case of Georgia, the EU can apply its conditionality with the emphasis on more restrictive measures, as the withdrawal of "carrots" did not cause the needed degree of compliance. These can include no recognition of government legitimacy and keeping official contacts on a working level unless a fundamental reversal of the anti-democratic policies is initiated. A strong communication strategy and language pointing towards clear intentions of adopting more punitive (incl. financial) measures to regime-enablers (law enforcement, judiciary, businesses, media and propaganda entities etc.) would become a sheer necessity. Effective practical/financial support to civil society groups, democratic movements and local professional associations as well as youth activists (e.g. summer/winter camps, training and professional education programs) can significantly boost the soft power effect of the EU. As for addressing the security concerns of Georgia, even before any clarity

[58] "Olaf Scholz: Rede Auf dem SPE-Kongress," SPD.DE, October 15, 2022, https://olaf-scholz.spd.de/aktuelles/detail/news/rede-auf-dem-spe-kongress/15/10/2022.

about the European security architecture is being created, the EU/NATO can intensify military training and exercises, as well as visits of military vessels to Georgian ports as a part of Black Sea security vision. Furthermore, the EU can become instrumental in providing a significant technical upgrade to Georgia's capacity of monitoring the occupation line. With this combination of strategic initiatives and country-related activities, the EU can significantly strengthen its credibility, regional posture and European perspective for the South Caucasus region.

References

Abiyev, Murad. "Azerbaijan Reaffirms Demand for Zangezur Corridor." *Caliber*, February 2, 2025. https://caliber.az/en/post/azerbaijani-leader-s-demands-armenian-pm-s-rhetorical-maneuvers-trump-s-peace-plan.

"Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Baku." Treaty Series 2936 , pp.55–80. United Nations Office of Legal Affairs, August 16, 2010. https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210477086s002-c004.

Barseghyan, Arshaluys. "After Years of Deterioration, Armenia's Relations with Russia Appear to Be Warming." *OC Media*, March 24, 2025. https://oc-media.org/after-years-of-deterioration-armenias-relations-with-russia-appear-to-be-warming/.

Benson, Brawley. "Georgian Dream Policies Damaging Tbilisi's National Security – Experts." *Eurasianet*, July 24, 2024. https://eurasianet.org/georgian-dream-policies-damaging-tbilisis-national-security-experts.

Brown, Chris. "Structural Realism, Classical Realism and Human Nature." *International Relations*, 2009.

Burmester, Isabel. *EU and Russian Hegemony in the „Shared Neighborhood": Between Coercion, Prescription and Co-optation*, 2024, Palgrave.

Buzan, Barry, and Richard Little. "Waltz and World History: The Paradox of Parsimony." In *Realism and World Politics*, Ken Booth (ed.)., pp.288–305. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Carr, Edward H. *Twenty Years of Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1981.

Caucasus Watch. "Aliyev Denounces Foreign Influence in Georgia, Criticizes Macron and USAID." December 20, 2024. https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/aliyev-denounces-foreign-influence-in-georgia-criticizes-macron-and-usaid.html.

"Commission Opinion on Georgia's Application for Membership of the European Union." COM(2022) 405 final. Brussels: European Commission, June 17, 2022. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en.

Cornell Overfield and Joshua Tallis, Great Power Relations: What Makes Powers Great and Why Do They Compete? 2020, CAN Report, available at https://www.cna.org/analyses/2020/01/what-makes-great-power-relations-and-why-compete.

Davalou, Lucy, and Andrew Naughtie. "Georgian Prime Minister Suspends EU Membership Talks until End of 2028." EuroNews, November 28, 2024. https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/28/georgian-prime-minister-suspends-eu-membership-talks-until-end-of-2028.

Delegation of the European Union to Georgia. "The European Union and Georgia," September 7, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/georgia/european-union-and-georgia_en?s=221.

Dudney Daniel and John Ikenberry, The nature and sources of liberal international order, Review of International Studies (1999).

EEAS, Delegation of the European Union to Georgia. "2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (Extract about Georgia)," November 8, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy-extract-about-georgia_en.

EU Neighbors East. "Annual Survey 2024: Georgia," November 1, 2024. https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2024-georgia/.

European Commission. "Commissioner Jørgensen in Azerbaijan to Reinforce Energy Cooperation," April 3, 2025. https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/commissioner-jorgensen-azerbaijan-reinforce-energy-cooperation-2025-04-03_en.

European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. "Commission Adopts 2023 Enlargement Package, Recommends to Open Negotiations with Ukraine and

Moldova, to Grant Candidate Status to Georgia and to Open Accession Negotiations with BiH, Once the Necessary Degree of Compliance Is Achieved," November 8, 2023. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2023-enlargement-package-recommends-open-negotiations-ukraine-and-moldova-grant-2023-11-08_en.

European Commission, Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood. "EU – Armenia Relations," September 9, 2024. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/armenia_en.

European Commission, Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood. "Joint EU-US-Armenia High Level Meeting in Support of Armenia's Resilience," April 5, 2024. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-eu-us-armenia-high-level-meeting-support-armenias-resilience-2024-04-05_en.

European Council, Council of the European Union. "First EU-Central Asia Summit, 4 April 2025," n.d. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/04/04/.

EUvsDisinfo. "Twists and Turns: Georgian Dream Rhetoric on the EU," October 23, 2024. https://euvsdisinfo.eu/twists-and-turns-georgian-dream-rhetoric-on-the-eu/.

Farhadova. "Azerbaijan Revokes Accreditation of Bloomberg." *OC Media*, February 28, 2025. https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-revokes-accreditation-of-bloomberg/.

Jervis, Robert. "Hans Morgenthau, Realism, and the Scientific Study of International Politics." *Social Research* 61, no. 4 (Winter 1994): pp.853–76.

Kaufman, Stuart J., Richard Little, William C. Wohlforth. *The Balance of Power in World History*, London 2007.

Keohane Robert O. (ed.). *Neorealism and its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Kitchen, Nicholas. "Systemic Pressures and Domestic Ideas: A Neoclassical Realist Model of Grand Strategy Formation." *Review of International Studies*, 2010.

Kucera, Joshua. "Georgia Formally Applies for EU Membership." *Eurasianet*, March 3, 2022. https://eurasianet.org/georgia-formally-applies-for-eu-membership.

Kunchulia, Lela. "Georgian Dream Takes On The 'Global War Party.'" *Radio Liberty*, May 18, 224AD. https://www.rferl.org/a/global-war--party-georgian-dream-bidzina-ivanishvili/32951749.html.

Levy, Jack. "What Do Great Powers Balance Against and When", in T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz and Michel Fortmann (eds.). *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, Standfort University Press, 2004.

Mackintosh, Thomas, Maia Davies, and Rayan Demytrie. "Police Use Water Cannon as Georgia EU Protests Erupt for Second Night." *BBC*, November 30, 2024. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62jp68p315o.

Mearsheimer, The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities. New Haven, CT: Yale University Pres, 2018.

Morgenthau J., Hans. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 7th ed. McGraw-Hill Education, 2005.

Papachristou, Lucy, and Felix Light. "Georgian Ruling Party Founder Vows to Ban Opposition at Final Pre-Election Rally." *Reuters*, October 23, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgian-ruling-party-founder-vows-ban-opposition-final-pre-election-rally-2024-10-23/.

president.az. "Joint Press Statements of Presidents of Azerbaijani and Georgia," April 16, 2025. https://president.az/en/articles/view/68593.

Radio Liberty. "Aliyev Warns Of 'New Military Confrontation' With Armenia." March 9, 2025. https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33378466.html.

Radio Liberty. "Armenian Defense Spending Set For Further Rise." September 26, 2024. https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33136331.html.

Radio Liberty. "Moscow Encouraged By Armenian Media Reports." March 21, 2025. https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33355233.html.

Radio Liberty. "Russian Border Guards Leave Yerevan Airport." July 31, 2024. https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-russia-guards-airport-withdrawal/33058381.html.

Randal L. Schweller, Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power, 2006, Princeton University.

Reuters. "Armenia Is Considering Seeking EU Membership, Foreign Minister Says." March 9, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenia-is-considering-seeking-eu-membership-foreign-minister-says-2024-03-09/.

Schweller, Randall L. "New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Waltz's Balancing Proposition." *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): pp.927–30.

Schweller, Randal L. Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power, 2006, Princeton University.

SPD.DE. "Olaf Scholz: Rede Auf Dem SPE-Kongress," October 15, 2022. https://olaf-scholz.spd.de/aktuelles/detail/news/rede-auf-dem-spe-kongress/15/10/2022.

Starcevic, Seb. "US Will Take Greenland 'One Way or the Other,' Trump Says." POLITICO, March 5, 2025. https://www.politico.eu/article/us-will-take-greenland-one-way-or-the-other-donald-trump-says/.

Stepanian, Ruzanna. "Pashinian Meets Vance At White House." *Radio Liberty*, February 7, 2025. https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33306914.html.

Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, William C. Wohlforth, The Balance of Power in World History, London 2007.

Thompson, Edward Palmer. *The Poverty of Theory or an Orrery of Errors*. London: Merlin Press Ltd, 1995. https://rosswolfe.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/e-p-thompson-the-poverty-of-theory-or-an-orrery-of-errors.pdf.

U.S. Department of State. "Sanctioning Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs Officials Involved in Serious Human Rights Abuses against Protesters," December 19, 2024. https://2021-2025.state.gov/sanctioning-georgian-ministry-of-internal-affairs-officials-involved-in-serious-human-rights-abuses-against-protesters/.

Walt, Stephen M. "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power." *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): pp.3–43. https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540.

Walt Stephen, The Origins of Alliances, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.

Walt, Stephen, The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of the U.S. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979.

Williams, Michael C. "The Politics of Theory: Waltz, Realism, and Democracy." In *Realism and World Politics*, Ken Booth (ed.)., pp.50–64. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Wohlforth, William C., Richard Little, Stuart J. Kaufman, David Kang, Charles A. Jones, Victoria Tin-Bor-Hui, Arthur Eckstein, Daniel Deudney, William L. Brenner, Testing the Balance of Power Theory in World History, European Journal of International Relations, 2007 Vol.13(2).

The Washington Summit Can Build Lasting Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan – If Threats and Challenges Are Managed Successfully

Vasif Huseynov[1]

Introduction

For more than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus remained one of Eurasia's most fragile regions, shaped by unresolved conflicts, periodic violence, and intense geopolitical competition. At the center of this instability stood the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, rooted in Armenia's long-term occupation of Azerbaijan's Karabakh region and surrounding territories, which repeatedly brought the two countries to the brink of war and drew in external powers. Although the use of force ended occupation of the Azerbaijani territories in 2020–2023 and significantly altered the regional balance, the absence of a comprehensive peace agreement continued to cast doubt over the durability of the emerging calm.

Against this backdrop, the developments of 2025, particularly the Washington Summit of August 8, represent an exceptional moment in the modern history of the South Caucasus. Hosted by U.S. President Donald J. Trump, the meeting between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan culminated in the initialing of a long-negotiated peace treaty and the signing of the Washington Agreements.[2] These documents reaffirmed the mutual recognition of sovereignty and territorial integrity, called for the dissolution of obsolete mediation mechanisms (i.e., the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), and addressed one of the most contentious issues in bilateral relations:

---

1 Dr. Vasif Huseynov is the Head of Department at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) and faculty member at Khazar University (Baku, Azerbaijan).

2 President.az, "Joint Declaration signed on meeting between President of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister of Armenia held in Washington," Official Website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 09 August 2025, Available at: https://president.az/en/articles/view/69572 (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

the reopening of transport links between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave through southern Armenia, now framed as the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP).

The summit was widely hailed as historic and raised hopes that the most dangerous fault line in the South Caucasus might finally be closed. Indeed, the absence of large-scale military clashes throughout 2025, combined with growing economic interaction and diplomatic engagement between Baku and Yerevan, suggested that a genuine opportunity for lasting peace had emerged. At the same time, the Washington process unfolded amid profound regional and global shifts: the weakening of Russia's traditional dominance, the more active involvement of the United States and the European Union, the cautious positioning of regional actors such as Türkiye and Iran, and the broader backdrop of global geopolitical rivalry.

Yet history cautions against premature optimism. Initialing a peace treaty does not guarantee its signing, while transformative infrastructure projects such as TRIPP carry not only economic promise but also geopolitical risk. Domestic political uncertainty in Armenia, constitutional and electoral hurdles, and the open skepticism – if not hostility – of Russia and Iran toward expanded U.S. involvement all pose serious challenges. Whether the Washington Summit becomes a true turning point or merely another unrealized diplomatic milestone will depend on how these threats are managed in the months and years ahead.

This article examines the road to the Washington Summit, assesses its key outcomes, and analyzes why it offers a unique chance for lasting peace and stability between Armenia and Azerbaijan, provided that the local and geopolitical challenges surrounding the agreements are handled with care, restraint, and strategic foresight.

Road to the Washington Summit

The Washington Summit of August 8, 2025 did not emerge in a political vacuum. It was rather the culmination of a long, uneven, and often contested peace process that unfolded in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War and evolved through several distinct phases of external mediation. From Russia's initial dominance to the European Union's growing involvement

and the fluctuating role of the United States under the Biden administration, the road to Washington reflects both the shifting balance of power in the South Caucasus and the changing priorities of the parties involved.

The early post-war negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan began in 2021 alongside President Joe Biden's term and were initially dominated by Russia under the November 10, 2020 trilateral statement, which established the ceasefire, deployed Russian peacekeepers, and committed the sides to reopening regional transport links.[3] In the post-war period, the proposed land connection between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan – later known as the Zangezur corridor – emerged as one of the most sensitive issues. The corridor was envisaged to operate under Russian control, reinforcing Moscow's role in regional security. Russia sought to advance the process within this trilateral framework throughout 2021, but its plans stalled after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which weakened its credibility and capacity as a mediator. As Russia's influence declined, the European Union stepped in, hosting a series of EU-mediated summits in 2022 and 2023 that marked a turning point by launching preparations for a comprehensive peace treaty, enabling direct bilateral contacts, and structuring talks around Azerbaijan's five principles based on mutual recognition of sovereignty and territorial integrity.[4]

The EU's growing role opened space for broader Western involvement, including by the United States. In late 2022, Washington began to engage more actively, hosting foreign ministerial meetings on the margins of the UN General Assembly and later in Washington, DC. This engagement intensified in May 2023, when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken facilitated four days

---

3 President.az, "Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation, Official Website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan," 10 November 2020, Available at: https://president.az/en/articles/view/45923 (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

4 Report.az, "Azerbaijan discloses 5 basic principles for normalizing relations with Armenia, Report.az, 14 March 2022," Available at: https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/azerbaijan-discloses-5-basic-principles-for-normalizing-relations-with-armenia (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

of talks between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Washington.[5] These negotiations represented the longest and most intensive round since the end of the war and signaled Washington's ambition to become a central diplomatic actor in the peace process.

Despite their length and intensity, the Washington talks of May 2023 did not yield a formal agreement. Substantive disagreements persisted over the content of the peace treaty, Azerbaijan's establishment of a border checkpoint on the Lachin road, and Armenia's lingering constitutional and political sensitivities. Although Prime Minister Pashinyan publicly acknowledged Armenia's recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and the absence of territorial claims, Baku remained skeptical of Yerevan's sincerity, pointing to attempts to reintroduce Karabakh-related provisions into the draft treaty.[6] U.S. officials nonetheless declared that the sides were "within reach" of an agreement.[7]

The fragile trust underpinning U.S. mediation collapsed later that year. In September 2023, Azerbaijan conducted a one-day anti-terror operation that dismantled the separatist regime in Karabakh and restored full control over its territory. While this operation marked the definitive end of the conflict on the ground, the Biden administration's response – widely perceived in Baku as biased and dismissive of Azerbaijan's legitimate security concerns – severely damaged US-Azerbaijan relations.[8] The cancellation of a planned foreign ministers' meeting in Washington in November 2023 symbolized this rupture.

---

5 Azatutyun, "Washington Says Peace Agreement Between Armenia, Azerbaijan 'Within Reach'," Azatutyun.am, 05 May 2023, Available at: https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32397140.html (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

6 President.az, "Ilham Aliyev attended international conference on "Shaping the Geopolitics of the Greater Eurasia: from Past to Present to Future" in Shusha," Official Website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 03 May 2023, Available at: https://president.az/en/articles/view/59576 (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

7 ArmRadio, "Final agreement within reach: Blinken hails "tangible progress" in Armenia-Azerbaijan talks," Public Radio of Armenia, 04 May 2023, Available at: https://en.armradio.am/2023/05/04/final-agreement-within-reach-blinken-hails-tangible-progress-in-armenia-azerbaijan-talks/ (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

8 Azatutyun, "Armenia, Azerbaijan 'Not Discussing' New Date For U.S.-Mediated Talks," Azatutyun.am, 07 December 2023, Available at: https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32720023.html (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

Tensions escalated further following remarks by senior U.S. officials, including Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien, who linked U.S.-Azerbaijan relations and the waiver of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act to progress in the peace talks.[9] In Baku, these statements revived memories of earlier U.S. pressure during the 1990s and reinforced perceptions of double standards. Azerbaijan increasingly emphasized "regional solutions to regional problems" and resisted what it viewed as attempts by Washington and Brussels to instrumentalize the peace process for broader geopolitical aims, particularly regarding the exclusion of Russia and Iran from any future transit corridors.[10]

By 2024, the Biden administration's role as a mediator had effectively stalled. Azerbaijan rejected further U.S.-initiated meetings, citing an "unjust and biased" approach, while President Ilham Aliyev openly expressed his preference for working with Republican administrations, recalling more pragmatic and result-oriented cooperation in the past.[11] Donald Trump's victory in the November 2024 presidential election was therefore greeted in Baku with cautious optimism.

This optimism proved consequential. Within months of Trump's return to office, U.S.-Azerbaijan relations began to reset, and Washington adopted a more neutral posture between Baku and Yerevan. Unlike the previous administration, the new U.S. leadership sought to engage both sides on an equal footing and to anchor peace efforts in concrete deliverables rather than normative pressure. These shifts created the political conditions for the August

---

9 CivilNet, "'No business as usual' with Azerbaijan until progress on peace with Armenia, says US," CivilNet.am, 15 November 2023, Available at: https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/757077/no-business-as-usual-with-azerbaijan-until-progress-on-peace-with-armenia-says-us/ (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

10 Huseynov. V, "Azerbaijan Advocates for Regional Solutions to Regional Problems in the South Caucasus," Eurasia Daily Monitor, 25 October 2023, Available at: https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-advocates-for-regional-solutions-to-regional-problems-in-the-south-caucasus/ (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

11 President.az, Meeting of the President Ilham Aliyev with the participants of the 2nd Shusha Global Media Forum, Official Website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 20 July 2024, Available at: https://president.az/en/articles/view/66533 (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

2025 Washington Summit, where years of fragmented diplomacy were consolidated into a single, high-stakes effort to finalize a peace framework and redefine regional connectivity.

In this sense, the road to Washington was shaped as much by geopolitical change as by bilateral negotiation. The summit was not merely the product of diplomatic persistence, but the outcome of a recalibrated international environment in which the limits of earlier mediation formats had become evident and a new opportunity for a comprehensive settlement finally emerged.

Results of the Washington Summit

The Washington Summit of 8 August 2025 marked a watershed moment in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations and, more broadly, in the geopolitical configuration of the South Caucasus. Hosted by U.S. President Donald J. Trump, the meeting culminated in a package of agreements that collectively aimed to close the chapter on a decades-long territorial conflict and to lay the foundations for a new regional order based on sovereignty, connectivity, and external guarantees.

The most consequential outcome of the summit was the initialing of the long-negotiated peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Built on the five basic principles proposed by Azerbaijan in March 2022, the treaty formalizes mutual recognition of territorial integrity and the inviolability of borders, thereby addressing the core political dispute that fueled repeated wars and crises. Although the treaty has not yet been formally signed – pending constitutional amendments in Armenia to remove territorial claims against Azerbaijan – it represents the most advanced and comprehensive political framework ever achieved between the two states.

Another important result was the joint decision by Armenia and Azerbaijan to call for the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group. Long criticized for its ineffectiveness and outdated mandate, the Minsk Group had become an obstacle rather than a facilitator of peace. Its removal symbolically and practically cleared the negotiating landscape, signaling that the conflict is no longer subject to indefinite international mediation but is instead moving toward a bilateral, treaty-based settlement.

Perhaps the most debated and geopolitically significant outcome of the Washington Summit concerned regional connectivity. The leaders reached an agreement on opening a transport link between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave through southern Armenia. Formerly known as the Zangezur corridor, the route was officially rebranded as the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP). Unlike earlier arrangements envisioned in the 2020 Russia-Armenia-Azerbaijan trilateral statement, the new framework places the corridor under U.S. oversight for at least 99 years, with Washington acting as the primary third-party guarantor of security and operational integrity. This marked a decisive shift away from Russian control and fundamentally altered the balance of influence in the region.

Beyond Armenia-Azerbaijan agreements, the summit also produced significant bilateral outcomes with the United States. Azerbaijan and the U.S. agreed to establish a Strategic Working Group to prepare a Charter on Strategic Partnership, signaling an intention to elevate relations and deepen cooperation in key areas such as energy, connectivity, and artificial intelligence. The decision to waive the long-criticized 907th Amendment to the Freedom Support Act further removed a major political irritant in U.S.-Azerbaijani relations. Armenia, for its part, signed parallel sectoral agreements with Washington, complementing the Strategic Partnership Charter it had concluded with the United States in January 2025.

Collectively, these results position the United States as a central diplomatic and strategic actor in the South Caucasus for the first time since the early post-Soviet years. The Washington Summit did not merely facilitate agreements; it redefined the external architecture underpinning peace and connectivity in the region. If implemented successfully, the outcomes of the summit could transform Armenia-Azerbaijan relations from conflict management to genuine normalization and integrate the South Caucasus more firmly into transregional economic and transport networks linking Central Asia, Türkiye, and Europe.

At the same time, the summit's results remain politically and geopolitically sensitive. Initialing agreements is not the same as implementing them, and the durability of these outcomes will depend on domestic developments in Armenia (e.g., the parliamentary elections in June 2026) and on how regional

and extra-regional powers respond to the new realities created in Washington. Nonetheless, in terms of substance, scope, and strategic impact, the Washington Summit delivered the most far-reaching set of results ever achieved in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process.

Potentially, a Unique Chance for Lasting Peace and Stability

The Washington Summit has created a rare and potentially transformative opportunity for lasting peace and stability in the South Caucasus. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has been addressed through a comprehensive political framework that combines a negotiated peace treaty, the dismantling of obsolete mediation mechanisms, and a forward-looking connectivity project backed by a powerful external guarantor. If implemented successfully, these arrangements could assist the normalization of the Armenia-Azerbaijan relations and open a path of lasting peace and stability in the South Caucasus.

Several factors make this moment unique. First, the peace treaty initialed in Washington directly addresses the core political dispute by formalizing mutual recognition of sovereignty and territorial integrity. This alone removes the principal justification for renewed interstate war. Second, the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group symbolically closes an era of frozen diplomacy and signals that the conflict is no longer subject to indefinite international management but is moving toward a bilateral, treaty-based settlement. Third, the agreement on the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) links peace to tangible economic incentives. By reconnecting mainland Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan through Armenia and integrating the route into the Middle Corridor, the project creates shared material interests that can reinforce political commitments and make renewed confrontation increasingly costly for all sides.

The broader regional context further enhances this opportunity. In 2025, despite intensifying global rivalries and the weakening of Russia's traditional dominance, the South Caucasus avoided major military escalation. Azerbaijan and Armenia gradually expanded economic interaction, transport links became more active, and diplomatic contacts multiplied. External actors, including the European Union, Türkiye, China, and the United States, largely supported stability and connectivity rather than zero-sum competition. The

Washington agreements thus emerged not in a vacuum, but within a wider pattern of pragmatic restraint and interest-based cooperation that reduced the likelihood of immediate conflict.

Yet this opportunity remains fragile. The most immediate risks stem from Armenia's domestic political situation. The peace treaty cannot be formally signed without constitutional amendments removing territorial claims against Azerbaijan, a process entangled with the June 2026 parliamentary elections. Russia-backed opposition forces, clerical circles, and segments of the diaspora portray the Washington agreements as capitulation and openly oppose the TRIPP project. A political reversal in Yerevan or prolonged internal instability could stall or derail implementation. Conversely, if Armenian voters prioritize economic recovery, regional integration, and an end to permanent confrontation, they could provide the domestic mandate necessary to consolidate peace.

Geopolitical challenges are equally serious and, if mishandled, could become the most significant obstacle to translating the Washington agreements into lasting peace. Russia and Iran have emerged as the two principal external actors dissatisfied with the outcomes of the Washington Summit, particularly with the decision to place the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) under U.S. oversight. For both Moscow and Tehran, the agreements are not viewed merely as an Armenia-Azerbaijan settlement or a technical connectivity project, but as a geopolitical reconfiguration that diminishes their influence in what they have long considered a sensitive and strategically vital neighborhood.

From Russia's perspective, the Washington agreements represent a clear erosion of its post-2020 role as the primary security manager in the South Caucasus. Since the end of the Second Karabakh War, Moscow has insisted that the November 10, 2020 trilateral statement constituted the only legitimate framework for regional stabilization, including the opening of transport links under Russian supervision.[12] The envisaged role of Russia's Federal Security

[12] Mid.ru, Briefing by the official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Maria Zakharova, Official Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 29 August 2025, Available at: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/2044002/#38 (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

Service (FSB) Border Guards in controlling transit routes was central to this vision, allowing Moscow to entrench itself as an indispensable arbiter of movement, security, and connectivity between the Caspian basin, Türkiye, and beyond. The rebranding of the corridor as TRIPP, its removal from the trilateral format and the assignment of oversight to the United States collectively undermine this strategic design.

Although the Kremlin's official reaction has been restrained, emphasizing the need to respect the interests of regional states and calling for dialogue, Russian political, media, and expert circles have been far blunter. Commentaries describing the Washington agreements as a "betrayal" or a "stab in the back" reflect a widespread perception that Armenia, a formal ally within the CSTO and EAEU, has crossed a geopolitical red line by allowing a long-term U.S. presence in southern Syunik. Moscow's calls for potential "Russian participation" in TRIPP should be understood less as genuine enthusiasm and more as an attempt to regain leverage over a process from which it has been effectively sidelined.[13] Failing to do so, Russia retains other instruments, such as political influence in Armenia, control over key infrastructure, such as the railways, information pressure, and indirect destabilization, to slow down or complicate implementation without openly confronting Washington.

Iran's reaction has been even more openly confrontational. Tehran views TRIPP through a security lens shaped by deep suspicion of Western and NATO presence near its northern borders. Iranian officials and influential figures close to the Supreme Leader have explicitly equated the Trump Route with the long-opposed "Zangezur corridor," arguing that it threatens Iran's strategic depth, undermines its transit role, and creates conditions for Western military and intelligence penetration in the South Caucasus. Statements by senior figures such as Ali Akbar Velayati, warning that the route would become a "graveyard" for foreign forces, illustrate the intensity of Iran's opposition and its willingness to employ coercive rhetoric.[14]

---

[13] Azatutyun, "Russia Insists on Role in Armenian Transit Link For Azerbaijan," Azatutyun.am, 16 December 2025, Available at: https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33624906.html (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

[14] Hetq.am, Zangezur Corridor Will Become Graveyard for Trump's Mercenaries; Says Iranian Official, Hetq.am, 10 August 2025, Available at: https://hetq.am/en/article/176120 (Accessed: 3 January 2026).

Iran's concerns are multifaceted. Strategically, TRIPP bypasses Iranian territory, reducing Tehran's leverage as a transit hub between Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, and Europe. Politically, U.S. involvement contradicts Iran's longstanding insistence on excluding Western powers from regional security arrangements. Militarily, Iranian elites fear that economic infrastructure could gradually evolve into a platform for surveillance, intelligence sharing, or even a limited security presence near Iran's borders. While Tehran is unlikely to disrupt the project through direct military means, its capacity to apply pressure through political signaling, military exercises near the border, and coordination with like-minded actors should not be underestimated.

The convergence of Russian and Iranian dissatisfaction creates a particularly delicate situation. Individually, neither actor is well positioned to halt the Washington process outright; collectively, however, they could raise the costs of implementation by exploiting Armenia's internal fragility, amplifying domestic opposition, or framing TRIPP as a destabilizing Western project rather than a regional public good. This risk is especially acute during Armenia's pre-election period, when external pressure could interact with domestic polarization.

Against this backdrop, the diplomatic efforts undertaken by Armenia and Azerbaijan to engage Moscow and Tehran are not tactical concessions but strategic necessities. Armenia's outreach reflects an understanding that ignoring Russian and Iranian concerns could transform a peace initiative into a broader security crisis. Azerbaijan's cautious balancing, avoiding overtly framing TRIPP as an anti-Russian or anti-Iranian project, serves the same purpose. The sustainability of the Washington agreements will ultimately depend on whether they can be insulated from great-power rivalry and presented, convincingly, as mechanisms for connectivity and stability rather than instruments of geopolitical exclusion.

If Russia and Iran continue to view the process as a zero-sum contest, they are likely to act as latent spoilers. If, however, their core concerns (e.g., security, sovereignty, and economic access) are at least partly addressed, the scope for constructive coexistence may widen. Managing this balance is therefore not peripheral to peacebuilding; it is central to whether the Washington Summit becomes a foundation for lasting stability or another missed opportunity in the South Caucasus.

In this context, the role of the United States is pivotal. By acting as the main external guarantor of the Washington agreements and the TRIPP project, Washington can help deter spoilers and reduce the scope for "divide and rule" tactics by other powers. At the same time, U.S. involvement must remain calibrated. If the corridor or the peace process is framed as a geopolitical instrument against Russia, Iran, or even China, it risks provoking countermeasures and undermining regional buy-in. The long-term success of TRIPP depends on its treatment as a shared economic corridor – open, commercially viable, and inclusive – rather than as a symbol of geopolitical realignment.

Conclusion

The Washington Summit of August 2025 represents a historic and unprecedented opportunity to transform the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict from a decades-long source of violence and instability into a durable framework for peace, cooperation, and regional integration. By initialing a comprehensive peace treaty, dismantling outdated mediation structures, and establishing the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) under U.S. oversight, the summit has combined political, economic, and strategic instruments in a single, coherent initiative. These measures address the core sources of interstate tension, create tangible incentives for cooperation, and embed the South Caucasus more firmly into broader transregional networks linking Central Asia, Türkiye, and Europe.

Yet the promise of lasting peace remains fragile. Domestic political uncertainties in Armenia, the upcoming parliamentary elections, and internal opposition to the Washington agreements could delay or undermine implementation. At the same time, the dissatisfaction of regional powers – particularly Russia and Iran – illustrates the geopolitical sensitivity of TRIPP and the broader peace framework. Their perceptions of exclusion or strategic loss, if left unaddressed, could generate latent pressures that complicate or even derail progress.

Ultimately, the durability of the Washington agreements will depend on careful management of both internal and external risks. Success will require Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders to navigate domestic politics prudently, en-

gage constructively with Moscow and Tehran, and maintain TRIPP as a genuinely inclusive, economically oriented corridor rather than a tool of geopolitical contestation. If these conditions are met, the Washington Summit could mark a turning point in the South Caucasus, transforming a cycle of conflict into a pathway toward stability, prosperity, and enduring regional cooperation.

Russia's Retrenchment From the South Caucasus and How to Maintain its Influence in the Region

Boris Kuznetsov

For three decades after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Russia was the unchallenged dominant power in the South Caucasus. Therefore, Russia perceives any events in the region that diminish its influence as a threat.

Over the past five years, Russia's dominance in the South Caucasus has been challenged. Key factors include Azerbaijan's recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia's deteriorating ties with its strategic ally Armenia, its retreat as a regional mediator, the increasing presence of Türkiye, the West and Iran. The post-Soviet space, once seen as an area of uncontested Russian influence, is becoming more fragmented and increasingly difficult for Moscow to manage.

Transcaucasia is demonstrating the dismantling of old ties: Azerbaijan has effectively eliminated Russia as a priority partner, purging its elites of Russian loyalists, while Türkiye is strengthening its position in the region, including in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Armenia is rapidly distancing itself from Moscow and placing its bets on rapprochement with the West and Türkiye. Meanwhile, Tbilisi, despite its economic dependence on Russia, may soon turn back toward the European Union, as Moscow is unwilling to offer investment or a solution to the Abkhaz and South Ossetian problems.

Azerbaijan has always occupied a unique position in the South Caucasus, skillfully balancing relations with the West, Türkiye, Israel, Iran, and Russia. Against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian- Armenian relations and Moscow's de facto neutrality in the 2020 and 2023 conflicts between Baku and Yerevan, it seemed that Russia and Azerbaijan were developing closer ties. This was underscored by the February 2022 Moscow Declaration on Allied Cooperation. However, this "geopolitical compensation" failed to materialize. The AZAL airplane tragedy highlighted the fragility of their strategic

partnership and the underlying tensions in bilateral relations.[1] This incident epitomized the divergent approaches of the two states on key issues ranging from Ukraine to the Middle East. Azerbaijan, while outwardly maintaining neutrality, is increasingly drawn into the orbit of states traditionally hostile to Russia's interests. Despite the decline in public confrontation with Moscow following the meeting between presidents Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev, Baku is strengthening its institutional and defense ties with the West. This is evident in the signing of agreements and strategic plans, and its integration into regional configurations in the Caucasus and the Middle East. One of the most recent steps was the signing of a Bilateral Cooperation Plan for 2026–2027 by the Azerbaijani and British Ministries of Defense. At the same time, Baku is developing an enhanced cooperation format with the United States, which could effectively evolve into a means of political and military external control.

In September 2023, Azerbaijan established full sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia's traditional role as the exclusive moderator in the settlement of the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict has effectively ended. Meanwhile, the Baku-Ankara alliance has strengthened, particularly following the Shusha Declaration signed in 2021. Its active military, diplomatic, economic and informational support of Azerbaijan strengthened the influence of Türkiye in the South Caucasus.

The balance of power has shifted in favor of the Azerbaijani-Turkish axis, creating a new geopolitical reality. Russia's waning dominance in the region has mostly benefited Türkiye. Moreover, it has enhanced Türkiye's role in the Caspian region and Central Asia, while advancing the Organization of Turkic States as a key regional integration project. Türkiye's strengthening ties with the Turkic-speaking republics along with their desire to reduce their dependence on Russia, has given Türkiye better leverage to expand its presence in the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route). By Türkiye's strategic vision, the Middle Corridor is a very attractive transport route, not only because it provides a direct connection to Eurasia but also because it decreases the dependence of other Turkic states on both Russia and Iran while increasing the role of Türkiye in shaping Eurasian geo-economics.

---

1 https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2024/12/29/20321888.shtml.

In other words, Azerbaijan, despite all its declarations of balance and pragmatism, is increasingly drifting toward Russia's adversaries. This not only creates challenges for Russia's security but also changes the overall context of regional policy. Moreover, even a temporary de-escalation in bilateral relations between Moscow and Baku does not reverse the long-term trend of Russia being pushed out of the South Caucasus. The confrontation between Russia and Azerbaijan will intensify in a hybrid format – without direct military clashes, but with growing tensions in the media, international platforms, and infrastructure cases. Under these circumstances, Russia will either have to adapt its policy to account for these shifts or build a new model of regional presence – one that is more flexible but also more selective in its approach to states that are playing a double game under the guise of "constructive dialogue". The balance of power will depend on Moscow's ability to quickly adapt and shape its policy in the new environment.

The changing balance of power in the region has become a source of concern for Iran, which is not directly involved in the conflict but is not immune to its uncertain consequences. Previously, Iran mostly focused on the problems of the Middle East. However, after 2020, Iran has developed more interest to be involved in the state of regional affairs. The strengthening of Ankara-Baku relations pushed Tehran to provide more support to Armenia to stand against the implementation of the Zangezur corridor project. Iran has strived to engage in regional cooperation processes in the South Caucasus to ensure a more prominent role for itself in the new order emerging in the wake of the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Iran holds several advantages over Russia. Firstly, Iran successfully opened a consulate general in the strategic Syunik region, increasing its influence in geopolitically important southern Armenia – a goal Russia has failed to achieve despite attempting for two years. Secondly, Iran has become a key security provider for Armenia: for instance, Armenian military imports from India had allegedly transited through Iranian territory. Thirdly, the Armenian public's trust in Iran has grown, while confidence in Russia has weakened.

Armenia as Russia's strategic ally played a key role in maintaining Russian influence in the region for decades. This dynamic changed dramatically in 2020 during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war when Azerbaijan recaptured the region. Russia managed to broker a ceasefire agreement that ended

the conflict and included the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the remaining parts of Nagorno-Karabakh. Nevertheless, Russia's image as a security provider to Armenia has subsequently declined due to its weak performance as a mediator in the wake of the dissolution of the former "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" and the reintegration of its territory in Azerbaijan in 2023. As the prospects for Russian-backed peace talks seemed uncertain, Armenian leaders sharply criticized Moscow for its failure to support Armenia by strengthening its defense. Simultaneously, Armenian PM Pashinyan not only criticized the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) but also called the organization a threat to national security and announced its suspension of membership in February 2024.

Russian-Georgian relations represent a quite strange format. On one hand, there are no diplomatic relations between the two states since September 2008. Georgia considers Russia as the country occupying its territories. On the other hand, Russia has been increasing bilateral economic cooperation with Georgia, including by restoring direct flights and visa-free regime. Russia is one of the most important trade and economic partners of Georgia, second after Türkiye. This has led to the emergence of a Moscow-oriented business elite in Georgia.

The growing contradictions between Georgia and its Western allies seemed to open the door to rapprochement and normalizing relations between Moscow and Tbilisi. However, progress has been complicated by many factors, not only geopolitical, but also relating to domestic politics.

Restoring Russia's position in the South Caucasus requires a radical strategic restructuring – with new narratives, updated institutions and the recognition that old forms of influence no longer work. The South Caucasus has long since transformed from a post-Soviet integration area into a space for geopolitical competition with – Chinese, Turkish, European, and American vectors, increasingly, with anti-Russian accents. While the old Russian reliance on the inertial loyalty of elites, on memories of a "shared past" and on "resource diplomacy" remained, current challenges require a rethinking of the essence of regional influence.

Firstly, a shift in the soft power paradigm is necessary. Russian cultural and information policy toward the South Caucasus has for too long been based

on outdated templates. Influence is built not on appeals to the past, but on the ability to propose innovative ideas for the future – sovereign, technologically advanced, and integrated into alternative centers of power. Russia must redefine its civilizational model – with a set of functioning institutions, an attractive digital infrastructure, and a clear humanitarian doctrine.

Secondly, it is critical to update its personnel policy. Russia's presence in the South Caucasus is associated with an outdated apparatus lacking real leverage over the regional states and people and an understanding of local sociocultural dynamics. What is needed are not just diplomats, but influence operators – young, educated, well-connected, and fluent in the language of local communities. This means a clear understanding and a conscious strategy for each country, consistently implemented through the development of loyal media outlets, experts, and think tanks.

Thirdly, it is necessary to move away from "resource diplomacy" and renegotiate agreements, clearly linking economic preferences to the necessary humanitarian policy. Russia cannot compete with China in terms of investment scale, but it should not act as a donor without commitments. The development of transport hubs, energy projects, digital platforms, and cross-border labor markets should not be a matter of "friendship requests", but rather a matter of pragmatic deals that benefit all parties.

Finally, internal honesty in Russia is needed. A strong country is not one that demands respect, but one that creates meaning for the others. Without a transparent domestic policy, an elite consensus, and a clear ideological framework, the external framework loses its footing. People in the post-Soviet republics, especially young people, see everything. They need answers to questions: who are you, why are you here, and what will happen if we join you.

In summary, regional integration in the South Caucasus presents a new and complex challenge for Russia. The South Caucasus is gradually shifting away from its traditional post-Soviet framework as part of Russia's sphere of interests. Russia's retrenchment created a vacuum that is increasingly being filled by regional and international actors. This trend highlights Moscow's diminishing monopoly as a regional security provider. This does not mean that Russia is leaving the South Caucasus, but its room for maneuver has significantly narrowed. The classic practice of "resource diplomacy", which

involves exchanging financial or energy support for political loyalty, is becoming less effective. Gratitude in international relations is rapidly losing its value, and excessive unconditional aid only fuels the desire to pursue a policy of gentle distancing from Russia, avoiding long-term commitments. The example of China, which builds its relations on investment and does not expect reciprocity, underscores that it is precisely the balance of mutual obligations that creates real leverage. Under these circumstances, Russia should manage the situation wisely, moving away from inertial and imperative thinking. Indeed, Moscow should promote a pragmatic vision of the South Caucasus, free from geopolitical illusions. Russia should rethink its soft power instruments in favor of concrete programs that will be perceived by local elites and society as truly meaningful. This will be a difficult shift for Russia, and the near future will show how justified it is.

Regional Perspective towards "TRIPP": What Choices does Armenia have?

Benyamin Poghosyan, Yeghia Tashjian

The Regional Interconnectivity Significance of "TRIPP"

The emergence of the "Trump's Route for International Peace and Prosperity" (TRIPP) as a strategic framework in Eurasia will symbolize a significant shift in how states understand trade interdependence, connectivity, and power projection. For many local and regional players, TRIPP represents a geo-economic system that connects transit corridors, energy pipelines, and roads into a unified strategic network. Its regional importance lies in its capacity to reshape political and economic alignments not only in the South Caucasus but also in nearby regions such as the Middle East and Central Asia.

In a region where trade routes are often vulnerable to geopolitical tensions, TRIPP offers diversification and interconnectivity between multiple trade routes, enabling states to reduce dependency on a single gateway or a single power. It would also provide landlocked countries such as Armenia a passage that facilitates the smoother flow of goods to/from the Middle East, Black Sea, and other regions. The core idea behind the project is to help states gain more economic benefit rather than engage in conflict; to establish a regional system of collective vulnerability, where making any disruption would be costly for all; and to make regional powers become stakeholders in sustaining peace and stability instead of triggering tensions. This is particularly relevant in contested regions such as the South Caucasus, where such projects could encourage complementarity rather than competitive connectivity.

Moreover, TRIPP could also become a platform where global and regional powers cooperate. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC), Türkiye's Middle Corridor, the EU's Global Gateway, and Russia's International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) all intersect with elements of TRIPP. This allows local actors to leverage great-power competition for investment and prevent the region

from becoming overly dependent on a single external actor, hence creating multipolar connectivity where no major actor claims hegemony. Economically, the projects would attract foreign investments, thus helping the establishment of additional industrial and agricultural trade zones and integration of peripheral regions (such as rural and bordering villages) into national and regional economies.

The following paper will examine the positions of regional and some extra-regional actors (Russia, Iran, Türkiye, India, and China) regarding TRIPP and analyse the options available to Armenia when navigating these interests.

The Russian Perspective

For decades, Russia acted as the key power security broker in the region, managing infrastructure like railroads and borders, and positioning itself as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Washington-backed project clearly challenges Russia's role by aiming to control a key infrastructural transit route in Armenia. The Washington Summit should also be viewed within the context of the post-Ukraine war regional order in the South Caucasus and the narrowing of Moscow's maneuvering spaces in the region.

Russia is pursuing a "dual track" towards TRIPP, pursuing diplomatic restraint and exerting economic and political pressure over Armenia. While officially calling for clarification, at the same time Moscow is insisting that its security and economic interests should be taken into consideration. Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk has expressed support for aspects of Armenia's involvement in TRIPP, hinting that Moscow may choose selective cooperation if it can benefit.[1] Russia's Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department, Alexey Fadayev, stated that while the project is intended to promote peace, it should take into consideration Armenia's membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the presence of Russian border guards in the Syunik province.[2] These two arguments acknowledge Russia's position on its continued interests and concerns in the

---

1 "Russia signals support for Armenia's stance on "TRIPP" project," August 15, 2025, *Azernews.Az*. https://www.azernews.az/region/246075.html.

2 "Russia promises to study details of "Trump Route" project in South Caucasus." *TASS*. August 13, 2025, https://tass.com/politics/2001733.

region. That is the project should not jeopardize Russia's geo-economic and geopolitical interests in the region. The EAEU represents Russia's geo-economic flagship in post-Soviet space, and Armenia, being the only member country having a border with Iran, is key in bridging EAEU-Iran trade relations.[3] By emphasizing Russia's border guards' presence, Moscow is reaffirming its security presence and warning of any possible Western military deployment in the region. This reminds us why Russia's Foreign Ministry accused the EU Monitoring Mission of becoming a "NATO mission" in Armenia.[4]

Russia also continued advocating for a regional peace process. In August 2025, commenting on the Washington Summit, Russia's MFA's spokesperson Maria Zakharova, while welcoming the U.S.-led peace efforts, emphasized that the "involvement of non-regional players should strengthen the peace agenda, not create new dividing lines," and added that the Trilateral agreement (signed on November 9, 2020) between Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan still remains valid. She also stated that regional conflicts should be resolved with the "assistance of the immediate neighbors – first of all Russia, Iran, and Türkiye". This is why Russia kept pushing for the "3+3 regional format" (Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and the three South Caucasian states), to institutionalize its cooperation with Ankara and Tehran to shape the regional architecture.[5]

While officials publicly have taken a softer position, the Russian media highlighted Moscow's concerns. Russian media portrayed TRIPP as a U.S. attempt to encircle Moscow and weaken the INSTC.[6] Russian media started

---

3 "Russia's strategy amid Trump's mediation breakthrough in the South Caucasus," *Geopolitics and Security Studies Center, GSSC,* August 18, 2025, https://www.gssc.lt/en/publication/russias-strategy-amid-trumps-mediation-breakthrough-in-the-south-caucasus/.

4 "EU mission in Armenia morphing into NATO mission – Lavrov," *TASS*, March 28, 2024, https://tass.com/politics/1767467.

5 "Challenges to Russia's influence in the South Caucasus," *New Eurasian Strategies Centre.* August 28, 2025, https://nestcentre.org/challenges-to-russias-influence-in-the-south-caucasus/?print=print.

6 Yeghia Tashjian, "U.S. policy in the South Caucasus: Keep Turkey in, Russia down and Iran out," The Armenian Weekly, August 11, 2025, https://armenianweekly.com/2025/08/11/u-s-policy-in-the-south-caucasus-keep-turkey-in-russia-down-and-iran-out/.

framing the TRIPP through the lens of territorial influence, energy dominance, security leverage and control over transit corridors. Hence, TRIPP is framed as part of 'Western containment architecture' against Russia in its "near abroad".[7] According to Eurasia Today:

> "Control over this corridor [TRIPP] allows the United States of America not only to influence energy flows from the Caspian region, but also to create the preconditions for NATO's expansion to the east through mechanisms of economic integration and military-logistics cooperation."[8]

Adding that the realization of this corridor will boost Türkiye's position, aiming to unify the Turkic world, thus creating additional opportunities for American influence in the region.[9]

Despite this rhetoric, Russia still holds cards to play: its military bases in Armenia, control over parts of the railway system, and responsibility for border patrols give it real influence. Russia may also gain economically by connecting the INSTC to TRIPP and the Middle Corridor. This would also provide an alternative trade route for Russia towards Europe and the Middle East via Türkiye. Looking forward, TRIPP could reshape how Russia fits into the South Caucasus. Armenia's closer partnership with Washington could steadily reduce its reliance on Moscow, forcing Russia to adjust its role. Russia will still find ways to influence TRIPP's implementation by leveraging unresolved conflicts and economic stakes.[10] However, the future will show how sustainable TRIPP really is, especially given Russia's entrenched networks, or how neighboring states, notably Iran, viewed this development.

The Iranian Perspective

The post-October 7, 2023, developments in the Middle East and the Israeli attacks on Iran have reduced Iran's deterrence cards. Iran's role in the South

---

7 Коротовских, Е., & Коротовских, Е. (2025, September 17). Американская дипломатия в Пакистане: коридор TRIPP как геополитический вызов Евразии. *Eurasiatoday*. https://eurasiatoday.ru/amerikanskaya-diplomatiya-v-pakistane-koridor-tripp-kak-geopoliticheskij-vyzov-evrazii/.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Eka Khorbaladze, Rewiring Eurasia: How the Trump Route Challenges China's Influence, *Think China*, August 25, 2025, https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/rewiring-eurasia-how-trump-route-challenges-chinas-influence.

Caucasus has also been minimized. Iran shares an 800km border with the region. Developments there can quickly affect Iranian security and trade. Iran's traditional balancing act between Armenia and Azerbaijan is becoming harder to maintain: siding too much with Yerevan risks confrontation with Baku, while passivity could allow changes on the ground that weaken Iran's influence.[11] Many Iranian analysts argue that Iran was caught off guard by the speed of developments and is now trying to secure a role in shaping TRIPP's rules and flows.[12]

Tehran's public messaging on TRIPP mixes deterrent rhetoric with conditional pragmatism. Ali Akbar Velayati, senior adviser to the Supreme Leader, delivered the sharpest line, calling the US-backed initiative an "American corridor" and promising Iran would block it, dismissing U.S. plans as a "graveyard of the mercenaries of Donald Trump".[13] The Foreign Ministry, by contrast, has voiced conditional support for a peace deal in principle, coupled with clear red lines against "foreign interference" near Iran's borders.[14] Meanwhile, President Masoud Pezeshkian has emphasized non-militarization of the project and noted unease over prospective U.S. corporate roles, framing acceptance as contingent on how the corridor is governed and secured.[15]

Iranian strategists see TRIPP as diluting Iran's longstanding role as a transit intermediary between Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia, potentially diverting traffic that sustains Iranian revenues and leverage and influence in

---

11 Yeghia Tashjian, "U.S. policy in the South Caucasus: Keep Turkey in, Russia down and Iran out," *The Armenian Weekly*, August 11, 2025, https://armenianweekly.com/2025/08/11/u-s-policy-in-the-south-caucasus-keep-turkey-in-russia-down-and-iran-out/.

12 "The deal that wasn't," *Meduza*, August 11, 2025, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/08/11/the-deal-that-wasn-t.

13 Yeghia Tashjian, "U.S. policy in the South Caucasus: Keep Turkey in, Russia down and Iran out," *The Armenian Weekly,* August 11, 2025, https://armenianweekly.com/2025/08/11/u-s-policy-in-the-south-caucasus-keep-turkey-in-russia-down-and-iran-out/.

14 Hrair Balian, "Peace will fail without clarity on TRIPP, release of hostages, and Karabakh rights." *Civilnet.* August 18, 2025, https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/969386/opinion-peace-will-fail-without-clarity-on-tripp-release-of-hostages-and-karabakh-rights/.

15 Mansur Mirovalev, "Does a Trump-brokered deal squeeze Russia, Iran out of the South Caucasus?" *Al Jazeera,* August 13, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/13/how-does-trumps-tripp-deal-squeezes-russia-iran-out-of-south-caucasus.

regional trade.[16] This would narrow Iran's capacity to shape rules, customs, and security practices at its frontier, while secretly encouraging Yerevan to deepen ties with the West. Around 30% of Armenia's trade moves through Iran.[17] If TRIPP bypasses Iran, it could decrease Armenia's reliance on Tehran and reduce income from customs and transport fees. It would also weaken Iran's flagship project, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which connects Iran to Russia and India.[18] With Russia quite muted and Türkiye-Azerbaijan coordination deepening, Tehran feels a shifting balance that increases the risk of regional isolation if it remains outside corridor governance.[19] This is why Tehran sees danger beyond trade. The main concern is that Western facilitation, potentially alongside Turkish and Israeli engagement, could both strengthen Baku's position and invite Israeli security footprints (counter-drone, border surveillance, intelligence sharing) into Armenia, together increasing strategic pressure on Iran from the north.[20] There are also fears of U.S. private security companies or even bases along the corridor, which Iran believes could be used to monitor its territory.[21] Iranian leaders also worry that TRIPP will strengthen a pan-Turkic arc and invite more hostile intelligence activity near its northern borders.[22]

---

16 Mehmet Fatih Oztarsu, "Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace: What is Iran Really Afraid of?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13889-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-what-is-iran-really-afraid-of?.html.

17 *Observer Research Foundation,* "Trump's geopolitical gambit in the South Caucasus," October 31, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/trump-s-geopolitical-gambit-in-the-south-caucasus.

18 Firat Kozok and Selcan Hacaoglu, August 22, 2025, "Trump Route in Caucasus Can Boost Trade From China If US Allows," *Bloomberg*, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-08-22/trump-route-in-caucasus-can-boost-trade-from-china-if-us-allows?embedded-checkout=true.

19 "The Washington Summit: Implications for Armenia and the region," *Applied Policy Research Armenia*, August 14, 2025, https://apri.institute/the-washington-summit-implications-for-armenia-and-the-region/.

20 "The deal that wasn't," *Meduza*, August 11, 2025, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/08/11/the-deal-that-wasn-t.

21 Mansur Mirovalev, "Does a Trump-brokered deal squeeze Russia, Iran out of the South Caucasus?" *Al Jazeera,* August 13, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/13/how-does-trumps-tripp-deal-squeezes-russia-iran-out-of-south-caucasus.

22 "The Washington Summit: Implications for Armenia and the region," *Applied Policy Research Armenia*, August 14, 2025, https://apri.institute/the-washington-summit-implications-for-armenia-and-the-region/.

This is why Iran is also encouraging Armenia to deepen its ties with India and invest in transit routes in the strategic province of Syunik that connects Yerevan to Iran. Tehran aims to have a gateway to Europe via the Persian Gulf - Black Sea Corridor through Armenia and Georgia.[23] For Iran, this step can also be a step to normalize its tense relations with the West and balance its transit dependency from Azerbaijan and Russia.

According to Prof. Vali Golmohammadi, Tehran is expected to mix deterrence (such as border signalling, intelligence vigilance, and strict red lines) with pragmatic cooperation in trade and energy in order to avoid being sidelined.[24] While President Pezeshkian has downplayed the issue publicly, Iran's security establishment views TRIPP as a real risk: it could reduce Iran's leverage in regional trade, weaken its role in the INSTC, and cut into valuable transit revenues.[25] Iran is likely to accept TRIPP reluctantly, trying to connect it to its own routes, such as having a railway connection to Armenia through Nakhijevan, instead of rejecting it completely.[26]

The Turkish Perspective

Türkiye welcomed the signing of the Washington Declaration on August 8, and the initialing of an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace agreement. However, the absence of President Erdoğan at the Washington Summit, and the establish-

---

22 "The deal that wasn't," *Meduza*, August 11, 2025, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/08/11/the-deal-that-wasn-t.

23 Umud Shokri, "Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor: A new era for Iran-Europe trade or just another risk?" *Middle East Institute*, November 25, 2024, https://www.mei.edu/publications/persian-gulf-black-sea-corridor-new-era-iran-europe-trade-or-just-another-risk.

24 "Vali Golmohammadi: The "Trump Route" Securitizes Iran's Posture in the Caucasus," *Caucasus Watch,* September 6, 2025, https://caucasuswatch.de/en/interviews/vali-golmohammadi-the-trump-route-securitizes-irans-posture-in-the-caucasus.html.

25 Mehmet Fatih Oztarsu, Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace: What is Iran Really Afraid of? *Central Asia- Caucasus Institute,* August 27, 2025, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13889-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-what-is-iran-really-afraid-of?.html.

26 "Vali Golmohammadi: The "Trump Route" Securitizes Iran's Posture in the Caucasus," *Caucasus Watch*, September 6, 2025, https://caucasuswatch.de/en/interviews/vali-golmohammadi-the-trump-route-securitizes-irans-posture-in-the-caucasus.html.

ment of direct contacts between President Aliyev and President Trump, sidelining Erdoğan as a facilitator, could have irritated the Turkish leader, creating further tensions in Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations. The September 2025 Erdoğan-Trump meeting in the White House,[27] however, may have assuaged Türkiye's perception of being sidelined, potentially bringing more Turkish support to the implementation of TRIPP.

It is worth noting that Turkish experts interviewed by these authors argued that the main benefit from Armenia for Türkiye is the opening of land access to Azerbaijan via the Syunik region of Armenia, the establishment of the so-called "Zangezur Corridor" – overlooking the benefit of opening the borders with Armenia as a whole. This means that if land access from Azerbaijan to Nakhijevan via the Syunik region – and then directly to Türkiye – is established, Türkiye may lose any incentive to continue normalization and open borders with Armenia. In this context, the start of the 224-kilometer Kars-Nakhijevan railroad construction in August 2025,[28] aiming to directly connect Türkiye with Azerbaijan, circumventing the Kars-Gyumri-Yerevan-Nakhijevan route, is a worrying sign of Turkish intentions to keep Armenia isolated from regional connectivity.

Moreover, Türkiye's geopolitical interest in the TRIPP stems from its long-term ambition to deepen its strategic and political ties with the Turkic states in Central Asia and consolidate its role as a pivotal Eurasian transit power. This route would reinforce Ankara's broader "Middle Corridor" strategy – a Turkish initiative to position Türkiye as a central transit hub between Central Asia and Europe – aiming to strengthen institutions such as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). By enabling a direct and "uninterrupted" transport route to the Turkic countries, TRIPP also carries a symbolic political weight for Türkiye to deepen its cultural and economic ties beyond the Caspian Sea.

---

27 "President Trump welcomes Turkish president to White House," *C-SPAN.org*. September 5, 2025, https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/president-trump-welcomes-turkish-president-to-white-house/666244.

28 "Türkiye starts building rail link to Nakhchivan, key to Zangezur Corridor," *Daily Sabah*, August 22, 2025, https://www.dailysabah.com/business/transportation/turkiye-starts-building-rail-link-to-nakhchivan-key-to-zangezur-corridor.

Türkiye also perceives the realization of this route as a tool to recalibrate the regional balance of power vis-à-vis Russia, Iran, and even China. Many Turkish and Azerbaijani experts believe that a functioning route under the U.S. would diminish Iran's leverage over the east-west routes and limit Russia's traditional security role in the South Caucasus.[29] Moreover, Türkiye would position itself as an alternative gateway to/from Central Asia from/to Europe at a moment when China is seeking to diversify its routes related to BRI and when Central Asian states are pursuing greater autonomy from Russia. The U.S. involvement in the South Caucasus also means Washington will rely more on its NATO ally to ensure the long-term viability of the route through Armenia.[30] Hence, for Ankara, TRIPP is not merely an infrastructural project, but a strategic instrument to reshape Eurasian connectivity and position Türkiye as an important geopolitical actor in the region.

Indian and Chinese Perspectives

The two major international trade routes that India is a part of are the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The IMEC goes from Mumbai through the Arabian Sea to Sharjah through Saudi Arabia and Jordan to the port of Haifa in Israel and through the Mediterranean Sea to Athens. The INSTC goes from Mumbai through the Arabian Sea to Chabahar port through Iran and Azerbaijan to Russia. India is also part of trilateral negotiations on a route from India to Iran and through Armenia and Georgia to Black Sea ports. India's INSTC is also heavily dependent on Trans-Caspian connections, and it would be interested in bridging with the TRIPP, as its potential integration with the INSTC would affect alternate routes into Europe.[31]

---

29 Yusuf Kanlı, "TRIPP deal strengthens Türkiye's strategic influence the region," *Yetkin report*, August 11, 2025, https://yetkinreport.com/en/2025/08/11/tripp-deal-strengthens-turkiyes-strategic-influence-the-region/.

30 Emil Avdaliani, "With the TRIPP Turkey is Set to Benefit Most in the South Caucasus," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, October 20, 2025, https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/738-with-the-tripp-turkey-is-set-to-benefit-most-in-the-south-caucasus.html.

31 M. Jamshed, "TRIPP: Geopolitics of an economic corridor - a new paradigm of 'deal diplomacy,'" *ETInfra.com*, September 5, 2025, https://infra.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/logistics/new-economic-corridor-the-tripp-and-its-role-in-global-deal-diplomacy/123710974.

Indian trade routes rely heavily on Iran, a reason why India is investing in Chabahar and recently received another U.S. waiver to invest in the Iranian port.[32] The INSTC, specifically, relies on both Iran and Azerbaijan. After the completion of the Rasht-Astara railway on the Iran-Azerbaijan border, the western INSTC route will intersect the Middle Corridor in Azerbaijan, enabling India to access Black Sea more quickly via Baku-Tbilisi-Batumi or Baku-Tbilisi-Kars.[33] India could ship goods to Iran, then through Azerbaijan (via Caspian) into the Middle Corridor and then Europe, if customs, transit agreements are in place. For India, it offers an alternative western connection to Europe/Black Sea/Caspian markets that complements or intersects with the INSTC. If TRIPP becomes operational and connected to the Middle Corridor and to the INSTC, India will benefit a lot. However, if the transport channels between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain blocked, India's dependence on Azerbaijan will increase. As such, it is in India's interest to link the TRIPP to the INSTC.

However, there are many potential risks for India. The bridging of INSTC to the Middle Corridor via TRIPP may also lead to an increase in the leverage of the Turkish-Azerbaijani axis over India, leaving it at the mercy of Pakistan's allies.

China's interest in TRIPP must be understood in the wider context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For Beijing, the South Caucasus has long been a crucial transit hub for connecting Europe and China while reducing reliance on Russian-controlled corridors. Azerbaijan has emerged as China's key partner in this effort, joining the BRI through projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway and the Alat Free Economic Zone, alongside Chinese

---

32 Kallol Bhattacherjee, "India gets six-month waiver on U.S. sanctions against Chabahar," *The Hindu*. October 30, 2025, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-six-month-waiver-us-sanctions-on-chabahar-port/article70220724.ece.

33 Ayjaz Wani, "Trump's Geopolitical Gambit in the South Caucasus," *Observer Research Foundation*, August 19, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/trump-s-geopolitical-gambit-in-the-south-caucasus.

investment in pipelines, industrial parks, and agriculture.[34] In 2024, Azerbaijan and China upgraded their cooperation around the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), or Middle Corridor, which is increasingly central to Eurasian trade. Georgia has also become significant for Beijing thanks to its Free Trade Zone and the proposed project of Anaklia deep-sea port, which would further strengthen communication between China and Europe. While Armenia is less integrated due to its geographic isolation, China remains its second-largest trading partner and sees potential for future participation in transport projects.[35]

TRIPP connects directly into this web of projects, and experts have emphasized its potential impact on China's trade strategy. The Middle Corridor, which already represents the fastest-growing overland trade route between China and Europe, is expected to triple freight volumes by 2030, reducing transportation costs and dependence on maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca.[36] In theory, the idea of TRIPP could be attractive to Chinese companies, offering a more efficient transit route and facilitating greater regional interdependence.[37] Yet analysts also warn that TRIPP complicates Beijing's ambitions, because the route which would be managed by a third side, preferably the US, may choose to securitize or politicize its management, thereby limiting China's influence.[38] This dynamic undermines China's long-term goal of maintaining control over Eurasian transport networks, since TRIPP reduces reliance on Chinese-built infrastructure. Beijing faces a strategic dilemma: if TRIPP remains neutral and commercially open, it promises cost savings and new opportunities, but if it becomes a geopolitical tool,

---

34 Yeghia Tashjian, "The International North-South Transport Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Caucasus," *Routledge Handbook of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Eurasia*, (ed. Mher D. Sahakyan and Kevin Lo) 2025.

35 Ibid.

36 Eka Khorbaladze, Rewiring Eurasia: How the Trump Route Challenges China's Influence, *Think China*, August 25, 2025, https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/rewiring-eurasia-how-trump-route-challenges-chinas-influence.

37 Tural Heybatov, "Will the U.S. Block China from Using the Trump Route?" *News.az,* 2025, https://news.az/news/-will-the-us-block-china-from-using-the-trump-route.

38 Eka Khorbaladze, Rewiring Eurasia: How the Trump Route Challenges China's Influence, *Think China*, August 25, 2025, https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/rewiring-eurasia-how-trump-route-challenges-chinas-influence.

China may be forced to double down on alternative partnerships with Russia and Iran.[39]

So far, China's response has been measured. Rather than openly opposing TRIPP, Beijing has expressed public support for regional peace and territorial integrity.[40] At the same time, it has quietly moved to hedge against U.S. dominance by consolidating its presence in the region through investments. Analysts argue that this creates a paradox: while TRIPP integrates U.S. influence into the South Caucasus, the corridor cannot succeed without Chinese participation, since its smooth operation depends on the flow of Chinese cargo.[41] If TRIPP fails, China could provide an alternative project to the region by absorbing Armenia and Azerbaijan into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and integrating the regional infrastructural projects into the BRI. Such a step would also serve the interests of Russia and Iran.

To sum up, the implications for Beijing's broader regional role remain contested. For some, TRIPP represents a constraint on China's freedom of movement, as it grants Washington greater control over East–West trade routes. For others, TRIPP may still offer opportunities if Beijing actively incorporates it into the BRI framework, using the corridor to deepen economic ties even within a U.S.-led project. Taken together, the arguments highlight the delicate balance China must strike on navigating U.S. strategic control while seeking to benefit from expanded connectivity, a tension that underscores how infrastructure in the South Caucasus is shaped as much by great-power competition as by trade and economic integration.

Options for Armenia: How Can Yerevan Navigate?

If TRIPP is implemented without reopening other regional connections – like Armenia's routes to Iran through Nakhijevan, to Russia via Azerbaijan,

---

39 Hai Nan, "America's New South Caucasus Corridor: Stakes for China, Russia, and Beyond," *Diplomat*, August 12, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/08/americas-new-south-caucasus-corridor-stakes-for-china-russia-and-beyond/.

40 Mansur Mirovalev, "Does Trump-brokered Deal Squeeze Russia, Iran Out of the South Caucasus?" *Aljazeera*, August 13, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/13/how-does-trumps-tripp-deal-squeezes-russia-iran-out-of-south-caucasus.

41 Tural Heybatov, "Will the U.S. Block China from Using the Trump Route?" News.az, 2025, https://news.az/news/-will-the-us-block-china-from-using-the-trump-route.

and especially the Armenia-Türkiye border – it will fall short of its goals. Armenia would remain isolated, its foreign policy options limited, and economic interdependence needed for stability would not develop. Most importantly, Armenians would continue to feel threatened by Azerbaijan and Türkiye. This scenario is more likely to result in ongoing instability rather than lasting peace and prosperity.

Economically, the most efficient and cost-effective way to restore regional connectivity is to launch the Yerevan-Yeraskh-Nakhijevan-Iran railway. This would quickly reestablish links between Armenia and Azerbaijan, supporting regional security and stability. The necessary rail infrastructure already exists in both Armenia and Nakhijevan.

Another practical step is to focus diplomatic efforts on reopening the Baku-Kars railway via Meghri, Nakhijevan, Yerevan, and Gyumri. Azerbaijan plans to complete the section in mainland Azerbaijan, which will reach the Armenian border by summer 2026. Armenia set up a working group to restore the relevant railway sections back in January 2022.[42]

For true and lasting peace in the South Caucasus, Armenia and other stakeholders should work together to restore all regional connections simultaneously. When the first train from Azerbaijan enters Syunik to reach Nakhijevan, trains from Yerevan should simultaneously reach Nakhijevan and Iran, and from Gyumri to Kars. Anything less could undermine international efforts for peace and risk future conflict.

Reflections

TRIPP is emerging as one of the key pillars of the new regional order in Eurasia, an order that is defined less by static alliances and more by interconnectivity and cooperation. Armenia, the only landlocked country in the region that has suffered from decades of imposed blockade by Türkiye and Azerbaijan over the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh, could be a beneficiary. However, Azerbaijan's territorial claims over Syunik, the weaponization of

42 "Working group on the restoration of the Yeraskh and Meghri sections of the railway set up by PM's decision," *Armenpress*, January 14, 2022, https://armenpress.am/en/article/1073006.

the corridor and other trade routes by Ankara and Baku, and turning the region into a battleground for great powers would further fragment the region and make Yerevan vulnerable.

Armenia's vision for TRIPP is rooted in the idea of repositioning the country as a secure, sovereign, and transit hub as reflected in the "Crossroad for Peace" initiative.[43] Yerevan sees the U.S. project not simply as a transport initiative, but as a framework that reinforces Armenia's territorial integrity. By prioritizing the route to run via Armenian-controlled territory – rather than an externally imposed extra-territorial corridor – Armenia aims to ensure that connectivity enhances its national security and does not undermine it. TRIPP would also help Armenia to diversify its economy by opening up to new markets and connecting to other transit corridors and be connected to the supply chains of the Persian Gulf, Asian markets, Europe, and the Middle East.

Geopolitically, the project intersects with the strategic interests of multiple regional and extra-regional actors – Russia, Iran, Türkiye, India, and China, each with differing visions for trade corridors. Competing alignments, unresolved regional conflicts, and overlapping spheres of influence make navigating challenging. Therefore, the signing of the unconditional peace treaty between Yerevan and Baku is an important milestone in creating a stable environment for needed long-term infrastructure investment and the realization of transport projects and trade interconnectivity in the region.

Bibliography

Armenpress (2022) *Working group on the restoration of the Yeraskh and Meghri sections of the railway set up by PM's decision*, 14 January, https://armenpress.am/en/article/1073006.

Avdaliani, E. (2025) *With the TRIPP Turkey is set to benefit most in the South Caucasus*. Central Asia–Caucasus Institute, 20 October, https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/ item/738-with-the-tripp-turkey-is-set-to-benefit-most-in-the-south-caucasus.html.

[43] Prime Ministry, Armenia, https://www.primeminister.am/u_files/file/documents/The%20Crossroad%20of%20Peace-Brochure.pdf.

Azernews.Az (2025) *Russia signals support for Armenia's stance on "TRIPP" project*, 15 August, https://www.azernews.az/region/246075.html.

Balian, H. (2025) 'Peace will fail without clarity on TRIPP, release of hostages, and Karabakh rights', *CivilNet*, 18 August, https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/969386/opinion-peace-will-fail-without-clarity-on-tripp-release-of-hostages-and-karabakh-rights/.

Bhattacherjee, K. (2025) *India gets six-month waiver on U.S. sanctions against Chabahar*. The Hindu, 30 October, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-six-month-waiver-us-sanctions-on-chabahar-port/article70220724.ece.

C-SPAN (2025) *President Trump welcomes Turkish president to White House*, 5 September, https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/president-trump-welcomes-turkish-president-to-white-house/666244.

Daily Sabah (2025) *Türkiye starts building rail link to Nakhchivan, key to Zangezur Corridor*, 22 August, https://www.dailysabah.com/business/transportation/turkiye-starts-building-rail-link-to-nakhchivan-key-to-zangezur-corridor.

Eurasia Today (2025) *Американская дипломатия в Пакистане: коридор TRIPP как геополитический вызов Евразии*, 17 September, https://eurasiatoday.ru/amerikanskaya-diplomatiya-v-pakistane-koridor-tripp-kak-geopoliticheskij-vyzov-evrazii/.

Geopolitics and Security Studies Center (GSSC) (2025) *Russia's strategy amid Trump's mediation breakthrough in the South Caucasus*, 18 August, https://www.gssc.lt/en/publication/russias-strategy-amid-trumps-mediation-breakthrough-in-the-south-caucasus/.

Heybatov, T. (2025) *Will the U.S. block China from using the Trump Route?* News.az, https://news.az/news/-will-the-us-block-china-from-using-the-trump-route.

Jamshed, M. (2025) *TRIPP: Geopolitics of an economic corridor – a new paradigm of "deal diplomacy"*. ETInfra, 5 September, https://infra.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/logistics/new-economic-corridor-the-tripp-and-its-role-in-global-deal-diplomacy/123710974.

Kanlı, Y. (2025) *TRIPP deal strengthens Türkiye's strategic influence in the region*. Yetkin Report, 11 August, https://yetkinreport.com/en/2025/08/11/tripp-deal-strengthens-turkiyes-strategic-influence-the-region.

Khorbaladze, E. (2025) 'Rewiring Eurasia: How the Trump Route Challenges China's Influence', *Think China*, 25 August. https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/rewiring-eurasia-how-trump-route-challenges-chinas-influence.

Kozok, F. and Hacaoglu, S. (2025) 'Trump Route in Caucasus Can Boost Trade From China If US Allows', *Bloomberg*, 22 August, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-08-22/trump-route-in-caucasus-can-boost-trade-from-china-if-us-allows?embedded-check-out=true.

Meduza (2025) 'The deal that wasn't', *Meduza*, 11 August, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/08/11/the-deal-that-wasn-t.

Mirovalev, M. (2025) 'Does a Trump-brokered deal squeeze Russia, Iran out of the South Caucasus?', *Al Jazeera*, 13 August, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/13/how-does-trumps-tripp-deal-squeezes-russia-iran-out-of-south-caucasus.

Nan, H. (2025) *America's new South Caucasus corridor: Stakes for China, Russia, and beyond.* The Diplomat, 12 August, https://thediplomat.com/2025/08/americas-new-south-caucasus-corridor-stakes-for-china-russia-and-beyond.

New Eurasian Strategies Centre (2025) *Challenges to Russia's influence in the South Caucasus*, 28 August, https://nestcentre.org/challenges-to-russias-influence-in-the-south-caucasus/?print=print.

Observer Research Foundation (2025) 'Trump's geopolitical gambit in the South Caucasus', 31 October, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/trump-s-geopolitical-gambit-in-the-south-caucasus.

Oztarsu, M.F. (2025) 'Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace: What is Iran Really Afraid of?', *Central Asia–Caucasus Institute*. 27 August, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13889-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-what-is-iran-really-afraid-of?.html.

Prime Ministry of Armenia (n.d.) *The Crossroad of Peace*, https://www.primeminister.am/u_files/file/documents/The%20Crossroad%20of%20Peace-Brochure.pdf.

Shokri, U. (2024) *Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor: A new era for Iran-Europe trade or just another risk?* Middle East Institute, 25 November, https://www.mei.edu/publications/persian-gulf-black-sea-corridor-new-era-iran-europe-trade-or-just-another-risk.

Tashjian, Y. (2025) 'U.S. policy in the South Caucasus: Keep Turkey in, Russia down and Iran out', *The Armenian Weekly*, 11 August, https://armenianweekly.com/2025/08/11/u-s-policy-in-the-south-caucasus-keep-turkey-in-russia-down-and-iran-out/.

Tashjian, Y. (2025) *The International North-South Transport Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Caucasus*. In: Sahakyan, M.D. and Lo, K. (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Eurasia*. Routledge.

TASS (2024) *EU mission in Armenia morphing into NATO mission – Lavrov*, 28 March, https://tass.com/politics/1767467.

TASS (2025) *Russia promises to study details of "Trump Route" project in South Caucasus*, 13 August, https://tass.com/politics/2001733.

The Washington Summit: Implications for Armenia and the region (2025) Applied Policy Research Armenia, 14 August, https://apri.institute/the-washington-summit-implications-for-armenia-and-the-region/.

Wani, A. (2025) *Trump's geopolitical gambit in the South Caucasus*. Observer Research Foundation, 19 August, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/trump-s-geopolitical-gambit-in-the-south-caucasus.

PART II:
AI-Mediated Ontological Security – National Identities and Sustainable Peace in the South-Caucasus

AI, Identity Narratives, and Implications for Ontological Security

Anna Nadibaidze

Introduction

Ontological security refers to the security of the self, or "the subjective sense of who one is".[1] The pursuit of ontological security involves routines that actors engage in to deal with the uncertainty of the world and maintain a self-attributed identity. These routines contribute to sustaining identity by stabilizing social relations, especially relations with "others".[2]

As highlighted by scholarship in International Relations, routines contributing to ontological security may negatively impact physical security and as national interests, as states often stabilize their identities via aggressive policies, military intervention, or armed conflict.[3] Therefore, an ontologically secure South Caucasus does not necessarily mean a peaceful South Caucasus.

Narratives are crucial to the routines that sustain states' ontological security. Narratives are cognitive tools through which state actors simplify complex realities into stories with plots, characters, and settings. With the help of narratives, actors make sense of reality and their identities within those realities. These stories are critical to states' efforts in building a self-identity, delimiting

---

1 Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 344, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346.

2 Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics," 347.

3 Filip Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity: Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Secession* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, "Russia's Relations with the West: Ontological Security through Conflict," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 359–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201314; Levon Hovsepyan and Artyom A. Tonoyan, "Sustaining Conflict: Identity, Ontological (in)Security, and Azerbaijan's Policy toward Armenia after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 36, no. 5 (2025): 963–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2025.2480690; Jonas Gejl Pedersen, *The Russian Quest for Ontological Security: An Inquiry into the Reconstruction and Translation of the "Russian Self" in Relation to the Military Intervention in the Kosovo and Ukraine Crises* (Forlaget Politica, 2019).

this identity from others, and maintaining "routinized relationships" with other actors.[4]

How do developments in the sphere of artificial intelligence (AI)[5] affect identity narratives and ontological security? This paper highlights two ways of conceptualizing the relationship between AI technologies and states' identity narratives: first, AI-related policies as part of states' quest for ontological security; and second, AI-enabled disinformation impacting identity narratives and undermining ontological security.

AI-Related Policies and Ontological Security

AI-related policies, such as national AI strategies or official discourses about AI, play a role in reinforcing identity narratives and reproducing states' self-perceptions of their roles on the global arena.

Approaches towards AI development in governmental policies, strategies, and official discourses are deeply embedded in and interlinked with states' pursuit of a certain identity in the international system. These policies do not only relate to the technical/technological aspects of AI: they reflect social and political contexts, including historically rooted narratives about national identity and positioning in the international system, which contribute to ontological security-seeking.[6]

For instance, the European Union (EU)'s AI Act has been found to reproduce "an exceptionalist notion of Europe as a policy actor and coherent political community",[7] the United States (US)' documents support narratives

---

4 Jelena Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2016): 614, https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12089.

5 This relates especially to technological developments in machine learning and generative AI technologies that have become more prominent since the mid-late 2010s.

6 Anna Nadibaidze, "Technology in the Quest for Status: The Russian Leadership's Artificial Intelligence Narrative," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 27, no. 2 (2024): 117–42, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-023-00322-1; Stefka Schmid et al., "Trust in Artificial Intelligence: Producing Ontological Security through Governmental Visions," *Cooperation and Conflict* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367241288073.

7 Bao-Chau Pham and Sarah R. Davies, "What Problems Is the AI Act Solving? Technological Solutionism, Fundamental Rights, and Trustworthiness in European AI Policy,"

about its leadership in innovation, especially in the global technological competition with China,[8] while Russia's official discourses on AI are closely linked to its pursuit of self-attributed great power status.[9]

Developing AI policies and governance frameworks is an opportunity for the states in the South Caucasus to pursue stable identities by demonstrating certain alignment or international positioning, for example, away from Russia and towards other directions such as the EU or the US.

When it comes to uses of AI in defence, for example, Armenia and Georgia have already demonstrated their divergence from Russia by endorsing the 2023 US Political Declaration on Responsible Military uses of AI and Autonomy[10] and the Chair's Summary of the 2024 Vienna Conference on Autonomous Weapons Systems.[11] While these are not legally binding documents, their endorsement and associated practices may contribute to narrative-building efforts as part of ontological security-seeking.

Crafting AI policies is therefore not just a matter of promoting technological innovation or regulating the risks associated with AI technologies. This process is deeply linked with national identity narratives contributing to the security of the self. However, this is an area that remains underdeveloped in the South Caucasus region, as so far only Azerbaijan has adopted a comprehensive national AI strategy for the next years.[12]

Critical Policy Studies 19, no. 2 (2025): 319, https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2024.2373786.

8 Schmid et al., "Trust in Artificial Intelligence"; Ingvild Bode et al., "Narrating and Practising the US–China 'Tech War,'" *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf037.

9 Nadibaidze, "Technology in the Quest for Status".

10 US Department of State, "Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy," February 16, 2023, https://www.state.gov/political-declaration-on-responsible-military-use-of-artificial-intelligence-and-autonomy/.

11 Federal Ministry European and International Affairs Republic of Austria, "Humanity at the Crossroads: Autonomous Weapons Systems and the Challenge of Regulation," April 30, 2024, https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Abruestung/AWS_2024/Chair_s_Summary.pdf.

12 "The Artificial Intelligence Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2025–2028," Digwatch, March 2025, https://dig.watch/resource/the-artificial-intelligence-strategy-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-for-2025-2028.

AI-Enabled Disinformation Destabilizing Identity Narratives

The second intersection between AI and ontological security relates to the potential of AI technologies, especially generative AI, to enable disinformation that risks destabilizing identity narratives and contributing to ontological insecurity. The use of AI to spread disinformation and false narratives may exacerbate increasing uncertainties and disruption, and the population's distrust in governmental institutions.[13]

Disruption and distrust are key objectives of Russia's disinformation and hybrid warfare campaigns, whether in Ukraine, Moldova, EU member states, or the South Caucasus. Challenging identity narratives and spreading false narratives have potential to undermine ontological security, potentially even leading to a "major ontological crisis".[14]

AI-enabled diffusion of Kremlin-backed narratives across social media networks are well-documented.[15] More recently, there have been instances of large-language model (LLM) "grooming": the Pravda network's efforts aimed at reproducing information leaning towards official Russian narratives, especially when it comes to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in outputs of LLMs by embedding disinformation material in data that are used to train the models.[16] As LLMs are now widely used, and often trusted, by

---

13 Alexander Romanishyn et al., "AI-Driven Disinformation: Policy Recommendations for Democratic Resilience," *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence* 8 (2025): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.3389/frai.2025.1569115.

14 Eteri Tsintsadze-Maass, "Ontological Crisis and the Compartmentalization of Insecurities," *Global Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (2024): 3, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae003.

15 Claudia Wallner et al., *Russia, AI and the Future of Disinformation Warfare* (Royal United Services Institute, 2025), https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/emerging-insights/russia-ai-and-future-disinformation-warfare; David Gilbert, "A Pro-Russia Disinformation Campaign Is Using Free AI Tools to Fuel a 'Content Explosion,'" WIRED, July 1, 2025, https://www.wired.com/story/pro-russia-disinformation-campaign-free-ai-tools/.

16 Annie Newport and Nina Jankowicz, "Russian Networks Flood the Internet with Propaganda, Aiming to Corrupt AI Chatbots," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, March 26, 2025, https://thebulletin.org/2025/03/russian-networks-flood-the-internet-with-propaganda-aiming-to-corrupt-ai-chatbots/; Antonio Giustozzi, "Can AI Help Russia Decisively Improve Its Information War Against the West?," RUSI Commentary, June 27, 2025, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/can-ai-help-russia-decisively-improve-its-information-war-against-west; Huw Dylan and Elena

members of the public, this strengthens the risk of diffusing disinformation via AI tools.

AI-driven disinformation can undermine not only identity narratives and ontological security, but importantly, also trust in institutions and information more broadly, which is a key part of peacebuilding and resilience efforts. It is therefore a risk to sustainable peace in the South Caucasus, making it crucial for the region's governments to enhance education and strengthen digital skills and literacy surrounding AI-produced content.

Leveraging AI for Sustainable Peace in the South Caucasus

Sustainable peace is rooted in structural, institutional, political, economic, and social dynamics where AI technologies could play a beneficial role. AI systems may be useful for processing large volumes of data, recognizing patterns within this data, and supporting monitoring or early warning mechanisms related to ceasefire agreements, for example.[17]

However, it is important for actors in the South Caucasus (as elsewhere in the world) to not treat AI as a technological 'fix' or 'silver bullet' to complex issues such as the prevention, the prediction, or the conduct of armed conflict. The dynamics of politics in the region are related to deeply rooted identities and issues that are not always correctly represented in quantitative analysis.

In addition to risks associated with AI systems, such as biases in training data and brittleness, it is important to remain aware of the limitations of quantifying complex phenomena such as peace and conflict. As numerical data does not always paint the full picture, contextualized human knowledge and expertise about the region are always required in peace-building efforts.

Grossfeld, "Revisionist Future: Russia's Assault on Large Language Models, the Distortion of Collective Memory, and the Politics of Eternity," *Dialogues on Digital Society* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1177/29768640251377941.

17 Michele Giovanardi, "AI for Peace: Mitigating the Risks and Enhancing Opportunities," *Data & Policy* 6 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1017/dap.2024.37; Branka Panic and Paige Arthur, *AI for Peace*, AI for Everything Series (CRC Press, 2024).

Ontological Security and the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Post-2020 Identity Crises and Paths to Peace

Gulkhanim Mammadova

Introduction

The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict has long been understood as an ethno-territorial one. However, through the lens of ontological security, it was also a matter of identity continuity as well as existential reassurance. In international relations and security studies, ontological security refers to the more-than-material desire of actors (states, communities) to sustain a stable identity, a coherent narrative of self, and a sense of continuity amid uncertainty (Mitzen, 2006). Ontological insecurity arises when actors feel their identity or collective narratives are threatened (e.g., by trauma, contestation, or disruptive change) (Giddens, 1991). Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have historically relied on a *mutually mirrored ontological framework* in which enmity itself provided predictability and a coherent sense of self. For decades, the "other" was central to national self-understandings, which made peace appear less stabilizing than continued rivalry. In such conflicts, ontological insecurity is deeply embedded: each side contests not just territory but histories, memory, belonging, and recognition (Kim & Morrow, 2024). Narratives (who "belongs", who "is rightful", whose version of history counts) become existential battlegrounds.

The 2020 war fundamentally disrupted this equilibrium, which triggered divergent ontological frameworks. For Azerbaijan, military victory produced *ontological affirmation*: a narrative of restoration and pride. For Armenia, defeat generated an *ontological shock* that dismantled deeply rooted identity scripts tied to the conflict. This asymmetry is destabilizing. Whereas prior decades maintained a fragile, yet predictable structure of antagonism, the post-war period is more volatile: Azerbaijan's triumphalism collides with Armenia's search for identity amid loss, heightening the risk of renewed hostility. Without addressing these crises of self, traditional peacebuilding mechanisms are likely to falter, as identity anxieties obstruct compromise and deepen mistrust.

The paper examines how ontological insecurity functions as an obstacle to reconciliation in the South Caucasus and highlights potential pathways for mitigation. These include reshaping educational and media narratives, increasing people-to-people engagement, and creating spaces for acknowledgment and healing of past grievances. One recommendation would be to use artificial intelligence in knowledge production by deploying AI to monitor hate speech, map narrative biases, and support the development of fact-based historical accounts. Together, these measures aim to provide new sources of ontological stability that are not dependent on enmity.

By situating the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict within the broader scholarship on ontological security, this study contributes to debates in peace and security studies on how identity anxieties perpetuate intractable conflicts. The resolution requires not only political agreements but also the transformation of identity routines. Addressing ontological (in)security directly is essential if the region is to move beyond a precarious post-war order toward sustainable peace.

Pre-2020 and Identity Formation

In the South Caucasus, the Karabakh conflict became the crucible of post-Soviet national identities. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan possessed a comprehensive history of independent statehood. Instead, both underwent new chapters of antagonism in the 1990s, shaped largely in opposition to each other. For Armenia, the defence of Karabakh symbolized survival against "Turkic and Islamic colonizers," tying statehood to narratives of victimhood and resistance (Ahmadzada & Gamaghelyan, 2025). For Azerbaijan, the loss of Karabakh was experienced as national humiliation and an injustice magnified by perceptions of external powers siding with Armenians. These interpretations became institutionalized through textbooks, media, and other practices and created a feedback loop of enmity that ensured each society's self-definition was anchored in opposition.

Although the conflict was "frozen" militarily for decades, ontologically, both sides found a perverse stability. Armenian nationalism centered around the defence of Karabakh as an existential duty, while Azerbaijani nationalism centered around the grievance of "lost lands" and created a mirror script:

national humiliation, occupation, and the promise of eventual restoration. In both cases, confrontation itself became the relationship that reduced uncertainty about identity. The Other, though threatening, made the Self legible.

Mitzen argues that states may cling to even harmful or costly routines because they provide ontological stability (Mitzen, 2006). This helps explain why, during the 1990s and 2000s, neither side embraced compromise despite devastating economic and human costs. Both Yerevan and Baku feared that altering the familiar pattern by conceding territory or opening new diplomatic frameworks would destabilize the national Self. In Yerevan, abandoning Karabakh would mean unraveling the very narrative of survival and heroism that sustained post-Soviet Armenian statehood. In Baku, accepting the loss of Karabakh would mean permanent humiliation, denying the Azerbaijani Self of dignity and liberation. Thus, the material logic of the security dilemma was strengthened by an ontological one and meant that the status quo was costly but relatively safe.

In the Armenian and Azerbaijani case, Bahar Rumelili's perspective on how identities are constructed through boundaries and encounters with Others (Rumelili, 2015) shows that these boundaries were drawn in absolute, exclusionary terms. Armenians as heroic victims, Azerbaijanis as aggressors; or Azerbaijanis as righteous victims, Armenians as occupiers backed by foreign powers. Rumelili emphasizes that such boundary-making offers stabilization or ontological lock-in, but it also forecloses the liminal space where identities might be reimagined (Rumelili, 2015). In Rumelili's interpretation, "liminal space" refers to an *in-between zone*, a conceptual and experiential space where fixed identities, roles, and boundaries are suspended, allowing for transformation and redefinition (Rumelili, 2015). Peace talks or people-to-people projects that attempted to soften these boundaries often generated anxiety: they opened liminal possibilities of coexistence, but elites and publics alike re-secured themselves by reasserting hardened distinctions.

Seen through this lens, the "frozen conflict" was less of a failure to resolve material disputes than a successful routine of identity reproduction. Armenian and Azerbaijani societies found continuity by positioning themselves against each other. In Mitzen's terms, enmity became a dependency: the relationship endured because it provided ontological security even as it blocked material progress (Mitzen, 2006). In Rumelili's terms, encounters with the

Other were consistently managed through re-securitization, not through liminality as transformation (Rumelili, 2015).

The implication is that before 2020, peace itself was ontologically destabilizing. To many Armenians, relinquishing the Karabakh struggle would dissolve the identity of a people defined by survival and resistance. To many Azerbaijanis, accepting the loss of Karabakh would mean living permanently as a humiliated nation. In both cases, the Other was indispensable for sustaining the Self. Theories of ontological security thus reveal why the conflict persisted for decades despite periodic negotiations: peace threatened identity more than war did.

Post-2020 Identity Crises

The 2020 Second Karabakh War disrupted the routines that had long anchored identity in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. From the perspective of ontological security, the war's outcome produced asymmetrical shocks: ontological affirmation for Azerbaijan and ontological dislocation for Armenia.

Azerbaijan: Victory as Ontological Affirmation

For Azerbaijan, the military triumph fulfilled the long-standing narrative of victimhood and restoration. Through Mitzen's lens, this victory supplied a powerful new routine that stabilized the national Self (Mitzen, 2006). For decades, Azerbaijani identity was anchored in grievance, humiliation, injustice, and the promise of liberation. The war's outcome transformed grievance into vindication: "lost lands" were restored, and national dignity reaffirmed. This ontological "closure" allowed leaders to recast the Self from a wounded victim to a triumphant restorer of justice.

Yet Mitzen reminds us that states often become dependent on familiar routines of enmity. Azerbaijan's triumphalism did not dissolve the conflict narrative but extended it: rather than demobilizing the Other, victory entrenched Armenia as a permanent foil (Mitzen, 2006). In Mitzen's terms, even as the material status quo changed, the ontological security dilemma persisted: predictability still required an enemy.

Rumelili's notion of liminality sharpens this paradox. Victory opened a liminal space in which Azerbaijan could have redefined itself not only against Armenia but also as a confident regional actor no longer trapped by grievance (Rumelili, 2015). Instead, political elites largely chose to manage liminality by re-securitizing boundaries: Armenian Otherness was maintained as a symbolic marker of Azerbaijani unity. Rather than reimagining coexistence, liminality was resolved by doubling down on exclusion. Thus, the war stabilized the Azerbaijani Self but locked it into a new form of dependency on triumphalism.

Armenia: Defeat as Ontological Dislocation

For Armenia, the war was a huge ontological shock. The defense of Karabakh had been central to national identity for three decades, a narrative of heroic survival against overwhelming odds. Its loss dismantled this script. From Mitzen's perspective, defeat shattered the routines that anchored the Armenian Self (Mitzen, 2006). Suddenly, the longstanding performance of resistance no longer applied. Leaders faced the impossible task of sustaining ontological continuity in the absence of the central narrative that had long underpinned legitimacy.

Prime Minister Pashinyan's post-war discourse illustrates this crisis. In 2019, he declared "Artsakh is Armenia, period" (Armenpress, Aug. 5, 2019). After defeat, he attempted to pivot toward a new routine: reframing identity around "Real Armenia" within internationally recognized borders. "Real Armenia", in Pashinyan's usage, seeks to recenter the national imaginary on the existing Republic of Armenia, its internationally accepted territory and institutions, rather than on historical Armenia, which often implies irredentist claims, aspirations toward greater Armenia, or the incorporation of Karabakh as a component of the Armenian polity. However, this redefinition is heavily criticized by some, who argue that it may represent a symbolic capitulation to loss. By excluding claims, it could be seen as abandoning a dimension of Armenian victimhood and resistance narratives.

However, Mitzen's insight is that identity routines cannot be discarded overnight; their loss produces anxiety and instability. Many Armenians, disoriented by the collapse of familiar scripts, turned to revanchist voices promising restoration. In this sense, Armenia exemplifies the vulnerability Mitzen

describes: the removal of conflict routines leads not to peace, but to ontological insecurity (Mitzen, 2006).

Rumelili's perspective clarifies Armenia's predicament. The post-war moment thrust Armenia into liminality: no longer able to sustain its old heroic categories, yet unable to fully embrace new ones. The Self hovered between victimhood, defeat, and possible redefinition. This liminality carried both dangers and opportunities. On one hand, it created anxiety that fueled polarization and nationalist backlash. On the other hand, it opened imaginative space for re-narrating Armenian identity around survival, reform, and regional integration. The choice between re-securitizing the Other and embracing narrative innovation remains contested in Armenian politics.

Asymmetry and Instability

Together, these trajectories create a volatile asymmetry. Azerbaijan enjoys ontological confidence from victory but continues to anchor its Self in antagonism. Armenia experiences ontological fragility, searching for new routines amid loss. In Mitzen's terms, both remain attached to conflictual routines, one through triumph, the other through grievance. In Rumelili's terms, both have responded to liminality largely by reinforcing boundaries rather than reimagining coexistence (Mitzen, 2006).

The result is a post-2020 ontological security dilemma: the old equilibrium of mirrored enmity is broken, but neither side has yet constructed alternative routines that make peace feel stabilizing. Without deliberate identity work, Azerbaijan's triumphalism and Armenia's crisis risk colliding in renewed hostility.

Ontological Insecurity and the Peace Dilemma

The post-2020 moment in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict illustrates the paradox of ontological security: the very conditions that make peace materially feasible simultaneously generate identity anxieties that obstruct reconciliation. Peace, in this context, is not merely a political or military arrangement but an ontological challenge.

Mitzen's framework explains why states may resist compromise even when it promises material benefits. Conflict provides routines such as enemy images, commemorations, and diplomatic scripts that stabilize the Self (Mitzen, 2006). When these routines are threatened, uncertainty arises. In the South Caucasus, both Armenia and Azerbaijan derived identity continuity from mutual antagonism: the Armenian Self as heroic defender, the Azerbaijani Self as unjustly victimized but resilient. When war altered these scripts in 2020, each society faced ontological dislocation. Azerbaijan's triumph required a continued role for Armenia as defeated Other, while Armenia's loss made its old routines unworkable yet offered no settled replacement. Peace negotiations, rather than reassuring, risk exacerbating insecurity by stripping away the predictable roles each side knows how to perform.

Rumelili's emphasis on liminality sharpens this dilemma. Post-war transitions are liminal spaces: old categories collapse, but new ones have not yet been institutionalized. For Armenia, liminality takes the form of being neither victorious nor reconciled, suspended between victimhood and possible redefinition. For Azerbaijan, liminality arises from the shift from grievance to triumph, demanding new narratives to justify continued mobilization against an Other that has already been militarily subdued. Liminality creates the possibility of re-imagining coexistence, but also the risk of anxiety-induced re-securitization.

From an ontological security perspective, peace is threatening for two reasons. First, it removes the enemy relationship that has long stabilized identities. For decades, Armenians and Azerbaijanis knew who they were because they knew who they were not. Peace unsettles this boundary, forcing both sides to confront ambiguity. Second, peace demands narrative innovation. Leaders must persuade societies to accept new roles: Azerbaijan as a confident state without grievance, Armenia as a redefined state without Karabakh. However, as Mitzen underscores, narrative change is politically dangerous because audiences fear discontinuity (Mitzen, 2006). Leaders who attempt it, like Pashinyan, face resistance from domestic rivals who promise a return to the familiar conflict script.

The result is what might be termed as an ontological security dilemma of peace. Armenia and Azerbaijan cannot feel secure without stable routines, but the routines available to them are conflictual. Attempts to move toward

peace trigger anxiety because they disrupt entrenched narratives; attempts to preserve stability through familiar scripts perpetuate antagonism. This creates a self-reinforcing trap: each side experiences ontological insecurity at the very moment peace seems possible.

For Azerbaijan, the danger is triumphalism, where ontological stability depends on continually invoking Armenian Otherness. For Armenia, the risk is paralysis or revanchism, as ontological insecurity makes re-narration politically costly. Together, these dynamics stall negotiations, delegitimize peace proposals, and sustain the possibility of renewed conflict.

Paths to Peace: An Ontological Security Approach

If ontological insecurity explains why peace feels threatening in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, then a sustainable reconciliation must address identity anxieties directly rather than assuming that treaties or deterrence alone will suffice. From Mitzen's perspective, the task is to replace the conflict routines that have long stabilized Self-Other relations with new routines that anchor identity in non-antagonistic ways (Mitzen, 2006). From Rumelili's perspective, the challenge is to navigate liminality productively, transforming the unsettling ambiguity of post-war transitions into an opening for narrative innovation rather than a trigger for re-securitization (Rumelili, 2015). It means peacebuilding must aim to provide societies with fresh sources of ontological security that are not dependent on enmity.

This process of the rebuilding of ontological security could start with the rewriting of educational and cultural narratives, for instance, school textbooks, public memorials, and media, that both in Armenia and Azerbaijan reproduced enemy images as stabilizing scripts. To move beyond this, curricula should present pluralistic histories that acknowledge suffering on both sides and introduce students to the humanity of the Other. Rumelili has emphasized that peace anxieties can only be managed through the construction of alternative self-narratives at multiple levels; joint history projects, cross-border academic dialogues, and cultural exchanges can serve precisely this purpose. While nationalist elites will resist, external incentives and sustained pressure from civil society can reduce the political costs of narrative innovation and reward "bridge-builders" rather than grievance entrepreneurs.

Equally vital is reforming media and communication. Mitzen reminds us that identity routines are performed daily, and in Azerbaijan and Armenia, these performances occur most visibly in the press and on television (Mitzen, 2006). State propaganda that depicts the Other as existentially threatening may stabilize ontological identity in the short term but ensures perpetual conflict. Shifting these routines requires both structural change, such as guaranteeing space for independent broadcasters and enforcing prohibitions against hate speech, and grassroots interventions, like media literacy programs and collaborative journalism initiatives. By embedding new communication practices into daily life, societies can come to see coexistence itself as predictable and routine, thereby supplying ontological reassurance.

Ontological security also requires the normalization of peace through people-to-people contact. As Rumelili's work on liminality suggests, identity transformation often occurs through encounters with Others in spaces where boundaries are softened. Cross-border exchanges between students, artists, religious groups, and sports teams can create new social scripts in which the Other is experienced not as an enemy but as a partner in shared activities. These interactions do not eliminate difference, but they resymbolize it, turning it into a manageable dimension of identity rather than a source of existential threat. Over time, such contacts provide the micro-routines through which new identities take shape.

Acknowledgement and historical justice form another cornerstone. Mitzen notes that the routines of truth commissions, memorials, and shared commemorations are not peripheral but central to ending enduring conflicts because they offer new rituals of identity stabilization (Mitzen, 2006). For Armenia and Azerbaijan, this would mean confronting difficult histories of displacement and war crimes and institutionalizing recognition. Joint commemorations or scholarly investigations into past violence could gradually shift the mnemonic landscape from exclusive victimhood to shared acknowledgement. By creating predictable rituals of reflection, such practices can provide ontological continuity while softening antagonism.

One of the core drivers of ontological insecurity is the dominance of singular historical narratives, exclusion of "other" voices, and the persistence of silences and gaps in collective memory (Rumelili, 2015). AI tools (e.g., large

language models, generative text/image systems) can assist in generating alternative narratives. It can also help communities to "fill in" gaps, especially voices marginalized in mainstream discourse (minority groups and populations from the conflict-affected regions of both countries). For instance, an AI-assisted project can transcribe and compare interviews from both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides. It can detect similar and different patterns and consequently produce a narrative that is not purely zero-sum.

AI could help historians with synthesizing large quantities of textual, archival, and interview data. For instance, Optical Character Recognition (OCR) models trained on Armenian and Azerbaijani scripts can digitize handwritten or typewritten archival materials, Automatic speech recognition (ASR) can transcribe oral histories and testimonies in multiple dialects. Machine translation models can make these sources cross-accessible. Once vast quantities of text are digitized, AI-powered semantic analysis allows historians to identify patterns invisible to manual reading. AI could reveal how the term "homeland" (in Armenian, *hayrenik*, and in Azerbaijani, *vətən*) shifts in meaning across time or sources. Sentiment and discourse analysis could trace how trauma, victimhood, or heroism are narrated in Armenian and Azerbaijani public memory.

In the Armenia-Azerbaijan context, machine-learning algorithms could also monitor social media for hate speech. For example, if AI detects a sudden spike in rhetoric around "erasure", "genocide", or "denial", it could flag this for moderation. AI could also support fact-checking initiatives. Natural language processing could compare and revise competing historical accounts in textbooks, while interactive AI-driven platforms could present young people with multiple perspectives on sensitive events.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Armenia and Azerbaijan will only escape their ontological security dilemma when enmity ceases to be the main provider of continuity. The task, therefore, is to transform the structures of meaning and construct alternative routines for identities. By embedding new routines in education, media, commemoration, or technology, Armenians and Azerbaijanis can come to experience stability without requiring enmity. According to Rumelili, liminal

moments are dangerous but also transformative, while Mitzen shows that routines can be remade to sustain identity differently (Mitzen, 2006). The challenge is to use the instability of the post-war period to anchor new narratives before old antagonistic scripts reassert themselves. Here are a few policy recommendations on how to use the current liminal moment in the Armenia–Azerbaijani conflict:

1. Establishment of a joint curriculum reform commission to rewrite school textbooks. The aim is to include multi-perspective narratives acknowledging suffering on both sides and teaching critical empathy. Comparative education reform experiences (e.g., Germany–Poland) demonstrate that pluralist curricula reduce intergenerational transmission of enemy images (Rumelili, 2015).
2. Encouragement of joint commemorations (for example, September 27) and shared memorials. These rituals can become new routines of ontological security, stable ways to remember without hostility (Mitzen, 2006).
3. Facilitation of long-term dialogue programs for artists, journalists, academics, and youth to meet regularly. Such encounters create "liminal spaces" where new identities can emerge (Rumelili, 2015).
4. Introduction of media codes of ethics and funding collaborative Armenian–Azerbaijani reporting projects. Media literacy campaigns can counter propaganda and normalize coexistence as an everyday topic of discussion (Mitzen, 2006). Grants and training for journalists to co-produce cross-border stories, using AI-based fact-checking tools to reduce propagandistic distortion. These collaborations could normalize balanced narratives in mainstream media (Mitzen, 2006).
5. Creation of bilateral or multilateral research centers, which will focus on conflict transformation and where researchers could co-author studies (Steele, 2008). In addition, funding academic fellowships where Armenian and Azerbaijani scholars jointly use AI-driven analysis to study conflict narratives. These projects could model cooperative knowledge production (Rumelili, 2015).

6. Development of machine-learning models that monitor public discourse and social media in three languages (Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian) for spikes in inflammatory rhetoric could be useful. This system could provide early alerts to peacebuilding organizations for timely response.
7. Equip NGOs, educators, and youth organizations with AI-based storytelling and visualization tools to lead local peace education campaigns, which can counter extremist narratives.

References

Ahmadzada, S. & Gamaghelyan, F. (2025). *Rethinking Identity in the Armenian–Azerbaijani Rivalry*. Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press.

Kim, D. J., & Morrow, D. (2024). Ontological Security and Protracted Conflict in Frontier Societies: Towards a Trans-Local Turn in Peacebuilding. Peacebuilding. https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2024.2370687.

Mitzen, J. (2006). *Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma*. European Journal of International Relations.

Pashinyan, N. (2019, August 5). *Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan Delivers Speech in Stepanakert*. Armenpress. https://armenpress.am/eng/news/983592.html.

Rumelili, B. (Ed.). (2015). *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*. Routledge.

Steele, B. J. (2008). *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*. Routledge.

Conflict, Ontological (in)Security, Discursive Strategies and Post-War Peace Perspectives in the South Caucasus

Levon Hovsepyan

We often analyse conflicts and post-conflict situations predominantly through realist or so-called materialist dimensions, while many of their deeper underlying layers remain overlooked. Here, I seek to outline the problem from an alternative perspective – through the lens of ontological (in)security – focusing on the prospects for peace in the South Caucasus.[1]

The ontological security concept (OSC) has indeed become a crucial theoretical lens for in-depth analysis of international relations and conflicts, as it enables the explanation of certain dynamics and phenomena. In **International Relations (IR), ontological security** refers to the need of states (and other political actors) to maintain a coherent self, a **stable sense of identity, continuity, and predictability** in their existence and interactions with the world.[2] It is the sense of being, rather than the sense of survival.[3] That is, existential security concerns living or survival, whereas ontological security concerns the ability to preserve one's self and identity.

Questions related to ontological (in)security primarily concern the search for identity and the continuity of a stable "Self." When all that is socially familiar, routinized, and internally and inclusively adopted is disrupted – when the everyday order and routine is disturbed – there occurs a destabilisation and erosion of everything that provides individuals and societies with a sense of stability and trust, thereby paving the way for ontological insecurity.[4] In the

1 I would like to thank Tatevik Manukyan, Researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA, for her comments on the initial draft.

2 Jeniffer Mitzen, Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2006, pp. 341–370.

3 Maria Mälksoo, 'Memory must be defended': Beyond the politics of mnemonical security. Security Dialogue, vol. 46, no. 3, 2015, p. 224.

4 Christian Kaunert and Joana de Deus Pereira, EU Eastern Partnership, Ontological Security and EU-Ukraine/Russian Warfare. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2023, pp. 1135–46.

context of protracted conflicts, the continuity of conflict creates a stable routinisation that constantly reinforces the dominant narratives stemming from the logic of conflict itself. To preserve ontological security, this routinisation is continuously maintained and reproduced. When such long-standing and deeply entrenched routines are disrupted, a sense of anxiety often emerges, as the paradigm of dominant narratives is disrupted.[5] We do not situate the concept of ontological security exclusively within the framework of identity;[6] however, identity issues are considered particularly salient in conflictual and post-conflict contexts for explaining ontological anxieties and interpreting the continuation of anti-Armenian narratives in Azerbaijan after August 8, 2025. Discursive strategies and dominant narratives serve as key mechanisms and strategies for identity construction and, consequently, for the maintenance of ontological security.

Following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan has maintained an aggressive policy toward Armenia, marked by military actions, coercive measures, and the continued propagation of anti-Armenian sentiment through evolving propaganda narratives. Despite official declarations by Azerbaijani authorities claiming that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been "resolved", Baku's belligerent rhetoric and behaviour have only intensified in the post-war period. Following Azerbaijan's victory in the war and the ongoing Armenian-Azerbaijani peace negotiations, the examination of the persistent, continuous, and regenerating anti-Armenian narratives has led us to the problem of ontological security.[7]

In Azerbaijan, the figure of the "Other" as an archenemy represented by Armenia and Armenians, constructed over decades, lies at the foundation of the crystallisation of the ontological "Self" and identity. The Armenian "Other" has played a significant role in shaping Azerbaijani national identity

---

5 Jelena Subotić, Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change, *Foreign Policy Analysis,* vol. 12, no. 4, 2016, pp. 610–627.

6 Nina C. Krickel-Choi, State personhood and ontological security as a framework of existence: moving beyond identity, discovering sovereignty, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2022, pp. 3–21.

7 Levon Hovsepyan and Artyom Tonoyan, Sustaining Conflict: Identity, Ontological (In)Security, and Azerbaijan's Policy toward Armenia after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 36, no. 5, 2025, pp. 963–995.

over the last 30 years and continues to do so.[8] Azerbaijani identity is built on the thesis that Armenians are the main "Other", as if to say, "for the self to be secure, the relationship with the other needs to be securitized".[9] The construction of others becomes securitized – oriented towards protecting the identity of the self – and is therefore linked closely to its inner needs. As long as the "Main Other", embodied by Armenians, plays a central role in the Azerbaijani nation-building, Azerbaijan's policy toward Armenia simultaneously addresses issues of identity and ontological (in)security. The primary issue for Azerbaijan remains the preservation of the enemy as a collective "Other" and a source of threat. Through the continuation of the conflict, Azerbaijan solves its ontological security as autobiographical narratives and routinized practices become "an integral part of a state's behaviour, as they shape the understanding of its identity".[10] After the 2020 war, Azerbaijan was not eager to de-securitize and de-escalate the conflict because "peace anxieties" could produce ontological insecurity. When the conflict is aimed at satisfying identity needs, its resolution can give birth to ontological anxiety and insecurity, which states avoid. Sometimes, conflict helps to maintain ontological security by reinforcing a state's identity[11] ("*we are who we are because we oppose them*").

On August 8, 2025, in Washington, D.C., the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, under the mediation of the President of the United States, initialed the peace agreement between the two countries. The Joint Declaration, signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the United States, emphasised the need to continue efforts toward the final signing of the peace treaty.[12] The Washington Declaration and the agreement's initialling were assessed by both sides as significant milestones or key achievements on the

---

8 Hovsepyan and Tonoyan, Sustaining Conflict, pp. 963–995.

9 Dmitry Chernoborov, *Public Perception of International Crises Identity, Ontological Security and Self-Affirmation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019, p. 71.

10 Alen Shadunts. "Trauma and Ontological Insecurity After the Second Karabakh War 2020." In Armenia After 2018: Social and Political Transformations, edited by Valentina Gevorgyan and Yulia Antonyan, Laussane: Peter Lang, 2024, p. 117.

11 Hovsepyan and Tonoyan, Sustaining Conflict, pp. 967–968.

12 Joint Declaration by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the United States of America on the outcomes of their meeting in Washington D.C., United States of America,

path toward a peaceful resolution. However, within Armenian public, political, and expert circles, profound mistrust regarding Azerbaijan's behaviour and the prospects for peace continues to persist. Some foreign policy experts, reflecting broader public perceptions, emphasised that "peace remains a distant and precarious goal – more a façade than a foundation for genuine reconciliation."[13] In the post-war period, this development can be regarded as a pivotal event that is expected to bring the parties closer to a comprehensive and genuine peace. This, in turn, implied that Azerbaijan's previous discourses and narratives should have been reconsidered to align with the "spirit and logic" of peace.

Hence, there arises a question: whether the August 8 initialling and declaration – considered a key milestone on the path toward Armenian-Azerbaijani peace – have led to a transformation in Azerbaijan's narrative and discursive strategy toward Armenia and Armenians, and whether Azerbaijan is genuinely inclined toward establishing comprehensive peace with Armenia or rather toward maintaining conflictual dynamics at certain levels.

For this purpose, a critical (political) discourse analysis (CPDA) was carried out, focused on statements, speeches, and interviews by President Ilham Aliyev and other members of the Azerbaijani ruling establishment, made from the time of the signing of the trilateral Washington Declaration on August 8, 2025, until October 20, 2025. We take a priori the principle that if Azerbaijan – specifically its ruling political elite – has a genuine and non-imitative approach to establishing peace, then its external and internal discourse should be aligned and, essentially, should not exhibit deep dichotomous differences. This is precisely the case in Armenia, where the external and internal statements of the governing authorities regarding peace show almost no variation. What is stated by Prime Minister Pashinyan or Foreign Minister Mirzoyan in the international domain or to international audiences is almost identically repeated both personally by them and by other members of their team within Armenia. Moreover, this applies not only to statements on peace and its im-

https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2025/08/09/Nikol-Pashinyan-visit-US-declaration/.

[13] Gevorg Melikyan, Reconciliation Through Coercion?, https://geopolitika.no/reconciliation-through-coercion/.

portance, but also to broader identity-related and ideological messaging, including the associated vocabulary, whose main objectives are the reduction of nationalist sentiments in Armenia, the erasure of the image of Azerbaijanis as "enemies" from public consciousness, the promotion of peaceful coexistence with them as neighbours, the apparent underestimation of existing security challenges, and so forth.

In the case of Azerbaijan, a distinct dichotomy can be observed between the discourses addressed to external and internal audiences, reflecting differing objectives of international image-building and domestic identity consolidation. President Aliyev's speeches addressed to the domestic audience are notable not only for their explicit aim of reviving and keeping alive the memory of the recent war but also for their clear objective of sustaining narratives that were constructed in post-war Azerbaijan as central themes, particularly portraying Armenians as an "eternal enemy".[14]

The preservation of a state's and a nation's biographical identity within its self-narrative is integral to security policy since the role of "national memory" is crucial in shaping a nation's own narrative of identity. States and nations, through their collective memory, construct not only their identity but also achieve ontological security. In other words, mnemonical security becomes ontological security.[15] States and political elites strategically utilize the politics of memory to justify and reinforce their own ontological security.[16] States tend to defend their historical memory, and that one actor's collective memory can become a security concern for another. Assuming that

---

14 See, for example, "Ilham Aliyev met with Kalbajar residents and presented apartment keys," The Official Website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, October 10, 2025, https://president.az/en/articles/view/69911; "12th Summit of the Council of Heads of State of the Organisation of Turkic States commenced in Gabala," The Official Website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, October 7, 2025, https://president.az/en/articles/view/70283.

15 Mälksoo, 'Memory must be defended'. pp. 221–237.

16 Filip Ejdus, Ontological Security and the Politics of Memory in International Relations, in *Handbook on the Politics of Memory*, ed. Mälksoo M. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), pp. 31–45, https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781800372535/book-part-9781800372535-9.xml.

social memory of wars and conflicts has an inherent conflict-preserving potential,[17] we can observe in Azerbaijan a targeted and purposeful memory politics.

At the discursive level, negative memories associated with the "Other" are actively preserved, while memories rooted in the militarised narratives of the 2020 war are reinforced, thereby serving to securitize them. Even if some softening tendencies might appear at the level of official rhetoric, the politics of memory remains highly active and multi-layered, suggesting that the securitisation and militarisation of memory are intended to sustain the dominant layers of Azerbaijani identity. It is noteworthy that in Ilham Aliyev's speeches delivered in Azerbaijani and addressed to domestic audiences, the semantic framework sustaining the concept of the "enemy" and the memory of the past persists, thereby preventing the conflict from being forgotten. This reveals the ontological anxieties of the Azerbaijani political establishment that the peace process could weaken the concept of the "main enemy", represented by the Armenians. States tend to safeguard their historical memory, while the social memory of wars and conflicts can carry a conflict-generating potential and help perpetuate ongoing antagonisms.[18]

Particularly in authoritarian systems, the formulation, dissemination, and influence of discourses related to both external and internal political issues are carried out through mechanisms that imply consistent and centrally coordinated management. In such systems, from the highest visible echelons of political authority to the lowest levels – including both overt and covert connections that at first glance may appear independent or unlinked to the regime – the narratives propagated and disseminated as components of political discourse should be understood as products of a single, integrated system.

The statements and speeches of officials representing Azerbaijan's ruling regime exhibit certain divergent and dichotomous relations with Aliyev's external political discourse regarding peace and the normalisation of relations with Armenia. However, they do not contradict the consistently articulated and emphasised anti-Armenian propaganda in Aliyev's domestic discourse. Moreover, following the logic of the centralised vertical governance system,

17 Mälksoo, 'Memory must be defended'. pp. 222–223.
18 Ibid.

these statements are sharper in nature, more massive, more unrestrained, and reach a broader audience in terms of anti-Armenian content than Aliyev's own speech, which is logically more cautious and veiled.

The internal socio-political discourse in Azerbaijan, both before and after August 8, which is shaped by the ruling political elite and disseminated top-down, has not undergone any significant changes. This applies not only to the preservation of the "enemy" image of Armenians and the constant maintenance of the threat of war, but also to the linguistic and stylistic characteristics of the recurring threats directed against Armenia.

For example, President Aliyev's August 21 speech, including words with hostile connotations, fully aligns with the strategy of keeping alive the anti-Armenian narratives that have been generated for decades within Azerbaijani society.[19] This is a strategy that the ruling elite of Azerbaijan has consistently pursued – not only since the 2020 war and the final ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, but notably also after August 8, 2025.

In Azerbaijan's internal discourse, the themes related to the so-called "Western Azerbaijan" pseudo-irredentism have remained intact and have been consistently reinforced after August 8. The structures and organisations that promote these themes at the propaganda level, including the "Western Azerbaijan Community" NGO and the "Center for Western Azerbaijan Studies" operating under the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU), continue to play a key role. Although the Azerbaijani state's guidance and sponsorship in the generation and dissemination of the narratives had long been evident, the recently leaked documents once again confirmed that the production of the so-called "Western Azerbaijan" irredentist narrative – cloaked in a purportedly humanitarian and cultural guise – has been directly financed and promoted by the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan.[20]

---

19 "Ilham Aliyev met with Kalbajar residents and presented apartment keys," The Official Website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, October 10, 2025, https://president.az/en/articles/view/69911.

20 Rasmus Canbäck, EXCLUSIVE: Azerbaijan's 'Western Azerbaijan' campaign exposed in leaked documents, OC Media, 3 November 2025, https://oc-media.org/exclusive-azerbaijans-western-azerbaijan-campaign-exposed-in-leaked-documents/.

If we summarise the main thematic axes of the Azerbaijani political elite's discourse in the post-8 August period, the following points can be emphasised:

- the dominant discourse on peace is constructed on conditionality – not as a reciprocal process, but as a unilateral obligation for Armenia;
- the discourse on peace is largely accompanied by the discursive denial of Armenia's sovereignty;
- the generation of a discourse of distrust, which shifts the field of responsibility solely onto the Armenian side;
- a discourse legitimising the use of military force, intersecting the narratives of peace and militarisation, thereby normalising militarisation;
- the regeneration of narratives of the past and of war memory, including through the securitisation and militarisation of memory.

As macro-discursive strategies and dominant narratives serve as key mechanisms and strategies for identity construction and, consequently, for the maintenance of ontological security,[21] I would like to address this issue.

Drawing on the typology of macro-discursive strategies concerning national identities, it can be observed that in Azerbaijan's case, **constructive and preservative** (or justificatory) strategies are in operation – discursive strategies aimed at the construction, or more precisely, the preservation, continuity, and reproduction of national identities. Azerbaijan not only maintains anti-Armenian sentiments as an "ontological narrative",[22] but also amplifies it by generating dominant discourse, rhetoric, and narratives regarding territorial claims over Armenia. Beyond the concrete military-political objectives and claims, the production of such discourse serves, in the long term, to sustain the viability of a dominant narrative oriented toward the future.[23] The discursive strategy of Armenia's ruling elite corresponds to the typology of **transformative strategies**, which aim at altering national identities. In the case of Armenia's ruling elite, a diametrically opposite pattern emerges compared to Azerbaijan: there is a deliberate reframing of national-state interests,

21 Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, "Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda, Theory, and Methodology." in *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: Sage, 2009), p. 18.

22 Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change", p. 612.

23 Ibid.

an effort to impose this at the public level and establish it as a dominant narrative, and a clear political agenda to replace the traditional national identity with a civic one. Evidence for these assertions includes Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, statements regarding amendments to the Constitution and national symbols, and the incorporation of this discourse into political and public debates.

Although it is generally accepted that the durability and longevity of peacebuilding depend more on the extent to which conflicting parties reduce ontological insecurities through positive reciprocal relations than on formal or procedural political agreements,[24] in this case, it is crucial to note that the source of the Azerbaijani leadership's ontological insecurities and fears, particularly after the 2020 war, is not Armenia or the Armenian people per se as a direct threat. Rather, it stems from the potential "devaluation" of the perceived "threat", namely the role of Armenia as the primary "Other", which becomes problematic in terms of continuation of identity engineering and the nation-building processes. In other words, for Azerbaijan, the source of ontological insecurity is not the conflict itself, but its resolution, as it can deepen the activation of "peace anxiety".[25] As Kim and Morrow note:

> Chronic insecurity both drives people to seek unity in group identity against an identified other, and ensures that people sustain those mutually damaging and dangerous rivalries with an identified other, which fuelled the insecurity in the first place. In frontiers characterised by those who are in routinised antagonistic relationships with whom they consider threats, even the most sophisticated efforts to build peace remain vulnerable to the dominance of ontological anxiety, reflected in routinised relationships and mutual escalation of hostility.[26]

Azerbaijan's domestic discourse continues the entrenched narratives and discourses, which are a challenge for reconciliation and genuine peace. Therefore, Azerbaijan faces a serious challenge in this regard, which may become

---

24 Dong Jin Kim and Duncan Morrow, Ontological security and protracted conflict in frontier societies: towards a trans-local turn in peacebuilding, *Peacebuilding*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2024, p. 276.

25 Bahar Rumelili, Ontological (in)security and peace anxieties: A framework for conflict resolution, Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security, 1st edition, London: Routledge, 2014.

26 Kim and Morrow, Ontological security and protracted conflict in frontier societies, p. 279.

a significant obstacle to peacebuilding and raises a question of sincerity or imitation in peace.

There are substantive and target-oriented discrepancies between Aliyev's speeches delivered for international audiences and those delivered in Azerbaijani for domestic audiences. Specifically, the messages directed toward the external audience emphasise a commitment to establishing lasting peace, whereas the messages intended for the internal audience tend to sustain the image of Armenians as an enemy and preserve the national, entrenched narratives and memories of the past, thus maintaining the ontological security regime unchanged. In light of Azerbaijan's coercive policies both in the post-war period and at present, it is evident that Baku's strategic objective is the continual pressing of Armenia's so-called "red lines." This strategy is reinforced through the perpetuation of routinized practices and entrenched narratives, signalling Azerbaijan's insincerity in genuine peace.

References

Canbäck Rasmus, EXCLUSIVE: Azerbaijan's 'Western Azerbaijan' campaign exposed in leaked documents, OC Media, 3 November 2025, https://oc-media.org/exclusive-azerbaijans-western-azerbaijan-campaign-exposed-in-leaked-documents/.

Chernoborov Dmitry, *Public Perception of International Crises, Identity, Ontological Security and Self-Affirmation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019.

Ejdus Filip, Ontological Security and the Politics of Memory in International Relations, in *Handbook on the Politics of Memory*, ed. Mälksoo M. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781800372535/book-part-9781800372535-9.xml.

Hovsepyan Levon and Artyom Tonoyan, Sustaining Conflict: Identity, Ontological (In)Security, and Azerbaijan's Policy toward Armenia after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 36, no. 5, 2025.

"Ilham Aliyev met with Kalbajar residents and presented apartment keys," The Official Website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, October 10, 2025, https://president.az/en/articles/view/69911.

Joint Declaration by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the United States of America on the outcomes of their meeting in Washington D.C., United States of America, https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2025/08/09/Nikol-Pashinyan-visit-US-declaration/.

Kaunert Christian and Joana de Deus Pereira, EU Eastern Partnership, Ontological Security and EU-Ukraine/Russian Warfare. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2023.

Kim Jin Dong and Duncan Morrow, Ontological security and protracted conflict in frontier societies: towards a trans-local turn in peacebuilding, *Peacebuilding*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2024.

Krickel-Choi Nina C., State Personhood and Ontological Security as a Framework of Existence: Moving Beyond Identity, Discovering Sovereignty, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2022.

Mälksoo Maria, "Memory Must be Defended": Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security. *Security Dialogue*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2015.

Melikyan Gevorg, Reconciliation Through Coercion?, *Geopolitika*, 07 September 2025, https://geopolitika.no/reconciliation-through-coercion/.

Mitzen Jeniffer, Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2006.

Rumelili Bahar, Ontological (in)security and peace anxieties: A framework for conflict resolution, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security*, 1st edition, London: Routledge, 2014.

Shadunts Alen, "Trauma and Ontological Insecurity After the Second Karabakh War 2020." In *Armenia After 2018: Social and Political Transformations*, edited by Valentina Gevorgyan and Yulia Antonyan, Laussane: Peter Lang, 2024.

Subotić Jelena, Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change, *Foreign Policy Analysis,* vol. 12, no. 4, 2016.

Wodak Ruth and Michael Meyer, "Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda, Theory, and Methodology." In *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: Sage, 2009).

PART III:
Cyber-Domain Strategies for Peacebuilding in the South Caucasus – Counter-Disinformation, Collaborative Security, and Inclusive Governance

Cyber Operations and Cognitive Warfare: Human-Security Vulnerabilities in the South Caucasus

Andro Gotsiridze

Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that cyber operations have become a defining component of contemporary security dynamics in the world. Although rarely decisive in armed conflict, they remain extraordinarily effective for espionage, subversion and disinformation. More importantly, they provide information advantage, shape perceptions and erode political and institutional processes making them a central enabler of cognitive warfare.

This risk is extremely apparent in the South Caucasus, where the shift from armed conflict toward an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process is likely to generate a parallel contest in the informational and cognitive spheres. Undoubtedly, cyber operations, disinformation and digitally mediated psychological pressure could influence not only public perceptions of the peace process but also social and emotional conditions essential for sustainable conflict resolution.

In a different environment such progress might have been received with cautious optimism and a gradual strengthening of trust. But not all actors welcome these shifts. To be more specific, Moscow and Tehran view US-supported peace efforts with suspicion since unresolved conflicts retain their primary instruments for maintaining influence in the region. At the same time, Beijing observes these dynamics carefully, expanding its economic footprint while seeking to limit Western engagement.

It is worth mentioning that peacebuilding threatens the very mechanisms through which external actors maintain influence. To be more specific, peace strengthens sovereignty and sovereignty reduces dependency. For example, stable Armenia and Azerbaijan, capable of negotiating without fear, coercion or misinformation would significantly limit the leverage that unresolved conflict provides to Moscow and Tehran. For this reason, destabilizing digital

interventions target the psychological and informational conditions under which peace can take root. Therefore, in this situation compromise is reframed as capitulation, mediation becomes manipulation and public trust becomes a vulnerability rather than an asset. The cumulative effect reflects what Du Cluzel identifies as the core objective of cognitive warfare: to weaken society itself – not merely its military institutions.[1]

As a result, every diplomatic step toward stability triggers a parallel surge in cyber probing, narrative engineering and political manipulation by external actors' intent on preserving their strategic leverage in the South Caucasus.

It needs to be underlined that the region's fragility is rooted not only in geopolitics but also in profound human-security vulnerabilities. Human security, as defined in UNDP's Human Development Reports, broadens the concept of security beyond military threats to include freedoms from fear, want, humiliation and misinformation. Therefore, in societies shaped by war trauma, displacement, socioeconomic inequality and contested historical narratives, these vulnerabilities create fertile ground for cyber-enabled manipulation.[2] Besides, peace processes rely on trust, openness and the collective capacity to imagine a shared future – all of which can be easily destabilized through digital interference.

This dynamic is neither incidental nor improvised. As Du Cluzel states, contemporary conflict increasingly aims at "making everyone a weapon." This implies that individuals' beliefs, fears, and emotional susceptibilities become deliberate targets of strategic operations.[3] The South Caucasus region clearly exemplifies this transformation: the peace process is not merely a diplomatic exercise. It is a battleground of perceptions, identities and psychological influence.

---

1 François du Cluzel, *Cognitive Warfare* (Norfolk, VA: NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2021), 6, https://innovationhub-act.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20210113_CW-Final-v2-.pdf.

2 Elena Mandalenakis, "Understanding Human Security and Resilience," in Building Resilience Against Human Security Threats and Risks: From Best Practices to Strategies (Vienna: 2025), ISBN 978-3-903548-12-1.

3 François du Cluzel, *Cognitive Warfare* (Norfolk, VA: NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2021), 6, https://innovationhub-act.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20210113_CW-Final-v2-.pdf.

Cyber incidents following the 2020 war and again during the 2023 negotiation rounds demonstrated how even minor technical disruptions can be weaponized for cognitive effect. In the months after the 2020 ceasefire, Armenian government systems experienced intermittent probing and brief outages attributed to Russia- and Iran-linked actors – episodes that, while technically limited, reinforced public anxieties about institutional vulnerability and hybrid interference. A similar dynamic unfolded in late 2023, when several Armenian government websites went offline.[4] The disruption lasted only minutes, yet social media rapidly filled with speculation about sabotage, betrayal, and covert concessions. In both cases, the technical footprint was minimal, but the psychological impact was substantial – illustrating how cyber events in the South Caucasus often function less as operational attacks and more as catalysts for distrust, speculation, and political hesitation under conditions of external cognitive pressure.[5]

Beyond the Armenia-Azerbaijan dynamic, broader South Caucasus exhibits a systemic vulnerability to cognitive interference. Societies across the region share common risk factors: deep-seated trauma linked to war and displacement; polarized political environments; conservative cultural identities; high levels of distrust toward institutions; and heavy reliance on social media as a primary information source.[6] These elements form an extended cognitive battlespace, where every dimension of the information ecosystem from emotion to belief to identity becomes a potential target for manipulation.[7]

Furthermore, the structure of the South Caucasus digital environment magnifies these risks, as platforms, such as Telegram, Facebook, and TikTok serve as primary arenas of public discourse with minimal barriers to entry for influence actors. Foreign intelligence services exploit this space by mixing

---

4 ArmenPress, "Armenia under increased cyberattacks, warns intelligence agency," ArmenPress, 23 September 2023.

5 Freedom House, *Armenia: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2020).

6 Elena Mandalenakis, "Understanding Human Security and Resilience," in Building Resilience Against Human Security Threats and Risks: From Best Practices to Strategies (Vienna: 2025), ISBN 978-3-903548-12-1.

7 Jean-Marc Rickli and Tobias Knappe, *Enhancing Cognitive Security and Societal Resilience to Counter Cognitive Warfare* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2025), 1–3.

genuine leaks with fabricated materials, which are then amplified by algorithmic incentives that reward outrage and emotional intensity. In other words, a forged document, a manipulated statement or a targeted leak can shift public sentiment dramatically, especially, during moments of political tension or diplomatic negotiation.

This is why cyber operations increasingly serve cognitive objectives. To be more specific, a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack that is quickly mitigated can still signal institutional weakness, a leak of sensitive documents, often mixing authentic material with fabricated additions, can erode trust in state authorities and their partners and a politically timed defacement can trigger insecurity or deepen polarization. Therefore, a question arises: what makes these seemingly minor incidents so dangerous? Although technically limited, they threaten state security by targeting core elements of human security – fear, trust, and social cohesion. These activities generate emotional reactions that shape political expectations far more effectively than traditional propaganda.

Cyber operations enable this deeper psychological intervention by weaponizing uncertainty, ambiguity and emotional resonance. For instance, in the South Caucasus, where identities are contested and traumas are raw, this strategy is particularly potent. This is precisely how earlier propaganda models evolve into contemporary cognitive warfare: where propaganda sought to persuade, cognitive warfare seeks to condition by shifting the objective from influencing *what* people think to influencing *how* they think, how they perceive reality, whom they trust, what they fear and what they believe is possible.[8]

Nowhere are the consequences of such tactics more visible than in Georgia, which has become a case study in how long-term cognitive operations can reshape national identity, influence democratic outcomes and hollow out institutional resilience without the use of force. Cyberattacks are frequently synchronized with diplomatic or geopolitical milestones – from the COVID-19 pandemic to the Russian invasion of Ukraine – enabling the spread of

---

8 Bernard Claverie and François du Cluzel, *Cognitive Warfare: The Fight for Your Brain* (Norfolk, VA: NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2023), https://innovationhub-act.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CW-article-Claverie-du-Cluzel-final_0.pdf.

false narratives that undermine partnerships, deepen polarization and amplify uncertainty at moments of heightened vulnerability. Importantly, disinformation operates through multi-layered ecosystems blending state media, social-media channels, coordinated bot networks and media outlets targeting specific communities. More specifically, influence operations exploit deep cultural and emotional triggers: fear of betrayal, the trauma of past wars, conspiracies surrounding "foreign influence" and anxieties over sovereignty. Increasingly, cyber operations do not merely distort facts but create an informational environment in which societies struggle to distinguish authentic concerns from engineered narratives, i.e. a digital adaptation of the classic playbook of active measures and reflexive control.

In this environment, trust, the essential currency of international partnerships and integration processes, becomes the primary target. Human-security vulnerabilities intensify this effect. More specifically, when societies live with chronic insecurity or unresolved trauma, they become more receptive to narratives portraying cooperation as dangerous, illegitimate or externally imposed. So, cyber operations amplify these insecurities and the same methods can be deployed against peacebuilding itself. A minor breach during sensitive talks can suggest institutional fragility; a manipulated recording can deepen distrust; a forged map or communiqué can trigger fears of territorial loss or imminent crisis.

This interplay between cyber operations, cognitive warfare, and human-security vulnerabilities provides the analytical foundation for the sections that follow. External cyber powers, particularly Russia, have adapted their strategies to exploit this specific environment.

External Cyber Actors and the Transformation Toward Cognitive Warfare

South Caucasus lies at the crossroads of competing geopolitical agendas and is increasingly shaped by three destructive external cyber actors with distinct tactics: Iran, China and Russia. Despite their differences, all rely on cyber operations and informational influence to erode institutional trust, manipulate public perception and shape political outcomes. Therefore, understanding this transformation requires recognizing how their methods diverge therefore, Iran's unpredictability and ideological posture, China's long-term

infrastructural embedding and Russia's sustained informational confrontation aimed at weakening societal resilience. Together, these approaches illustrate a shifting threat landscape in which cyber operations function as catalysts for psychological pressure, political manipulation and the erosion of human security thus marking a broader move toward the cognitive domain of warfare, where the human mind becomes the primary target.

Iran has repeatedly demonstrated its readiness to target civilian infrastructure, deploy destructive malware and retaliate digitally in response to political or military triggers.[9] Its cyber operations are fundamentally asymmetric: unable to project conventional military power in the region, Tehran relies on cyber tools to signal strength, impose costs and assert regional presence. These activities have included disruptions to transportation systems, aviation networks, government services and critical energy infrastructure, a sector of strategic importance in the South Caucasus.

Iran's cyber posture is further shaped by pronounced strategic volatility, with operations often following perceived insults or diplomatic tensions. This unpredictability heightens regional risk, as even limited intrusions can amplify uncertainty and erode public confidence in state capacity, generating fear, confusion, and broader human-security vulnerabilities.

Therefore, cyber operations now constitute a core component of Iran's military power. Although Tehran primarily employs modified criminal-market malware – generally less sophisticated than Russian or Chinese tools – its capabilities remain sufficient to threaten small banks, local energy companies, and pipeline control systems through DDoS attacks, destructive wipers, and targeted cyber-espionage. While Iran lacks the capacity for advanced Stuxnet- or BlackEnergy-level operations, sustained investment in asymmetric digital tools has enabled it to develop a disruptive cyber posture capable of inflicting meaningful damage on regional critical infrastructure and advancing political objectives through coercive digital means.[10]

---

9 Julia Dickson and Emily Harding, *A Playbook for Winning the Cyber War, Part 4: Evaluating Iran's Cyber Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Intelligence, National Security, and Technology Program, September 2025).

10 *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019).

China's approach is fundamentally different. Beijing shares Moscow's belief that information superiority is central to future warfare but in the South Caucasus it pursues its goals through subtle, structural, long-term influence, not overt disruption. Beijing builds influence by embedding itself in the region's digital and economic infrastructure: through telecommunications architecture, fiber-optic corridors, smart-city systems, data centres, and strategic investments.[11] So, rather than destabilizing systems, China gradually creates dependencies that shape political options, governance norms, and technological standards.

Interestingly, in the South Caucasus, China rarely intervenes directly in political crises or peace processes. Instead, it advances through strategic patience. Russia's disruptive behavior often provides useful cover, creating distraction and instability that limit Western engagement and weaken state institutions. In this environment, Chinese companies expand their presence, offering affordable technology and rapid development packages. While Moscow dominates narrative and psychological operations, Beijing embeds itself structurally. The result is a division of labor in which Russia destabilizes and China embeds, allowing Chinese influence to grow quietly in the shadows of Russia's provocations.[12]

Viewed in this context, Russia emerges as the most aggressive, intrusive and strategically consequential external cyber actor. Moreover, Russia, now a central actor in the cognitive-warfare domain and a model for China and Iran, has used these methods to enable its war in Ukraine, shape Western decision-making, weaken democratic institutions along the EU's eastern flank, obscure its strategic objectives, and shield the vulnerabilities of Vladimir Putin's regime.[13]

---

11 Aosheng Pusztaszeri, Emily Harding, and Julia Dickson, *A Playbook for Winning the Cyber War, Part 3: Evaluating China's Cyber Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Intelligence, National Security, and Technology Program, September 2025).

12 Michael Cecire, "China's Black Sea Play," *RAND Commentary*, August 5, 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/08/chinas-black-sea-play.html.

13 Nataliya Bugayova and Kateryna Stepanenko, *A Primer on Russian Cognitive Warfare* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War Press, Institute for the Study of War, June 30, 2025).

For Moscow, cyber operations and information warfare form a single operational continuum. The doctrine of *informatsionnoe protivoborstvo* ("information confrontation") conceptualizes cyber power not as a technical capability but as an instrument of psychological, societal, and political influence.[14] Within this framework, the decisive battles of modern conflict unfold in cognition, identity and perception rather than in the physical terrain. Russia's objective is not merely to penetrate networks but to shape meaning itself by altering how societies interpret events, assess risks, and make political choices.

Another significant factor is that Russia's cyber ecosystem is built on a hybrid architecture that fuses intelligence services, military units, proxy groups and criminal organizations into a flexible and deniable operational network. Consequently, Moscow's activity is driven primarily by three intelligence agencies: the FSB, responsible for internal security and broad digital surveillance; the SVR, which specializes in long-term espionage, persistent infiltration, and strategic reconnaissance; and the GRU, the military intelligence service behind the most aggressive and destructive cyber operations. These state structures are further supplemented by patriotic hackers, cybercriminal syndicates, hacktivist fronts and regional proxies, creating an ecosystem in which the boundaries between state and non-state activity deliberately blur, thus providing Moscow with both operational flexibility and strategic deniability.[15] Together, these actors conduct large-scale information-psychological campaigns and technical attacks, ranging from disruptive strikes against critical infrastructure to deep, covert espionage and long-term access operations targeting industrial control systems.[16]

These cyber operations become even more dangerous when anchored in Soviet-era active measures and updated through the doctrine of reflexive control, together designed to manipulate information flows and emotional cues

---

14 Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations*, DIA-11-1704-161 (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017).

15 Michael Connell and Sarah Vogler, *Russia's Approach to Cyber Warfare* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2017), CNA Occasional Paper, performed under Federal Government Contract No. N00014-16-D-5003.

16 Julia Dickson and Emily Harding, *A Playbook for Winning the Cyber War, Part 2: Evaluating Russia's Cyber Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Intelligence, National Security, and Technology Program, September 2025).

so that targeted societies make decisions that ultimately serve Russian interests. Within this framework, cyber tools are not standalone capabilities but integral components of a broader cognitive strategy aimed at destabilizing democratic societies and reshaping political environments over time. This transformation occurs when cyber operations move beyond networks and begin striking at fear, dignity, well-being, truth and social cohesion, the core pillars of human security, turning technical intrusions into cognitive attacks.

Transformation of Russian Cyberoperations

Tracing the evolution of Russian cyber operations reveals a consistent pattern: even when their technical effect is limited, their impact on human security is profound, with direct implications for national security. Russia's campaigns repeatedly demonstrate that destabilizing the psychological and social environment of a target state can weaken national resilience as effectively as conventional coercion. For example, in Estonia in 2007, Russian-linked actors launched extensive DDoS attacks after the relocation of the Bronze Soldier monument. Although, these disruptions temporarily disabled banks, media outlets and government services, they caused no lasting physical damage. The real effect emerged from the uncertainty and fear these incidents generated, such as anxiety over potential military escalation, doubts about NATO's reliability, and heightened tensions involving Estonia's Russian-speaking minority.[17] The attacks' strategic value lay in their psychological reverberations, not their technical footprint.

Russia expanded this approach in Georgia in 2008, synchronizing cyber operations with a conventional military intervention.[18] The result was an informational vacuum that Russia immediately filled with narratives portraying its invasion as a "peace enforcement operation." The defacement of the Georgian President's website timed with troop movements, functioned as symbolic humiliation reinforcing perceptions of state vulnerability. Russia simul-

---

17 James A. Lewis, "Compelling Opponents to Our Will: The Role of Cyber Warfare in Ukraine," in *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, ed. Kenneth Geers (Tallinn: NATO CCDCOE, 2015), 39–48.

18 Eneken Tikk, Kadri Kaska, and Liis Vihul, *International Cyber Incidents: Legal Considerations* (Tallinn: NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, 2010).

taneously deployed Nazi-labelling tactics, framing Georgian leaders as extremists in order to justify its actions, a narrative later repeated in Ukraine. Although limited internet penetration restricted technical disruption, the psychological consequences were significant: public confusion deepened, access to reliable information eroded, and perceptions of state capacity weakened. These effects targeted core human-security dimensions such as dignity, truth, and community cohesion, laying cognitive groundwork for Russia's attempted regime-change narrative.

Russia reached full integration of cyber operations into its military and political strategy in its operations in Ukraine between 2014 and 2016. Persistent penetration of Ukrainian networks, strategic espionage, and the deployment of malware against critical infrastructure culminated in the 2015 and 2016 power-grid attacks that left hundreds of thousands without electricity.[19] These incidents undermined economic and physical security while damaging public confidence in the state's ability to provide essential services. Cyber-enabled intelligence also supported artillery targeting, placing civilians at immediate risk. Parallel identity-based disinformation campaigns sought to fracture national unity and delegitimize Ukrainian institutions. Although these actions did not determine military outcomes, their psychological impact was deliberate, producing fear, uncertainty, and mistrust on a national scale.

Events in Crimea in 2014 further exposed the strategic coupling of information operations with kinetic action. As Russian forces seized key sites, dismantled Ukrainian positions and facilitated a disputed referendum, Moscow conducted a parallel campaign aimed at controlling the flow of information across physical, logical, and social layers of communication.[20] This demonstrates how cyber and information operations along with on-the-

---

19 Connell, Michael, and Sarah Vogler. *Russia's Approach to Cyber Warfare.* Arlington, VA: CNA, 2017. CNA Occasional Paper. Performed under Federal Government Contract No. N00014-16-D-5003.

20 Margarita Jaitner and Peter A. Mattsson, "Russian Information Warfare of 2014," in *2015 7th International Conference on Cyber Conflict: Architectures in Cyberspace*, ed. M. Maybaum, A.-M. Osula, and L. Lindström (Tallinn: NATO CCD COE Publications, 2015) 39–52.

ground activities can interact to create a seamless environment of cognitive dominance.[21]

Viewed together, the above cases of Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine in 2014, illustrate that Russia's most consequential cyber effects occur not only in code but also in cognition. By undermining trust, intensifying fear, humiliating leadership, distorting truth and fracturing social cohesion, Russian cyber operations systematically attack the human-security foundations upon which democratic stability and national resilience depend. In this sense, cyber operations threaten national security by degrading the society's capacity to withstand coercion and thus, achieving strategic effects that previously required conventional force. In NATO's context, such operations as in Estonia (2007) and Lithuania (2008) potentially tested the boundaries of Article 5 applicability.

Following the events in Crimea in 2014, Russia expanded its cognitive toolkit beyond the post-Soviet region and began applying it systematically against Western democracies. The annexation itself offered an early demonstration of how cyber operations, information operations, and control of physical communication infrastructure could be synchronized to shape perceptions and disable resistance, an approach that would later appear in Russian interference campaigns abroad.

From 2014 onward, Russian operators targeted electoral or other democratic processes in the United States, the UK, France and Germany.[22] These activities included hacking political parties, leaking selected materials, manufacturing *kompromat*, and deploying coordinated disinformation across state media, proxy platforms, botnets, and social-media influence networks. According to U.S. and European intelligence assessments, the primary aim was not simply to damage individual candidates but to discredit democratic institutions, weaken trust and polarize societies along identity and ideological lines. In Germany, intelligence services concluded that Russia's objective was to

---

21 Julia Voo and Virpratap Vikram Singh, *Russia's Information Confrontation Doctrine in Practice (2014–Present): Intent, Evolution and Implications* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, June 2025).

22 Laura Galante and Shaun Ee, *Defining Russian Election Interference: An Analysis of Select 2014 to 2018 Cyber-Enabled Incidents* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, September 2018).

erode faith in the democratic system itself rather than to support any specific political actor.[23]

These operations increasingly relied on *narrative laundering* defined as the deliberate circulation of fabricated narratives through multiple proxy channels until they appeared organic and credible within the information environment. The theft of politically sensitive data months before elections followed by timed leaks during critical phases of the campaign created uncertainty, humiliation and mistrust, contributing to a deliberate assault on the informational foundations of democratic decision-making.

Taken together, these activities demonstrate how Russian influence operations have evolved from traditional propaganda into a coherent form of cognitive warfare, one that weaponizes information flows, exploits human-security vulnerabilities and shapes political expectations not through persuasion but through corrosion. By targeting fear, trust, dignity and social cohesion, these operations systematically attack the very conditions that allow democratic societies to function. In doing so, Russia repeatedly seeks to use democratic tools against democracy itself: first by manipulating elections, public debate and media ecosystems and then by turning these same mechanisms into channels for cognitive capture and societal fragmentation.

During the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow again turned to psychological warfare. Pre-invasion wiper attacks sought to weaken state capacity; defacements aimed to instill panic and information chaos attempted to paralyze society. Although Russia also attempted limited kinetic effects through cyber means, the emphasis of these campaigns remained overwhelmingly psychological, seeking to disrupt public reasoning, amplify fear and fracture societal cohesion. Yet these efforts largely failed. Years of sustained preparation, including the cultivation of strong alliances, the enhancement of cybersecurity capabilities, the establishment of trusted communication channels and backup systems, the mobilization of civil society, and the development of resilient public-private partnerships, enabled Ukraine not only to withstand attacks but also to effectively mitigate their impact. The lesson is clear: Russian cyber operations are least effective where

[23] Bundesministerium des Innern, *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2016: Spionage und sonstige nachrichtendienstliche Aktivitäten* (Berlin: Bundesministerium des Innern, 2017).

societies have invested in resilience.[24] Across all these cases, Russian cyber and information operations work to hollow out societies from within, generating uncertainty, fragmentation and strategic paralysis by striking fundamental human security components such as fear, trust, dignity, cohesion, and access to reliable information.

For the South Caucasus, these dynamics carry direct strategic consequences. Unresolved conflicts, political polarization, economic vulnerability and fragile institutions create an environment highly susceptible to cognitive exploitation. After its failures in Ukraine, Moscow increasingly relies not on overt force but on hybrid tools, particularly in the cognitive domain, to maintain influence in its neighborhood. In societies marked by division, uncertainty, and declining institutional trust, Russian narratives can begin to appear rational, familiar, or even inevitable.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Georgia, the region's most advanced yet most exposed laboratory of Russian cognitive warfare. Over time, Moscow has fused cyber operations, disinformation, political infiltration and identity manipulation to erode confidence in Western partners, distort public debate and empower a narrow domestic minority capable of steering the state's trajectory. This has produced a form of cognitive state capture, where institutions and narratives shift in ways that serve external interests even when the majority of society remains strongly pro-Western.

Georgia is therefore not an exception but a warning and a demonstration of how cognitive warfare can reshape a political system from within, using a minority as the vector of capture.

Georgia as a Laboratory of Cognitive State Capture

Georgia offers one of the clearest illustrations of how sustained cyber operations, narrative manipulation and psychological influence can evolve into full-spectrum cognitive warfare. In Georgia, Russia has modernized the old Soviet doctrine of reflexive control to the digital age by merging cyber intrusions, targeted disinformation, identity engineering and political infiltration

[24] James A. Lewis, *Cyber War and Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023).

into a single long-term strategy that gradually reshapes the country's strategic reflexes and political orientation without overt coercion. This is not mere interference or propaganda but a system of psychological conditioning that erodes human security by altering how society interprets legitimacy, risk and strategic choice. As François du Cluzel argues, reflexive control is now fused with the emerging cognitive domain of warfare, where the human mind becomes the primary battlespace and the decisive terrain.[25] Georgia thus stands as a revealing case of how cognitive state capture can unfold even within an open, strongly pro-Western society. As Jean-Marc Rickli observes, democracies are inherently more vulnerable to subversion because their openness grants to their adversaries easier access to their citizens than authoritarian systems do. Such an asymmetry makes democratic societies far more exposed to cognitive and informational attack.[26]

During the first stage of cognitive state capture, Russia moved to dominate Georgia's information environment through a dense ecosystem of trolls, bots, proxy media and aligned broadcasters. These channels amplified narratives portraying Western integration as unattainable, NATO as a path to war and Europe as a threat to Georgian identity. This was not simple propaganda but an early application of reflexive control in an effort to recalibrate how Georgians perceived their strategic options and cultural boundaries. The aim was to induce hesitation, manufacture strategic doubt and normalize neutrality or accommodation with Russia as the seemingly "rational" alternative.

For example, during the 2024 pre-election period, Georgian media monitoring identified a sharp rise in anti-Western narratives, dominated by messages portraying the West as interfering in elections, dragging Georgia into war, and undermining national sovereignty. These narratives were reinforced by pro-Russian and identity-based messaging that framed Western integration as a threat to tradition, security, and stability. The ruling party and its affiliates

---

25 François du Cluzel, *Cognitive Warfare* (Norfolk, VA: NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2021), 6, https://innovationhub-act.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20210113_CW-Final-v2-.pdf.

26 https://atelierdesfuturs.org/guerre-cognitive/#de.

further amplified these messages, using a false war-peace dichotomy to delegitimize critics and consolidate political control.[27]

The Kremlin framed these actions through propaganda as evidence that NATO could not protect Georgia, that Western alignment provoked conflict and that only Russia held the keys to resolution. Russia used the "borderization" narrative as both a tool of physical coercion and as a propaganda instrument to reshape public perceptions of security, sovereignty and geopolitical options. Central to the narrative was the manipulation of war-related fears, positioning Russia as the sole guarantor of Georgia's territorial integrity, blaming the previous administration for the 2008 conflict, and framing Western criticism as an alleged attempt to drag the country into a new war.

To ensure the reorientation of Georgia's strategic trajectory against the will of its overwhelmingly pro-Western majority, required systematic political penetration. Beginning in the early 2010's, ideologically aligned actors within Georgia's political and social spheres, nationalist groups, segments of the clergy, business networks tied to external markets and informal cultural influencers, were gradually drawn into an ecosystem that echoed externally driven narratives. Through coordinated media platforms and culturally resonant messaging, a portion of the domestic elite began reproducing these themes, making anti-Western discourse appear locally rooted rather than strategically engineered.

This constituted the second phase of cognitive state capture, namely, the internalization and domestic amplification of narratives that advanced external strategic objectives while appearing to emerge organically from within Georgian society. The convergence of domestic power-consolidation strategies with these external aims intensified after 2012, as governing elites increasingly relied on conservative identity politics, weakened institutional checks and balances and framed Western integration as destabilizing. This alignment

---

[27] *Anti-Western Propaganda and Disinformation Amid 2024 Parliamentary Elections: Interim Report, 1 July–1 October 2024* (Tbilisi: Media Development Foundation, 2024). https://mdfgeorgia.ge/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Anti-Western-Propaganda-and-Disinformation.pdf.

created a self-reinforcing feedback loop in which externally derived narratives were legitimized through domestic institutions, granting them authenticity, social resonance and enduring political effects.

The third phase of cognitive state capture emerged once these narratives no longer required external reinforcement because they had become self-sustaining within Georgia's political discourse. State actors, amplified by far-right groups and individuals presented by Russian media as "ordinary Georgians," began asserting that NATO membership would provoke war, that Western NGOs threatened national sovereignty, and that the United States sought to "drag Georgia into the conflict in Ukraine". These statements were verbatim reproductions of Russian strategic messaging, propagated despite the clear pro-Western preference of the majority of Georgian society. This represented reflexive control in its most advanced form: narratives originating in Moscow were now articulated by Georgian officials themselves.

As a result, Moscow's core narrative pillars rooted in its 2021 National Security Strategy were adapted to Georgian realities and became the foundation of a segmented influence strategy. The following postulates framed Russia as the guardian of stability and identity while portraying Western integration as both dangerous and morally corrosive:

- *The West destroys traditions and values while Russia defends faith and family* – reinforcing the "traditional values" paradigm
- *The West starts wars through proxy governments while Russia defends peace* – exploiting the trauma of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and linking it to the invasion of Ukraine
- *Russia's aggressive policies are a defensive response to Georgia's Western aspirations* – reframing Moscow's actions as justified
- *The United States constantly interferes in other nations' affairs and seeks to drag Georgia into war* – generating fear and distrust against Western partners

Most importantly, they underpinned a differentiated influence campaign aimed at specific sectors of Georgian society. The military, historically one of the most pro-Western institutions, was confronted with statements that

Western liberalism corroded masculine honor and military ethos, not aiming to convert the armed forces but to keep them politically neutral during Georgia's strategic reorientation.

The police were conditioned to view pro-European protesters as foreign-backed radicals undermining tradition, a perception reinforced by the routine dehumanization of Western-oriented parties, NGOs and activists as "LGBT agents", thus morally justifying repression.

Besides, internally displaced persons were approached through trauma-based messaging suggesting that only "neutrality" could secure their return, while clergy and conservative families were courted through identity narratives depicting Russia as the defender of Orthodoxy and the nation's moral foundations.

Collectively, these layered efforts produced cognitive fatigue, emotional fragmentation and interpretive paralysis shifting public discourse from rational assessments of Georgia's strategic trajectory toward polarizing cultural and moral conflicts that obscured and, ultimately, undermined the country's Western choices.

Central to this cognitive architecture was the weaponization of cyberspace – the arena in which Russia's influence operations evolved from messaging to manipulation and from propaganda to psychological conditioning. Georgia has been the target of some of the most coordinated hybrid cyber-influence operations in the post-Soviet region. Russia's digital operations did not primarily aim to disrupt infrastructure but to contaminate perception.

One of the clearest examples of Russia's cyber-enabled cognitive warfare was the 2018–2020 hybrid operation against Georgia's Ministry of Health and the U.S.-funded Lugar Laboratory. After stealing internal documents, Russian services conducted a *simulation fabrication* – the blending a few authentic files with irrelevant or falsified materials to create the illusion of "evidence." This was followed by a coordinated amplification campaign: first, former Georgian security chief and ex-KGB general Igor Giorgadze alleged in Moscow that "leaked documents" proved illegal human experiments; then, General Igor Kirillov claimed the United States was using the lab to develop biological weapons in violation of international conventions. Shortly before

this, MFA-spokesperson Maria Zakharova had already accused the laboratory as conducting experiments on Georgian citizens; and finally President Putin himself repeated these accusations at the Valdai Club. This operation demonstrates the dual function of Russian cognitive warfare: domestically, to rally its own population against a fabricated Western threat; externally, to erode trust, sow fear, and destabilize Georgia's confidence in its Western partners.[28]

The 2019 nationwide website defacement attack demonstrated another modality of cognitive warfare. Thousands of Georgian websites, including, government agencies, courts, municipalities were simultaneously defaced with an image of former President Mikheil Saakashvili and the message "I'll be back". Coordinated international attribution followed in February 2020, when Georgia, the United Kingdom, the United States, the EU, and several partner states publicly identified Russia's GRU Unit 74455 (Sandworm) as responsible for the 2019 cyberattack. The UK assessed this attribution as "almost certain", underscoring its consistency with Sandworm's earlier high-impact operations, including the attacks on Ukraine's power grid and the NotPetya malware campaign. This marked one of the clearest collective recognitions of Russia's offensive cyber posture in the region.[29] Technically, the attack was simple. Psychologically, it was devastating. It conveyed a symbolic occupation of Georgia's information space, hinted at political instability, and activated deep societal divisions at a highly sensitive pre-election moment. It demonstrated the logic of cognitive warfare: low-cost technical actions engineered to produce high-impact emotional and political responses.

Simultaneously, Russia supported a massive social-media ecosystem designed to shape public perception. Troll farms, anonymous Telegram channels and coordinated Facebook networks amplified narratives about NATO's aggression, Western moral decadence and the dangers of opposition movements.[30] These channels grew explosively after 2022,

---

28 https://mythdetector.com/en/how-were-documents-about-lugar-lab-leaking-from-the-ministry-of-health-before-the-cyberattack/.

29 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-condemns-russias-gru-over-georgia-cyber-attacks.

30 https://isfed.ge/eng/blogi/rusuli-sainformatsio-operatsia-saqartveloshi-sputnikiskoordinirebuli-qseli-feisbuqze.

demonstrating how social media forms the backbone of cognitive warfare: rapid, emotional and difficult to attribute.[31]

Interestingly, anti-Western rhetoric enabled Georgia's ruling party to consolidate a more authoritarian governing style, suppress civic activism and delegitimize opposition movements. This created a dangerous convergence: external strategic objectives aligned with domestic political interests, accelerating cognitive penetration because citizens could no longer distinguish between externally driven narratives and internal political discourse.

Within this environment, the trauma of the 2008 war became a central psychological instrument. Russia reframed its own aggression as Georgia's responsibility, a narrative later echoed by the ruling party, and repeatedly warned that NATO membership would provoke renewed conflict. Disinformation further claimed that NATO demanded the recognition of occupied territories or that integration would lead to catastrophic war. These narratives produced chronic insecurity, directly undermining "freedom from fear", a core pillar of human security.

The Kremlin also advanced a manipulative notion of "neutrality", marketed as a Swiss-style model, suggesting that disengagement from both Russia and the West would secure peace. In Georgia's geopolitical context, however, neutrality would mean isolation, vulnerability and de facto subordination – a form of reflexive control disguised as conflict avoidance.

Viewed through a human-security lens, the pattern becomes clear: this strategy systematically erodes trust, amplifies fear and weakens social cohesion. Most importantly, as psychological immunity declines, strategic paralysis follows. This is the essence of cognitive state capture – when a society's interpretive framework becomes the principal battlefield.

Georgia, thus stands as both a warning and a precedent. It demonstrates that cyber and cognitive warfare are deeply intertwined; that hybrid aggression

---

31 *Anti-Western Propaganda and Disinformation Amid 2024 Parliamentary Elections: Interim Report, 1 July–1 October 2024* (Tbilisi: Media Development Foundation, 2024), https://mdfgeorgia.ge/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Anti-Western-Propaganda-and-Disinformation.pdf.

evolves from information operations into psychological conditioning and that the erosion of human security is one of the most effective means of undermining sovereignty. The same vulnerabilities – conservative identities, unresolved conflicts, institutional fragility and entrenched fears – are present across the region, making neighboring states similarly susceptible to cognitive manipulation.

Ultimately, Georgia shows that cyber warfare is never only about networks. It is about shaping the emotions, expectations and choices of society. To be more specific, when digital tools are fused with psychological narratives, politicized identity and elite capture, external influence becomes internalized even as democratic institutions formally remain in place.

Regional Lessons and Strategic Imperatives for Cognitive Resilience in the South Caucasus

The experience of Georgia and the wider South Caucasus, demonstrates that the decisive terrain of modern confrontation lies not in physical borders but in the cognitive and emotional space where societies interpret reality, assign trust and make political choices. Therefore, external actors can reshape a state's strategic trajectory not through territorial control but through long-term manipulation of perceptions, identities and informational ecosystems, a process consistent with the emergence of cognitive warfare targeting the individual citizen.[32]

What began as familiar propaganda has evolved into a multi-layered system of influence in which the human mind becomes the primary battlespace. Georgia's case illustrates how these tactics exploit conservative identities, unresolved conflicts and trauma, transforming Western integration from a strategic policy question into a contested struggle over culture, faith and national authenticity.

Obviously, these dynamics are not confined to Georgia. Armenia, Azerbaijan and other states in the region exhibit similar structural vulnerabilities such as identity-based sensitivities, trauma from conflict, institutional fragility and

[32] Jean-Marc Rickli and Tobias Knappe, *Enhancing Cognitive Security and Societal Resilience to Counter Cognitive Warfare* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2025), 1–3.

high exposure to disinformation, thus making them equally susceptible to manipulation that undermines political unity and contributes to polarization. Once public trust erodes and human security weakens, the state's natural resistance to influence collapses.

Crucially, this is not a challenge solvable by technical cybersecurity alone. The cognitive operations cannot be countered by firewalls or attribution mechanisms. They require a whole-of-society approach that strengthens cognitive security through awareness, education, responsible information ecosystems, and resilience.[33] As cognitive warfare respects no borders, resilience must also be cooperative, synchronized, and regionally aligned.

Obviously, the core lesson is clear: societies, not servers, are the primary targets of modern cyber confrontation. In other words, when cyber tools merge with psychological narratives, social-media ecosystems, and political infiltration, external influence becomes internalized. Even though democratic institutions may still function, once the cognitive ecosystem that sustains them is progressively reoriented, it leaves states vulnerable to strategic paralysis and long-term manipulation.

Overall, the preceding discussion clearly demonstrates that resilience should be strengthened in light of societal resilience and a positive orientation toward the future. Therefore, the following recommendations are suggested.

1. National Priority: Build a Public-Private Platform for Cyber Defense

National, societal and individual resilience are interdependent, and technical capacity is the key factor. In other words, cognitive influence operations often rely on either data stolen from compromised networks or disinformation amplified through them. Although disinformation is not new, its scale, speed and sophistication have grown dramatically, enabling highly personalized campaigns. At the same time, state agencies frequently lack sufficient resources, while the most advanced cyber expertise resides in the private sector, such as, banks, telecommunications companies, ISPs and digital service

[33] Jean-Marc Rickli and Tobias Knappe, *Enhancing Cognitive Security and Societal Resilience to Counter Cognitive Warfare* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2025), 1–3.

providers. This asymmetry obviously creates systemic vulnerabilities that adversaries exploit not only to disrupt critical services but also to generate psychological uncertainty and cognitive shock.

To address this gap, states should establish a public-private platform for cyber defense, centered on a voluntary cyber reserve. Such a structure would allow private-sector specialists to be integrated during periods of elevated threat for joint training, information sharing, crisis simulations and surge support during major incidents. This model enhances the speed of incident response, improves the coherence of crisis communication and protects essential services whose disruption carries immediate cognitive and political consequences.

Pooling national expertise in this way definitely strengthens cyber posture, ensures business continuity and reduces the societal anxiety triggered even by minor cyber incidents. Technical resilience thus becomes the essential foundation upon which cognitive resilience is built.

2. Regional Priority: Joint Fact-Checking and Public Awareness Initiatives

This recommendation stresses the fact that while technical cyber cooperation may face political or legal limits, the informational domain – fact-checking, verification, and public awareness – remains fully open to regional collaboration. Cognitive warfare exploits shared emotions, cross-border narratives and synchronized disinformation flows. Accordingly, counter-measures must be equally coordinated. Expanding fact-checking and awareness-raising efforts is essential but this requires restoring public trust in those very institutions, especially when hostile actors actively demonize NGOs and independent verifiers. In this case, Georgia provides a useful precedent. Since 2016, wounded veterans have led national awareness campaigns[34] and their discipline, moral authority and authenticity grant them exceptional public credibility. Therefore, integrating such trusted messengers into counter-disinformation efforts would significantly strengthen societal resilience.

---

[34] Andria Gotsiridze and Maka Petriashvili, "Rebooting Security: An Innovative Plan for Protecting Georgia's Critical Infrastructure," *per Concordiam* 9, no. 1 (2018): 42–47, https://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/mcdocs/files/College/F_Publications/perConcordiam/percon_v9n1_eng.pdf.

A regional extension of this model would yield immediate impact. More specifically, a joint fact-checking consortium – bringing together civil society organizations, investigative journalists, and highly trusted public figures from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, particularly those in uniform – could monitor narrative manipulation in real time, expose hostile influence patterns, and inoculate societies against emotionally engineered narratives.

Obviously, even in a region marked by geopolitical tension, cognitive protection can serve as a neutral space for cooperation. All three societies confront similar psychological and informational threats, making coordinated countermeasures both feasible and strategically necessary.

3. Strategic Imperative: Integrate Human Security into All Cognitive-Resilience Planning

The most critical requirement is to embed human security at the center of national resilience strategies. This remains the missing pillar in many cyber and cognitive-defense frameworks. Indeed, cognitive warfare succeeds most effectively where insecurity, trauma, socio-economic vulnerability or cultural anxiety remain unresolved. In other words, when citizens feel economically precarious, socially excluded or their identity is threatened, disinformation gains credibility and external manipulation becomes indistinguishable from domestic discourse.

Consequently, enhancing human security, i.e. ensuring freedom from fear, want, humiliation and deliberate misinformation, is essential for strengthening societal immunity. Indeed, a population that feels protected, dignified and informed is far less susceptible to cognitive manipulation and identity-based influence operations.

From this perspective, integrating human-security principles into all stages of planning enables states to transition from merely protecting networks to protecting people. While technical defenses may prevent operational disruptions, only resilience grounded on human security can mitigate psychological erosion, societal fragmentation and the internalization of hostile narratives. In this sense, human security-driven resilience transforms a technically protected society into a psychologically resilient one, capable of resisting manipulation even under sustained pressure.

Conclusion

Ultimately, cybersecurity is not only about technology. It is about people, trust and shared responsibility. More specifically, South Caucasus will not strengthen resilience merely by upgrading systems. Instead, it will reinforce the psychological, social and informational foundations of its societies. Obviously, a region that builds public-private cyber cooperation, develops joint fact-checking mechanisms and prioritizes human security, will not only defend against hostile influence but also cultivate confidence, cohesion and strategic stability necessary for long-term peace.

Russia's asymmetric and algorithm-driven influence operations are now widely recognized. Election interference through orchestrated disinformation, coordinated inauthentic behavior, troll networks and cyberattacks exploits precisely what open societies value most, transparency, pluralism and unrestricted media environments. Although these tactics have historical roots in the Soviet psychological operations, their strategic purpose has changed. Rather than asserting ideological superiority, the objective today is to erode trust, create ambiguity and gradually hollow out an adversary's political system from within. This is the logic of reflexive control: shaping an opponent's perception of reality so effectively that they make decisions aligned with the initiator's interests, all while believing these choices to be self-determined.

Most importantly, in an era where cognitive operations cross borders faster than armies, defending the mind has become inseparable from defending the state. When individuals are protected from disinformation and encouraged to think critically and constructively, they are more likely to support and actively contribute to the protection of their state.

Accordingly, countering the evolution of cognitive confrontation requires more than purely technical defensive measures. It requires a proactive, human-centered strategy that strengthens cognitive security, reinforces institutional integrity and equips citizens to navigate manipulated information environments. Enhancing societal awareness, building trust in credible information sources and promoting a whole-of-society approach can significantly reduce the impact of malign influence operations and safeguard the democratic foundations of open societies.

References

Anti-Western Propaganda and Disinformation Amid 2024 Parliamentary Elections: Interim Report, 1 July–1 October 2024**.** Tbilisi: Media Development Foundation, 2024.

Bugayova, Nataliya, and Kateryna Stepanenko. *A Primer on Russian Cognitive Warfare*. Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War Press, Institute for the Study of War, June 30, 2025.

Bundesministerium des Innern. *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2016: Spionage und sonstige nachrichtendienstliche Aktivitäten*. Berlin: Bundesministerium des Innern, 2017.

Cecire, Michael. "China's Black Sea Play." *RAND Commentary*, August 5, 2025. https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/08/chinas-black-sea-play.html.

Claverie, Bernard, and François du Cluzel. *Cognitive Warfare: The Fight for Your Brain*. Norfolk, VA: NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2023. https://innovationhub-act.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CW-article-Claverie-du-Cluzel-final_0.pdf.

Connell, Michael, and Sarah Vogler. *Russia's Approach to Cyber Warfare*. Arlington, VA: CNA, 2017. CNA Occasional Paper. Performed under Federal Government Contract No. N00014-16-D-5003.

Defense Intelligence Agency. *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance*. Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019.

Defense Intelligence Agency. *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations*. DIA-11-1704-161. Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017.

Dickson, Julia, and Emily Harding. *A Playbook for Winning the Cyber War, Part 2: Evaluating Russia's Cyber Strategy*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Intelligence, National Security, and Technology Program, September 2025.

Dickson, Julia, and Emily Harding. *A Playbook for Winning the Cyber War, Part 4: Evaluating Iran's Cyber Strategy*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Intelligence, National Security, and Technology Program, September 2025.

du Cluzel, François. *Cognitive Warfare*. Norfolk, VA: NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2021. https://innovationhub-act.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20210113_CW-Final-v2-.pdf.

Freedom House. *Armenia: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report*. Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2020.

Galante, Laura, and Shaun Ee. *Defining Russian Election Interference: An Analysis of Select 2014 to 2018 Cyber-Enabled Incidents*. Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, September 2018.

Gotsiridze, Andria, and Maka Petriashvili. "Rebooting Security: An Innovative Plan for Protecting Georgia's Critical Infrastructure." *per Concordiam* 9, no. 1 (2018): 42–47. https://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/mcdocs/files/College/F_Publications/perConcordiam/percon_v9n1_eng.pdf.

Jaitner, Margarita, and Peter A. Mattsson. "Russian Information Warfare of 2014." In *2015 7th International Conference on Cyber Conflict: Architectures in Cyberspace*, edited by M. Maybaum, A.-M. Osula, and L. Lindström, 39–52. Tallinn: NATO CCD COE Publications, 2015.

Lewis, James A. *Cyber War and Ukraine*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023.

Lewis, James A. "Compelling Opponents to Our Will: The Role of Cyber Warfare in Ukraine." In *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, edited by Kenneth Geers, 39–48. Tallinn: NATO CCDCOE, 2015.

Mandalenakis, Elena. "Understanding Human Security and Resilience." In *Building Resilience Against Human Security Threats and Risks: From Best Practices to Strategies*. Vienna, 2025. ISBN 978-3-903548-12-1.

Pusztaszeri, Aosheng, Emily Harding, and Julia Dickson. *A Playbook for Winning the Cyber War, Part 3: Evaluating China's Cyber Strategy*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Intelligence, National Security, and Technology Program, September 2025.

Rickli, Jean-Marc, and Tobias Knappe. *Enhancing Cognitive Security and Societal Resilience to Counter Cognitive Warfare*. Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2025.

Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Voo, Julia, and Virpratap Vikram Singh. *Russia's Information Confrontation Doctrine in Practice (2014–Present): Intent, Evolution and Implications*. London: RUSI, June 2025.

Tikk, Eneken, Kadri Kaska, and Liis Vihul. *International Cyber Incidents: Legal Considerations*. Tallinn: NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, 2010.

Voo, Julia, and Virpratap Vikram Singh. *Russia's Information Confrontation Doctrine in Practice (2014–Present): Intent, Evolution and Implications*. London: Royal United Services Institute, June 2025.

Digital Connectivity and Confidence-Building across Eurasia: Azerbaijan's Multilateral Strategy in the Emerging Digital Order

Vusal Guliyev

Introduction

Azerbaijan has emerged as a pivotal Eurasian state, connecting East and West through traditional transportation, logistics corridors, as well as energy pipelines. It is also becoming an important hub for digital networks that support contemporary economic and political interactions. Benefiting from its strategic position at the crossroads of Europe, Central Asia, the South Caucasus and the Middle East, Azerbaijan is positioning itself as a digital bridge across Eurasia, complementing physical connectivity with data flows, digital services, and interoperable governance frameworks. In this context, digital transformation is not just a domestic modernization effort, but rather an integral component of Azerbaijan's foreign policy and regional integration strategy.

Within this evolving landscape, Baku has adopted a proactive and multi-layered approach to digital diplomacy by engaging with a variety of multilateral and minilateral platforms, such as the Middle Corridor Initiative (MCI), the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Through these frameworks, Azerbaijan seeks to advance digital connectivity, e-governance, cyber resilience, data protection, and confidence-building measures (CBMs) across the wider Eurasian space. Although these platforms differ in institutional depth, membership composition, and strategic orientation, together they provide flexible mechanisms for promoting digital cooperation, aligning standards, and fostering trust among diverse regional actors. By engaging across multiple formats simultaneously, Azerbaijan enhances its ability to act as a convening power and an agenda-setter in debates on the digital dimensions of regional integration.

A defining feature of Azerbaijan's approach is its emphasis on the complementarity of physical and digital corridors. For example, initiatives associated with the Middle Corridor, are increasingly linked to digital logistics platforms, smart customs systems, and cross-border data-exchange mechanisms. These initiatives are designed to enhance efficiency, transparency, and resilience of Eurasian supply chains. Within the OTS framework, Azerbaijan promotes the harmonization of digital governance practices, the expansion of e-government services, and cooperation on cybersecurity, reflecting shared linguistic, cultural, and political affinities among Turkic states. Engaging with the BRI and SCO enables Baku to participate in broader Eurasian debates on digital infrastructure development, digital trade, and information and communication technology security. CICA on the other hand, offers a platform for addressing emerging cyber threats and evolving norms of responsible state behavior through confidence-building mechanisms.

Most importantly, these overlapping platforms allow Azerbaijan to incorporate its national digital transformation agenda into broader regional frameworks. Domestically, the expansion of e-governance, digital public services, and cybersecurity capabilities strengthens state capacity, administrative transparency, and economic diversification beyond the hydrocarbon sector. Regionally, Azerbaijan's initiatives contribute to narrowing the digital divide, enhancing interoperability, and fostering trust among participating states by establishing shared standards and cooperative mechanisms. By aligning its national priorities with regional digital agendas, Baku positions itself as both a beneficiary, and an active contributor to Eurasia's digital integration.

This article examines how Azerbaijan strategically employs multilateral and minilateral frameworks to advance its digital objectives, arguing that digital connectivity has become a central pillar of the country's foreign and economic policy. It explores how Azerbaijan's engagement in the MCI, OTS, BRI, SCO, and CICA simultaneously supports domestic modernization, facilitates economic diversification, and contributes to regional stability by fostering resilience, transparency, and confidence in an increasingly interconnected and contested digital environment.

Conceptual and Geopolitical Context

While these multilateral engagements form the visible architecture of Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy, their effectiveness is rooted in a deeper conceptual synthesis of geography, connectivity, and contemporary statecraft. Azerbaijan's digital strategy is anchored in a multidimensional understanding of connectivity that integrates transport corridors, energy networks, and information flows into a unified geopolitical and economic vision. Rather than viewing digitalization as a purely technological or administrative reform, Baku conceptualizes it as a strategic enabler that enhances the value, resilience, and international relevance of its physical connectivity infrastructure. This perspective reflects Azerbaijan's long-standing role as a transit and hub state, historically shaped by its position along major trade routes and, more recently, by its function as a key energy and logistics bridge between East and West.

The geostrategic advantage of Azerbaijan has been translated into concrete infrastructure investments, most notably in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, called the Middle Corridor. Linking China and Central Asia with European markets via the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye, the Middle Corridor has gained heightened strategic significance amid global efforts to diversify supply chains and reduce reliance on a limited number of transit routes. Azerbaijan's central role within this corridor is reinforced by sustained investments in port infrastructure, rail connectivity, customs modernization, and logistics hubs, positioning the country as a critical transit gateway across Eurasia.

In recent years, digitalization has emerged as a crucial complement to this physical connectivity. Initiatives such as the Digital Silk Way demonstrate Azerbaijan's efforts to extend the logic of transit and hub-building into the digital domain. This initiative aims to establish a secure, high-capacity fiber-optic backbone linking Europe and Asia through the Caspian basin. Furthermore, it aims to facilitate high-speed data transit, reduce latency, and enhance the redundancy and security of Eurasian digital routes. In an era marked by growing concerns over data security, geopolitical fragmentation, and the vulnerability of critical digital infrastructure, Azerbaijan's promotion of diversified data corridors reflects both economic pragmatism and strategic foresight. Digital infrastructure thus emerges not only as an economic asset, but

also as a geopolitical instrument enhancing Azerbaijan's relevance in regional and global connectivity debates.

At the domestic level, Azerbaijan has aligned this outward-facing connectivity agenda with an ambitious program of digital transformation and e-governance. Digital public services, electronic platforms, and one-stop-shop service models are designed to modernize public administration, increase transparency reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies, and improve citizens' access to state services. These reforms are driven by the recognition that effective participation in regional digital corridors requires a robust domestic digital ecosystem capable of generating trust among users, investors, and international partners. In this sense, e-governance serves both internal governance objectives and external credibility-building functions.

These reforms are supported by an evolving legal and institutional framework. Azerbaijan has established specialized cybersecurity and information-security bodies tasked with protecting critical infrastructure, ensuring the integrity of digital services, and coordinating responses to cyber threats. At the same time, it has developed a national framework for personal data protection grounded in domestic legislation and informed by international commitments, including convergence with emerging European standards. This evolution reflects an understanding that sustainable and internationally interoperable digital connectivity must be accompanied by credible safeguards for privacy, security, and digital rights.

Against this conceptual and geopolitical backdrop, Azerbaijan's engagement with multilateral and minilateral frameworks can be understood as a deliberate strategy to embed national digital priorities within wider regional architectures. Through these platforms, Azerbaijan advances five interrelated objectives: enhancing digital connectivity, expanding e-governance cooperation, strengthening cyber resilience, ensuring robust data protection, and promoting confidence-building measures. Collectively, these objectives illustrate how Azerbaijan leverages geography, institutional reform, and diplomatic engagement to position itself as an emerging digital hub and a constructive contributor to Eurasia's evolving digital order. This conceptual shift from physical transit to integrated data hubs finds its most immediate expression in the Middle Corridor, where the movement of goods is increasingly overlaid with a high-capacity digital layer.

Digital Connectivity Within the Wider Framework of the MCI

Within the framework of the Middle Corridor Initiative, Azerbaijan has deliberately positioned itself as both the logistical and digital hub of the Trans-Caspian route, integrating physical transport infrastructure with emerging digital networks. Since the late 2010s – and with renewed momentum following disruptions to traditional Eurasian transit routes after 2022 – Baku has framed the Middle Corridor not simply as an alternative transport pathway, but as a technologically enabled connectivity ecosystem. This approach aligns with broader regional efforts to enhance the efficiency, resilience, and competitiveness of east-west supply chains linking China and Central Asia with the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and European markets (Institute for Development and Diplomacy, 2022; Caspian-Alpine Society, 2025).

Azerbaijan's central role within the corridor is reinforced by sustained investments in core physical infrastructure. The Port of Baku, developed as a modern multimodal logistics hub on the Caspian Sea, serves as the principal maritime gateway of the route, facilitating containerized cargo flows between Central Asia and the South Caucasus (Jamestown Foundation, 2025; AIR Center, 2025). In 2022, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Digital Development and Transport implemented standardized procedures for cargo management at the Port of Baku. These "Procedural Rules" provide a clear and uniform framework for handling transit cargo, enhancing consistency and predictability in maritime freight operations along the Middle Corridor (Ministry of Digital Development and Transport of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022). In parallel, the Azerbaijani government is developing comparable regulatory mechanisms at other border-crossing points to further harmonize and digitize the country's transit freight system. The introduction of a "Digital Customs Value" system in September 2025, aimed at strengthening transparency and fairness in customs valuation while continuing the standardization of logistics sector regulations (AzerNews, 2025).

Digital tools are increasingly integrated into port operations at the Port of Baku, improving container-handling efficiency, enhancing coordination between rail and maritime operators, and increasing transparency for corridor users (Centre for Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communication, 2025). Beyond logistical upgrades, the Port of Baku has also advanced considerably in the adoption of environmentally sustainable technologies. In

2019, it became the first port in the Caspian Basin to be designated a "Green Seaport". Through the integration of renewable energy and environmentally sound waste management practices, the port has substantially lowered its carbon footprint while enhancing operational efficiency. Looking ahead, the port's leadership has set an ambitious target to reach net-zero emissions by 2035 through the deployment of advanced technologies (Port of Baku, 2025; Jamestown Foundation, 2025).

In parallel, the modernization and operational expansion of key railway links – most notably the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (BTK) – have significantly increased Azerbaijan's capacity to accommodate rising transit volumes while reducing delivery times along the Trans-Caspian route. In September 2024 and July 2025, ADY ("Azerbaijan Railways" CJSC) concluded agreements with Chinese companies aimed at facilitating freight shipments along the BTK railway within the Middle Corridor (ADY, 2025). Subsequently, in October 2025, ADY signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Türkiye and Georgia. The primary objectives of this MoU were to enhance the competitiveness of the BTK route in comparison to alternative transport corridors, to increase cargo volumes through the optimization of transit times, and to introduce competitive tariffs that would facilitate sustainable transport operations and transparent freight pricing (ADY, 2025). These multilateral partnerships have been complemented by reforms in customs administration and border management aimed at minimizing procedural bottlenecks and improving predictability for transit operators (World Bank, 2023; IDD, 2022; AIR Center, 2025).

Azerbaijan has also actively advanced the digitalization of corridor operations through the adoption of technology-driven logistics solutions. Key initiatives include the development of single-window platforms such as *ADY Smart* by Azerbaijan Railways since 2024, the establishment of digital transit-management centers, and the deployment of automated cargo-tracking and scheduling systems (ADY, 2024; Report News Agency, 2024). As a result, cargo processing now takes only 20 minutes, thanks to the digital work permit system, which eliminates the need for paper documentation. In parallel, the adoption of international digital freight platforms – particularly *eCIM/SMGS* electronic consignment notes for rail transport – has facilitated smoother cross-border freight movement and reduced administrative delays

along the corridor (Coordinating Council of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Transit Freight, 2025).

Looking ahead, the comprehensive modernization of Azerbaijan's national communications networks and domestic telecommunications infrastructure represents another core pillar of government-backed digitalization efforts. These efforts aimed at strengthening the transshipment capacity and long-term sustainability of the Middle Corridor. In practical terms, AzerTelecom, the country's primary internet backbone provider, and Azerbaijan Railways have collaborated on the construction of commercial fiber-optic cable lines along railway corridors. This initiative is part of the broader Azerbaijan Digital Hub project (TREND News Agency, 2019).

This initiative is critical for ensuring high-speed internet access for logistics centers, industrial zones, and border checkpoints along the corridor. Integrating fiber-optic networks into railway infrastructure also enhances communication reliability for rail operations, enables real-time cargo monitoring, and supports the gradual deployment of smart transportation systems. Reflecting the strategic importance of these efforts, in October 2024 the Asian Development Bank announced an investment of approximately USD 47 million to further digitalize Azerbaijan's railway network under the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program (Asian Development Bank, 2024; AIR Center, 2025).

Another central pillar of Azerbaijan's digital connectivity strategy within the MCI is the Digital Silk Way project (initiated by Baku-based NEQSOL Holding and implemented by AzerTelecom).This is promoted both by public institutions and private-sector stakeholders as a digital counterpart to the Trans-Caspian route (Digitalsilkway.az, 2026). This strategic project envisages the construction of a fiber-optic cable along the seabed of the Caspian Sea, connecting Azerbaijan with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and enabling high-capacity data transmission with internet connectivity of up to 400 terabits per second (NEQSOL Holding, 2025). The initiative aims to establish high-capacity, secure digital infrastructure along the Middle Corridor, including terrestrial fiber-optic networks across Azerbaijan and submarine or hybrid cable systems across the Caspian Sea. Discussions and feasibility assess-

ments gained particular prominence in 2023–2024, reflecting growing interest among regional and European partners in diversifying data-transit routes (Daily Sabah, 2024; NEQSOL Holding, 2025).

By linking data hubs in Central Asia with networks in the South Caucasus and onward to Europe, the Digital Silk Way seeks to reduce data-transmission latency while enhancing redundancy and reliability. This responds directly to the rapid growth of east-west data flows driven by cloud computing, e-commerce, financial technologies, and digitally enabled services, as well as to concerns over congestion and geopolitical vulnerability affecting traditional northern and southern data routes (UNCTAD, 2021; OECD, 2021). Consequently, the Digital Silk Way enhances the strategic significance of the Middle Corridor beyond physical trade into the digital domain.

Embedding digital connectivity within the MCI serves several interrelated strategic objectives for Azerbaijan. Firstly, it enhances the resilience of regional and global data flows by offering a credible alternative digital corridor that is geographically efficient, politically stable, and increasingly integrated with European digital markets. This diversification aligns with the interests of both European and Asian stakeholders seeking secure and commercially viable data routes amid growing geopolitical uncertainty (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2024). Secondly, it enables Azerbaijan to capture greater economic value from data transit, colocation services, and digital-infrastructure management, reinforcing its long-term strategy of economic diversification beyond hydrocarbons.

More broadly, Azerbaijan's approach within the MCI illustrates how digital infrastructure has become an integral component of contemporary connectivity strategies. By aligning investments in ports, railways, and logistics with fiber-optic networks and data-transit facilities, Azerbaijan advances a model of hybrid connectivity in which the movement of goods, energy, and data is mutually reinforcing. This approach enhances the efficiency and competitiveness of the Middle Corridor while embedding Azerbaijan more deeply within Eurasia's evolving digital architecture. These efficiency gains are further amplified by Azerbaijan's engagement with the Organization of Turkic States, which provides the institutional and cultural foundation necessary to harmonize the digital regulations and standards underpinning these critical trade routes.

The OTS as a Platform for Turkic Digital Connectivity

Within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), Azerbaijan actively promotes Turkic-wide digital integration as a natural extension of deepening political, economic, and connectivity cooperation among member states. Since the institutional transformation of the Turkic Council into the OTS in 2021, digitalization has emerged as an increasingly prominent pillar of cooperation alongside transport, trade, and energy. Baku has consistently promoted the development of common standards in telecommunications, roaming regulation, as well as information and communication technologies (ICT) by building on shared linguistic, cultural, and historical ties. In doing so, Baku has regarded regulatory harmonization as a prerequisite for fostering meaningful and sustainable digital interdependence. This agenda is consistent with the overarching objectives of the OTS, namely the enhancement of intra-Turkic trade, mobility, and institutional coherence. It is also aligned with the advancement of Azerbaijan's vision for the Turkic space as an increasingly contiguous digital and economic zone (Jamestown Foundation, 2025).

The material foundations of this digital agenda are reinforced by the growing volume of transit traffic among OTS member states along the Middle Corridor. As cargo flows between Türkiye, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia have expanded – particularly after 2022 – Azerbaijan has emphasized the importance of aligning digital infrastructure development with these physical movements. Policy discussions within OTS working groups and summit declarations increasingly highlight the need for parallel investments in cross-border fiber-optic connectivity, data-exchange facilities, and digital logistics platforms to support efficient and resilient corridor operations (Jamestown Foundation, 2025; World Bank, 2024). By promoting the integration of fiber-optic networks along railways, highways, and energy routes, Baku advances a model in which data flow alongside goods and services, thus reinforcing both efficiency and resilience across Turkic connectivity corridors.

A particularly illustrative example of this approach is Azerbaijan's support for submarine and terrestrial fiber-optic infrastructure across the Caspian Sea, aimed at strengthening digital connectivity among OTS member countries. Central to this effort is the Trans-Caspian Fiber-Optic Cable Project, launched by AzerTelecom in late 2018 as part of the broader Digital Silk Way

initiative. As discussed earlier, the project aims to establish a high-capacity digital telecommunications corridor between Europe and Asia. Implemented in two phases, the first phase involves the construction of a backbone fiber-optic cable linking Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan via the seabed of the Caspian Sea, while the second phase envisages a similar connection between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan (Digitalsilkway.az, 2025). By enabling high-speed data transmission between Central Asia and the South Caucasus, these projects are expected to enhance network redundancy and reduce latency for Turkic data traffic, while positioning Azerbaijan as a key digital hub linking Central Asian OTS member states with Türkiye and European markets.

The OTS has played a proactive role in facilitating Middle Corridor-related agreements among Turkic states. These multi-party arrangements range from the modernization of existing terminal facilities to the provision of technical assistance and operational coordination. For example, the Port of Baku has maintained "sister port" agreements with Kazakhstan's Port of Aktau and Türkiye's Port of Samsun since 2013, with the objective of optimizing transport operations across the Middle Corridor as an integrated system (Turkic Council, 2019; The Organization of Turkic States, 2024).

Furthermore, the existence of bilateral precedents has contributed to the development of OTS-wide digital initiatives. The mutual recognition of electronic signatures between Azerbaijan and Türkiye for customs and trade documentation, implemented in 2019, is frequently cited as a practical model for broader Turkic cooperation (Ministry of Digital Development and Transport of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2019). Building on this experience, OTS discussions increasingly explore the mutual recognition of digital identities, interoperability of e-signatures, and the alignment of business-registration and customs platforms as incremental yet pragmatic steps toward a more integrated Turkic digital market.

In mid-2022, Azerbaijan also established a partnership with Türkiye's Albayrak Group to enhance port management practices and improve bulk cargo-handling efficiency through the exchange of advanced technological and operational practices (Trend News Agency, 2022; Institute for Development and Diplomacy, 2022). Collectively, these collaborations aim to promote the sharing of expertise in port governance, increase operational efficiency, and stimulate higher trade volumes along the corridor.

In this context, the Ankara Declaration, signed on 29 January 2025 by Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan, underscores the importance of advancing digitalization policies along the transport corridors linking the Turkic states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2025). The declaration highlights the advantages of the e-permit mechanism in digitalizing transport operations, particularly its role in addressing inefficiencies associated with paper-based permits. The signatories also welcomed the ongoing pilot implementation of the e-Permit system between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, as well as between Türkiye and Uzbekistan. At the same time, they reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening intergovernmental cooperation aimed at further developing multimodal transport infrastructure, modernizing rail and road networks, and expanding digital connectivity across their territories (AIR Center, 2025).

In addition to the above-mentioned examples, emerging discussions within the OTS are increasingly focusing on data-hosting cooperation and the potential development of regional cloud infrastructure. Azerbaijani policymakers and private-sector stakeholders have supported the creation of interoperable data centers and cloud services serving OTS member states, with the objectives of localizing data storage, strengthening cybersecurity, and supporting the growth of regional digital-services ecosystems (Caspian News, 2025). These discussions signal a broader ambition to move from infrastructure-led connectivity toward functional digital integration, in which shared platforms and services generate tangible economic value.

Concrete progress has been also reflected in summit-level outcomes and ministerial discussions. The 2025 OTS Summit in Gabala emphasized the role of digital customs and transport tools – such as e-Permit, e-CMR, and e-TIR systems – in streamlining trade procedures, reducing administrative costs, and enabling smoother cross-border operations along Turkic corridors (Organization of Turkic States, 2025; Caspian Post, 2025). These tools are particularly significant for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often face disproportionate burdens from fragmented regulatory regimes and paper-based procedures.

Azerbaijan's initiatives within the OTS also place strong emphasis on trust-building grounded in shared identity, leveraging linguistic and cultural proximity to lower political and regulatory barriers to digital cooperation. Joint

initiatives in e-commerce platforms, digital payment systems, and interoperable digital public-service portals are increasingly framed as instruments for facilitating cross-border business activity, supporting SMEs, and strengthening people-to-people connectivity across the Turkic world. In this respect, digitalization is regarded not solely as a technical process, but also as a confidence-building mechanism that reinforces institutional solidarity within the OTS.

Through these cumulative efforts, Azerbaijan employs the OTS not merely as a political or symbolic forum, but as a functional platform for constructing a coherent Turkic digital ecosystem extending from Anatolia through the South Caucasus into Central Asia. This ecosystem is envisioned as one in which regulatory alignment, infrastructure interconnection, and shared digital services collectively reduce transaction costs, enhance regional competitiveness, and strengthen strategic cohesion among Turkic states. In advancing this agenda, Azerbaijan reinforces its role as both a connector and a coordinator within the Turkic world, promoting a model of digital integration that complements physical connectivity and contributes to the long-term institutional consolidation of the OTS. Beyond the regional cohesion fostered within the Turkic space, Azerbaijan's digital ambitions also intersect with global infrastructure dynamics, most notably through its calibrated engagement with China's Digital Silk Road under the broader Belt and Road Initiative.

Digital Connectivity and Technology Cooperation under the BRI

Within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Azerbaijan has progressively expanded its cooperation with China in the fields of digital infrastructure and advanced technologies, extending bilateral engagement beyond the traditional pillars of transport, logistics, and energy into the rapidly evolving digital economy. This shift has become increasingly evident since the late 2010s, as digital connectivity has been recognized by both sides as a critical component of contemporary infrastructure development and a long-term driver of economic growth (China State Council, 2015; OECD, 2021). High-level political dialogue – reinforced through presidential meetings, intergovernmental commissions, and memoranda concluded during bilateral visits and multilateral forums – has provided the institutional foundation for

broadening Azerbaijan-China cooperation into digital domains (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024).

This evolution closely corresponds with the growing prominence of the Digital Silk Road (DSR) within the broader BRI framework. Initially articulated in China's *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* and subsequently reinforced through sector-specific policy documents, the DSR emphasizes cooperation in telecommunications, digital trade, smart cities, and innovation ecosystems (China State Council, 2015; Xinhua News Agency, 2023). Azerbaijan's engagement with this agenda reflects a convergence of strategic interests: for China, Azerbaijan represents a stable partner situated along a key Eurasian land bridge; for Azerbaijan, cooperation with China offers access to advanced technologies, financing instruments, and implementation experience in large-scale digital infrastructure projects (Jamestown Foundation, 2023).

These interactions have translated into concrete areas of cooperation, including broadband expansion, fifth-generation (5G) telecommunications, satellite and space-based technologies, and broader digital-economy development. Since the late 2010s and early 2020s, Chinese technology firms and vendors such as Huawei and ZTE have emerged as important partners in supporting Azerbaijan's efforts to modernize its digital backbone, enhance nationwide connectivity, and prepare for next-generation communication networks. Such cooperation has featured prominently in meetings of the Azerbaijan-China Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation, as well as in Belt and Road Initiative-related forums and technology exhibitions (Caucasus Strategic Perspectives, 2022).

In this regard, back in 2019, Azerbaijan's State Customs Committee reached an agreement to establish a long-term collaboration with China's telecommunications conglomerate, Huawei, to modernize and automate the country's customs system using cutting-edge technologies (AzerNews, 2019). This partnership led to the implementation of an integrated customs management system for international trade and transport operations, incorporating Single Window systems that enhance connectivity and digitization across border crossings and customs ecosystems (The Azerbaijan State News Agency, 2019). By leveraging automation, Azerbaijan has significantly improved the efficiency, accuracy, and transparency of its customs operations,

reducing processing times and minimizing the risk of errors or fraudulent activities in trade transactions (AIR Center, 2025).

Similarly, the most recent intergovernmental deals, reached in 2024 between Azerbaijan and China, provide a further illustration of this deepening partnership. In particular, the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Routes for the China-Europe Railway Express (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024), together with the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China on jointly accelerating the preparation of a cooperation plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (AZTV, 2024), signal the opening of a new phase of bilateral cooperation. These agreements reflect a shared commitment to advancing transport and logistics through coordinated interstate modernization projects.

Collectively, these bilateral partnerships support Azerbaijan's strategic ambition to position itself as a regional digital hub facilitating east-west data flows across Eurasia. Azerbaijan seeks to move beyond a purely transit-based model and to host value-added digital activities, including cloud services, fintech platforms, e-commerce logistics, and data-driven transport management systems. This can be achieved by strengthening domestic digital infrastructure and aligning it with transregional transport and logistics corridors. International organizations increasingly emphasize the importance of integrating digital layers into physical connectivity corridors, particularly along Eurasian routes linking China with Europe (UNCTAD, 2021; World Bank, 2024).

Chinese expertise and investment are also viewed as important enablers of Azerbaijan's smart infrastructure agenda, especially in the context of post-conflict reconstruction in liberated territories. These areas have been designated as pilot zones for smart cities and smart villages, where digital governance systems, intelligent transport solutions, renewable-energy integration, and high-speed connectivity are incorporated from the outset. Cooperation with Chinese partners in smart urban technologies and digital public services has been framed as a means of accelerating reconstruction while introducing

advanced technological standards (Caucasus Strategic Perspectives, 2022; Asian Development Bank, 2023; AIR Center, 2025).

By embedding digital technologies into urban planning and public-service delivery, Azerbaijan seeks to demonstrate how digitalization can support inclusive growth, efficient resource management, and improved quality of life. This approach aligns with the broader recalibration of the BRI in the early 2020s toward "high-quality development," innovation, and sustainability, with increased emphasis on technology-intensive and digitally enabled projects (Xinhua News Agency, 2023).

In this context, the Digital Silk Way functions as a regional digital extension of the BRI, creating synergies between China's technological capabilities and Azerbaijan's geographic position along key Eurasian corridors. By linking Chinese digital infrastructure initiatives with the Trans-Caspian route and Azerbaijan's domestic digital transformation agenda, this concept reinforces Azerbaijan's role as a bridge between Asian and European digital ecosystems (NEQSOL Holding, 2025). Investments in fiber-optic connectivity, data-transmission infrastructure, and regional digital hubs demonstrate an increasing convergence of physical and digital infrastructure development.

Azerbaijan has strategically sought to integrate BRI-related digital cooperation with China within a comprehensive multi-vector connectivity framework. Instead of treating the BRI as an independent framework, Baku chooses to align its engagement with China with parallel initiatives under the Middle Corridor, cooperation within the Organization of Turkic States, and interaction with European digital markets. This approach allows Azerbaijan to benefit from Chinese technological innovation and financing while preserving strategic flexibility and regulatory compatibility with multiple partners (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2024).

Ultimately, Azerbaijan's participation in the digital dimension of the BRI underscores its ambition to evolve from a transit country into an active stakeholder shaping Eurasia's emerging digital economy. By embedding digital infrastructure, smart technologies, and data connectivity into BRI cooperation with China, Azerbaijan advances its broader strategy of leveraging digital connectivity as a source of economic diversification, geopolitical relevance,

and sustainable development across the Eurasian space. While the BRI provides key technological and financial inputs for Azerbaijan's digital backbone, the country's parallel engagement with the SCO and CICA serves to embed these capabilities within the wider security and confidence-building architectures of the Asian continent.

Digital Engagement through the SCO and CICA Platforms

Although Azerbaijan is not a founding member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, it has steadily expanded its engagement with SCO structures, dialogue mechanisms, and member states as part of a broader strategy to embed itself within evolving Eurasian governance frameworks. High-level contacts between Azerbaijan and SCO members have intensified in recent years, particularly through bilateral meetings held on the margins of SCO summits and ministerial gatherings. Consultations conducted in 2024-2025 between President Ilham Aliyev and SCO leaders and senior officials underscore Baku's interest in remaining closely aligned with the organization's evolving agenda, especially in areas related to digital transformation and regional connectivity (President of Azerbaijan, 2025).

This pattern of engagement reflects Azerbaijan's pragmatic approach to multilateralism, in which participation in diverse regional formats complements – rather than replaces – existing institutional commitments. Within the SCO context, Azerbaijan has demonstrated particular interest in digital infrastructure development, cybersecurity cooperation, digital trade facilitation, and technology transfer (The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2025). These areas have gained increasing prominence as digitalization reshapes both economic competitiveness and regional security dynamics. Correspondingly, SCO strategic documents and summit declarations since the early 2020s have emphasized the development of the digital economy, cooperation in information and communication technologies, and enhanced coordination against cybercrime and the misuse of information technologies (SCO Secretariat, 2023; Jamestown Foundation, 2025).

Azerbaijan's expanding cooperation with Central Asian SCO members – most notably Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – is especially significant in this regard. These partnerships closely align with Azerbaijan's broader connectivity agenda under the Middle Corridor Initiative and its activities within the

Organization of Turkic States. Overlapping institutional engagements facilitate the gradual harmonization of digital standards, regulatory approaches, and technical solutions across Eurasian transit routes. In practical terms, this cooperation has involved discussions on interoperable digital customs systems, cross-border data exchange, and the digitalization of logistics and transport corridors linking the South Caucasus with Central Asia and China (World Bank, 2024).

Cybersecurity and information security constitute another important area of convergence between Azerbaijan's priorities and the SCO's agenda. Since the adoption of the SCO Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of International Information Security, the organization has increasingly framed cyberspace as an extension of national and regional security. Azerbaijan's participation in SCO expert-level discussions on protecting critical information infrastructure, combating cybercrime, and promoting norms of responsible state behavior in cyberspace enables experience-sharing and policy alignment. This engagement supports Azerbaijan's domestic cyber-resilience efforts while situating them within a broader Eurasian security framework emphasizing sovereignty, stability, and coordinated responses (SCO Secretariat, 2022; UNIDIR, 2023).

Parallel to its SCO engagement, Azerbaijan has assumed a more proactive role within the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, particularly following its assumption of the chairmanship for the 2024-2026 period. Under this mandate, Baku has explicitly prioritized digital connectivity as a driver of economic growth, post-conflict reconstruction, and long-term stability across CICA's diverse membership. Digital transformation features prominently in Azerbaijan's CICA agenda alongside traditional confidence-building domains such as economic cooperation and sustainable development (CICA Secretariat, 2024).

Within CICA, Azerbaijan has promoted broadband connectivity, the exchange of best practices in e-governance – most notably through the presentation of its ASAN service model – and the integration of smart city and smart village concepts into development-oriented confidence-building measures. These initiatives have been highlighted at CICA ministerial meetings and expert forums in 2024 and 2025, where digital public services were

framed as tools for enhancing transparency, administrative efficiency, and social inclusion (CICA Secretariat, 2025).

Similarly, Azerbaijan has put forward several key initiatives for 2025 within the framework of confidence-building measures. These include a conference focused on sharing best practices in the digitalization of transport corridors, an event aimed at increasing the involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises in trade through e-commerce. Other such initiatives include a forum dedicated to digital transformation and innovation, and specialized cybersecurity training programs for experts from CICA member states (Report News Agency, 2025).

Compared to the SCO, Azerbaijan's engagement within CICA is development-oriented. While SCO discussions tend to prioritize information security, cyber threats, and digital sovereignty, CICA's broader and more heterogeneous membership allows Azerbaijan to advance digital connectivity as an inclusive and non-zero-sum process. By presenting digital infrastructure and interoperable public services as enablers of development and social cohesion, Azerbaijan positions digitalization as a constructive area of cooperation, particularly relevant for post-conflict and developing states (Asian Development Bank, 2023).

Azerbaijan has advanced digital initiatives within the CICA framework, explicitly as confidence-building measures. The promotion of transparency in digital policymaking, the sharing practical experience in cybersecurity governance, and the support of the development of open, secure, and interoperable digital corridors are the primary mechanisms by which Baku seeks to reduce mistrust and foster cooperative norms among participating states. This approach aligns with CICA's original confidence-building rationale while it adapts to the realities of digital interdependence and technological competition.

Taken together, Azerbaijan's engagement with both the SCO and CICA enables it to bridge security-oriented and development-oriented approaches to digitalization. Through SCO-related processes, Azerbaijan contributes to debates on cyber resilience, information security, and digital sovereignty; through CICA, it advances a more inclusive vision linking digital connectivity to development, reconstruction, and trust-building. This dual-track strategy

reinforces Azerbaijan's broader objective of positioning digital connectivity as a shared Eurasian interest underpinning regional stability, resilience, and mutual confidence. Importantly, this diplomatic emphasis on stability extends beyond high-level forums and is operationalized through the transfer and implementation of e-governance models designed to strengthen the citizen-state relationship as a foundation for both domestic legitimacy and regional trust.

E-Governance as a Confidence-Building Measure

Beyond their administrative and economic functions, e-governance initiatives in Azerbaijan are deliberately framed as instruments of confidence-building, particularly in the sensitive context of post-conflict reconstruction and societal reintegration. International governance and peacebuilding literature increasingly recognizes that transparent, accessible, and predictable public services play a critical role in rebuilding trust between citizens and state institutions in post-conflict settings (World Bank, 2017; OECD, 2020). Azerbaijan's digital governance strategy reflects this understanding by embedding e-governance within reconstruction policies as a stabilizing and trust-enhancing mechanism, rather than treating it as a purely technical reform.

In territories liberated following the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the Azerbaijani government has prioritized the deployment of smart city and smart village models that integrate digital public services into everyday governance from the earliest stages of resettlement and reconstruction. Policy documents and official development plans emphasize the use of digital platforms to ensure immediate access to essential services, including civil registration, social benefits administration, healthcare appointments, education services, and municipal management (Asian Development Bank, 2023; CSP, 2022). By delivering these services through unified digital interfaces, authorities aim to minimize administrative friction, enhance service predictability, and establish a consistent and visible state presence in areas undergoing rapid socio-economic transformation.

Providing high-quality digital public services from the outset also serves a broader political and social signalling function. The provision of e-services as a public good – accessible regardless of geographic location or social status

– signals a commitment to inclusive development and equitable governance, both widely regarded as prerequisites for sustainable peace in post-conflict societies (UNDP, 2016; World Bank, 2020). By reducing bureaucratic discretion and increasing transparency, digital platforms help mitigate perceptions of exclusion or unequal treatment that can otherwise contribute to grievance formation. In this sense, e-governance functions not only as a mechanism for service delivery but also as a visible expression of state responsiveness, accountability, and reliability.

Over time, these dynamics contribute to the rebuilding of trust between citizens and state institutions, a factor consistently identified as central to long-term stability and reconciliation. Empirical studies indicate that when citizens experience efficient and equitable access to public services – particularly in contexts of displacement, return, and reconstruction – the legitimacy of state institutions is strengthened and the risk of renewed social tensions is reduced (OECD, 2020; UNDP, 2022). Thus, Azerbaijan's emphasis on digital public services in liberated territories deliberately addresses both immediate governance needs and deeper confidence deficits stemming from prolonged conflict.

At the regional and multilateral levels, Azerbaijan actively promotes its e-governance experience as a transferable model for confidence-building. Within platforms such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Baku highlights the role of digital public services in strengthening state-citizen relations, improving governance outcomes in conflict-affected and post-conflict environments, and enhancing transparency in public administration. Azerbaijan has framed e-governance as a practical category of confidence-building measures (CBMs) during CICA meetings and chairmanship-related activities. This underpins its capacity to foster predictability, reduce administrative arbitrariness, and support cooperative norms among states with diverse political and institutional systems (CICA Secretariat, 2024).

Through the advancement of e-governance as a CBM, Azerbaijan encourages participating states to conceptualize digitalization not merely as a technical modernization effort, but as a political and social instrument capable of enhancing trust at both the domestic and regional levels. This framing aligns with broader international debates on cyber and digital confidence-building,

which increasingly recognize the governance dimension of digital transformation alongside security considerations (UN Institute for Disarmament Research, 2023). In this way, Azerbaijan bridges development-oriented and security-oriented approaches to confidence-building within multilateral Asian frameworks.

Taken together, this approach allows Azerbaijan to align its domestic digital reforms with broader regional stability objectives, positioning digital governance at the intersection of development, peacebuilding, and security. By sharing best practices, promoting common benchmarks for good governance, and emphasizing the stabilizing effects of inclusive digital public services, Azerbaijan reinforces its image as a constructive actor and norm entrepreneur in regional digital cooperation. In doing so, Baku contributes to the emergence of regional norms that recognize digital public services as a vital component of sustainable peace, effective governance, and cooperative confidence-building in the contemporary Eurasian space. The demonstrated success of these administrative e-services in fostering domestic legitimacy provides the empirical foundation for Azerbaijan's broader advocacy of digital cooperation as a formal category of confidence-building measures across Eurasia.

Confidence-Building Measures in the Digital Domain

Beyond purely technical and legal considerations, Azerbaijan increasingly conceptualizes digital transformation as a strategic instrument for confidence-building at both domestic and regional levels. In a region historically marked by political fragmentation, post-conflict sensitivities, and uneven development, digital connectivity and governance are framed by Baku as comparatively neutral and forward-looking domains capable of reducing mistrust, enhancing transparency, and fostering practical cooperation across Eurasia. This approach aligns with a growing body of international research that highlights the role of digital governance, service delivery, and infrastructure interdependence in strengthening institutional trust and mitigating conflict-related risks (OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2017).

At the domestic level, expanded digital connectivity and e-governance initiatives contribute directly to confidence-building by strengthening state-citizen relations. Accessible e-government platforms, standardized digital public

services, and transparent administrative procedures reduce opportunities for arbitrariness and corruption, thereby enhancing public trust in state institutions (UNDP, 2016; World Bank, 2020). Empirical studies consistently show that predictable, technology-enabled service delivery increases perceptions of fairness and responsiveness, particularly in societies undergoing institutional transformation. In post-conflict and reconstruction contexts – most notably in Azerbaijan's liberated territories – the early deployment of smart infrastructure and digital public services signals a commitment to inclusive governance and equal access to state services (Asian Development Bank, 2023). This approach helps mitigate grievances, supports social reintegration, and reinforces perceptions of state presence, accountability, and procedural justice.

At the regional level, Azerbaijan promotes digital cooperation as a low-politics yet high-impact domain for confidence-building among neighboring and partner states. Initiatives in digital connectivity – such as cross-border fiber-optic networks, data-exchange facilities, and shared data-transit routes along the Middle Corridor – create mutual dependencies and shared economic incentives that can stabilize broader political relations (UNCTAD, 2021; World Bank, 2024). By embedding digital infrastructure within multilateral frameworks such as the Middle Corridor Initiative, the Organization of Turkic States, and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Azerbaijan encourages cooperation grounded in functional benefits rather than ideological alignment. This logic reflects established confidence-building practices, whereby sustained technical and economic interaction gradually generates trust, predictability, and cooperative habits in interstate relations (OECD, 2021).

Cybersecurity and information-security cooperation further function as critical confidence-building measures in the digital domain. Engagement in regional and multilateral dialogues on cyber norms, protection of critical infrastructure, and countering cybercrime reduces the risks of misperception and unintended escalation in cyberspace – an area increasingly characterized by ambiguity and attribution challenges (UNIDIR, 2023). Azerbaijan contributes to a more transparent and cooperative digital environment by participating in discussions on responsible state behavior, confidence-building measures in cyberspace, and operational information-sharing mechanisms,

Such engagement supports the development of shared expectations regarding acceptable conduct and crisis management, which are widely recognized as essential components of trust-building in the cyber domain (OSCE, 2022).

Similarly, the promotion of common data-protection standards and interoperable digital governance frameworks serves an important confidence-building function by establishing shared rules and expectations among states. Regulatory convergence in areas such as personal data protection, digital identity systems, and the mutual recognition of electronic signatures lowers barriers to cross-border digital services and reinforces trust in the handling of sensitive information (Council of Europe, 2022; OECD, 2021). For businesses, citizens, and governments alike, such harmonization provides reassurance that digital interactions are governed by transparent, predictable, and rights-respecting norms, thereby facilitating deeper digital and economic integration.

In multilateral forums – particularly within CICA – Azerbaijan has explicitly advanced the notion that digital transformation can function as a confidence-building measure in its own right. During its chairmanship and active participation in CICA working mechanisms, Baku has framed digital infrastructure development, e-governance reform, and cybersecurity cooperation as tools for transparency, development, and mutual benefit rather than competition (CICA Secretariat, 2024). This framing enables Azerbaijan to link its domestic digital reforms with broader regional stability objectives, positioning digital governance at the intersection of development and security.

Taken together, Azerbaijan's approach to confidence-building in the digital domain reflects a deliberate effort to align technological modernization with trust-enhancing governance practices. By integrating digital connectivity, e-governance, cybersecurity cooperation, and regulatory harmonization into both domestic policy and multilateral engagement, Azerbaijan positions itself not only as a beneficiary of digital integration but also as a norm-shaper and facilitator of trust in the emerging Eurasian digital order. In an environment where connectivity increasingly underpins both economic integration and political confidence, Azerbaijan's emphasis on digital confidence-building contributes to more resilient, predictable, and cooperative regional relations. By institutionalizing these digital confidence-building measures, Azerbaijan

effectively reframes its connectivity infrastructure not merely as a commercial asset, but as a critical source of regional trust and a stabilizing factor in an era of geopolitical fragmentation.

Digital Connectivity as a Source of Trust

Azerbaijan increasingly seeks to translate connectivity into trust with both regional neighbours and extra-regional partners by positioning itself as a reliable provider of digital infrastructure and services. In an era in which data flows, digital platforms, and information infrastructures have become critical enablers of economic activity and political interaction, trust has emerged as a central determinant of connectivity outcomes. Azerbaijan's investments in high-quality digital infrastructure – combined with efforts to promote regulatory transparency, predictability, and institutional accountability – enable Baku to present itself as a responsible stakeholder within the evolving Eurasian digital ecosystem (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2024). Clear rules on data protection, alignment with international conventions, and the strengthening of national cybersecurity governance signal that Azerbaijan aims to function not merely as a passive transit territory for data flows, but as an active and trustworthy custodian of digital interdependence.

Within this framework, the Digital Silk Way functions as more than an economic or technological initiative. It operates as a confidence-building mechanism that embeds Azerbaijan within a dense network of mutually beneficial digital interdependencies across Eurasia. By supporting the development of secure fiber-optic infrastructure, redundant data-transit routes, and neutral data-exchange hubs linking Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and European markets, Azerbaijan contributes to the diversification of regional and global digital corridors (UNCTAD, 2021; NEQSOL Holding, 2025). Such diversification mitigates systemic risks associated with over-reliance on a limited number of northern or southern routes that are increasingly exposed to geopolitical tensions, congestion, and security vulnerabilities. For partner states and private-sector actors alike, Azerbaijan's role in enhancing route diversity strengthens resilience and predictability, thereby reinforcing trust in the continuity and integrity of cross-border data flows.

Trust is further reinforced through Azerbaijan's active participation in regional and multilateral digital governance initiatives. Engagement in cybersecurity dialogues, information-sharing mechanisms, and capacity-building programs – whether under the EU's Eastern Partnership, cooperation frameworks linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, or confidence-building measures within the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia – demonstrates a commitment to cooperative and transparent approaches to cyber resilience (European Commission, 2023; CICA Secretariat, 2024). Such participation contributes to the normalization of information exchange, reduces uncertainty in cyberspace, and supports the development of shared expectations regarding responsible state behavior, all of which are widely recognized as essential foundations for trust-based digital cooperation (UNIDIR, 2023).

Importantly, Azerbaijan's approach reflects an understanding that trust in digital connectivity cannot be sustained through infrastructure investment alone. Equally critical is the development of legal and normative frameworks that protect digital rights and ensure responsible data governance. Azerbaijan seeks to reassure partners that expanded connectivity will not come at the expense of individual rights or information security by advancing legal reforms aligned with international standards on personal data protection, cybersecurity, and digital governance (OECD, 2021; Council of Europe, 2022). This emphasis resonates with broader international debates on "trustworthy connectivity," which underscore that the legitimacy and durability of digital integration depend on the compatibility of connectivity initiatives with rights-based regulation and rule-of-law principles (World Bank, 2020).

In practical terms, Azerbaijan's focus on data protection and regulatory alignment supports the emergence of a rules-based digital environment in which state and non-state actors can engage with greater confidence. Predictable regulatory conditions lower transaction costs for businesses, encourage cross-border investment in digital services, and facilitate cooperation in sensitive areas such as cloud computing, fintech, and digital public services (UNCTAD, 2021). At the same time, strengthened cybersecurity governance reduces the likelihood that Azerbaijan's infrastructure could become a source of systemic vulnerability for regional partners, further reinforcing trust in its role as a digital hub.

Azerbaijan's digital connectivity strategy, when considered as a whole, reflects a nuanced understanding that trust constitutes a critical currency in the digital age. Azerbaijan is deliberately linking infrastructure development with governance reform, cybersecurity cooperation, and rights-based regulation, in order to position itself as a bridge not only between regions, but also between economic efficiency and normative responsibility. In doing so, Baku contributes to the gradual shaping of a Eurasian digital order in which connectivity, security, and trust are mutually reinforcing, thereby enhancing stability and cooperation in an increasingly interconnected – and contested – digital landscape. Ultimately, the cultivation of this trust through secure, diverse, and transparent digital networks consolidates Azerbaijan's standing as an indispensable node in the Eurasian order and sets the stage for a comprehensive assessment of its multi-layered digital strategy.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's engagement with the Middle Corridor Initiative, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia illustrates how a mid-sized Eurasian state can strategically leverage overlapping and partially competing regional architectures to advance a coherent and forward-looking digital governance agenda. Rather than treating these frameworks as discrete or compartmentalized platforms, Baku integrates them into a complementary ecosystem through which national priorities – digital connectivity, e-governance, cyber resilience, data protection, and confidence-building – are projected onto the wider regional level.

By incorporating its domestic digital transformation objectives within multilateral and minilateral initiatives, Azerbaijan simultaneously advances internal modernization and external connectivity. Projects such as the Digital Silk Way exemplify this dual logic, strengthening Eurasia's digital infrastructure while positioning Azerbaijan as a reliable data-transit hub and provider of digital services. In doing so, the country contributes to the diversification and resilience of Eurasian digital routes, aligning its interests with those of European, Central Asian, and Asian partners seeking secure, efficient, and politically sustainable alternatives in global data flows.

Azerbaijan's expanding e-governance ecosystem further demonstrates how digital public services can function as instruments of both state modernization and confidence-building. Supported by cooperation under frameworks such as the BRI and the OTS, e-government reforms enhance administrative efficiency, transparency, and citizen trust domestically, while offering transferable models and shared standards at the regional level. In post-conflict and reconstruction contexts, smart governance initiatives underscore the role of digitalization in promoting inclusive development, institutional legitimacy, and long-term stability.

Equally important, Azerbaijan's evolving frameworks on cybersecurity and data protection anchor these initiatives in law, institutions, and international norms. Alignment with global standards on information security and personal data protection reinforces trust among partners and users, mitigates the risks associated with expanding digital interdependence, and facilitates cross-border digital trade and cooperation. By actively participating in regional discussions on cyber norms and responsible state behavior, Azerbaijan contributes to shaping a more predictable, transparent, and cooperative digital environment across Eurasia.

Taken together, these dynamics portray Azerbaijan as an increasingly central actor in the emerging Eurasian digital landscape. Through a strategy that deliberately links infrastructure development with governance reform, security cooperation, and rights-based regulation, Azerbaijan demonstrates how connectivity, security, and trust can be mutually reinforcing. In this sense, Azerbaijan's experience offers broader insight into how middle powers can shape regional digital orders – not through dominance or exclusivity, but through integration, standard-setting, and confidence-building in the digital domain.

References

ADY, September 9, 2025: "5 Years of the China–Europe Railway Express Route: Baku Welcomed the 237th Train from Yiwu", https://corp.ady.az/en/2/news/news/5-years-of-the-china-europe-railway-express-route-baku-welcomed-the-237th-train-from-yiwu.

ADY, October 1, 2025: "New Agreement Between Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Georgia: Cooperation on the BTK Expands", https://corp.ady.az/

en/2/news/news/new-agreement-between-azerbaijan-turkiye-and-georgia-cooperation-on-the-btk-expands.

AnewZ TV, January 1, 2026: "Azerbaijan Emerges as an Exporter of E-Governance and Digital Solutions", https://anewz.tv/opinion/news/16837/azerbaijan-emerges-as-an-exporter-of-e-governance/news.

Asian Development Bank, Ocotber 24, 2024: "ADB Approves $47 Million Loan to Help Digitalize Azerbaijan's Railways", https://www.adb.org/news/adb-approves-47-million-loan-help-digitalize-azerbaijan-railways.

AzerNews, September 12, 2019: "Customs Committee introduces innovative technologies", https://www.azernews.az/business/155856.html.

AzerNews, March 4, 2025: "Azerbaijan approves 2025 roadmap to enhance border trade efficiency", https://www.azernews.az/business/238562.html.

AzerNews, March 7, 2025: "Azerbaijan's digital ambitions take shape with Trans-Caspian fiber optic project", https://www.azernews.az/analysis/238680.html.

AzTv, August 15, 2024: "President Aliyev approves document signed between Azerbaijan and China", https://aztv.az/en/news/31367/president-aliyev-approves-document-signed-between-azerbaijan-and-china.

Caspian-Alpine Society, February 4, 2025: "Azerbaijan's Contribution to Regional Connectivity", https://caspian-alpine.org/azerbaijans-contribution-to-regional-connectivity/.

Caspian-Alpine Society, September 2, 2025: "SCO Tianjin Summit 2025: Azerbaijan's Expanding Role in Eurasian Cooperation", https://caspian-alpine.org/sco-tianjin-summit-2025-azerbaijans-expanding-role-in-eurasian-cooperation/.

Caucasus Strategic Perspectives, December 1, 2022: "Azerbaijan's Efforts to Digitalize the Middle Corridor", https://cspjournal.az/uploads/files/Summer%202022/(8)%20Vusal%20Guliyev.pdf.

Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), 2019: "Turkic Council", https://aircenter.az/uploads/files/TURKIC-COUNCIL-Kitab-185x250-web.pdf.

Center for Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communication, December 16, 2025: "The "Single Window" information system will further

Increase the country's transport and transit attractiveness", https://ereforms.gov.az/en/media/xeberler/bir-pencere-informasiya-sistemi-olkemizin-neqliyyat-tranzit-celbediciliyini-daha-da-artiracaqdir-2109.

Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), July, 2025: "Digitalization Strategies along the Middle Corridor: Transforming TransEurasian Logistics", https://aircenter.az/uploads/wWqgPf1Uuxn0.pdf.

Coordinating Council of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Transit Freight, 2025: "Digitalization", https://transit.gov.az/en/media-en/directions-mission-guiding-principles-and-goals/digitalization.

Coordinating Council of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Transit Freight, June 26, 2025: "Transforming Transport: Azerbaijan's Vision for International Connectivity", https://transit.gov.az/storage/Transport-Connectivity-Brochure-15092025.pdf.

Daily Sabah, August 17, 2024: "Reviving the Silk Road with a new digital link", https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/reviving-the-silk-road-with-a-new-digital-link.

Digital Silk Way, 2026: "Trans-Caspian Fiber Optic Cable Project", https://www.digitalsilkway.az/page/35/trans-caspian-fiber-optic-cable-project.

Institute for Development and Diplomacy, December 1, 2022: "Azerbaijan's Efforts to Digitalize the Middle Corridor", https://idd.az/media/old/2022/12/01/idd_policy_brief_-_guliyev_-_1_december.pdf?v=1.1.

Jamestown Foundation, April 23, 2025: "The Port of Baku Facilitates Trans-Eurasian Commerce (Part One)", https://jamestown.org/ the-port-of-baku-facilitates-trans-eurasian-commerce-part-one//.

Jamestown Foundation, May 7, 2025: "The Port of Baku Facilitates Trans-Eurasian Commerce (Part Two)", https://jamestown.org/ the-port-of-baku-facilitates-trans-eurasian-commerce-part-two/.

Jamestown Foundation, June 26, 2025: "Organization of Turkic States Advances Eurasian Trade Connectivity", https://jamestown.org/organization-of-turkic-states-advances-eurasian-trade-connectivity/.

Jamestown Foundation, September 16, 2025: "Azerbaijan Attempts Pragmatic Diplomacy at SCO Summit", https://jamestown.org/azerbaijan-attempts-pragmatic-diplomacy-at-sco-summit/.

Jamestown Foundation, December 4, 2025: "Middle Corridor Expands Through New Multimodal Routes", https://jamestown.org/middle-corridor-expands-through-new-multimodal-routes/.

Middle Corridor, 2026: "The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route starts from Southeast Asia and China, runs through Kazakhstan, the Caspian sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and further to European countries", https://middlecorridor.com/en/route.

Ministry of Digital Development and Transport of the Republic of Azerbaijan, September 30, 2019: "Azerbaijan, Turkey discuss mutual recognition of electronic signatures", https://mincom.gov.az/en/media-en/news/azerbaijan-turkey-discuss-mutual-recognition-of-electronic-signatures716.

Ministry of Digital Development and Transport of the Republic of Azerbaijan, July 22, 2022: "A single center for management of transit freight created", https://mincom.gov.az/en/media-en/news/a-single-center-for-management-of-transit-freight-created1601.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, July 3, 2025: "No:280/24, Response by Aykhan Hajizada, MFA Spokesperson, to the local media inquiry regarding bilateral and multilateral meetings of H.E. Mr. Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, in Astana", https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no28024?.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, January 29, 2025: "Ankara Declaration on the Results of the Second Trilateral Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Trade/Economy and Transport/ Infrastructure of Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, 29 January 2025 ", https://www.mfa.gov.tr/ankara-declaration-turkiye-azerbaijan-and-uzbekistan.en.mfa.

NEQSOL Holding, March 14, 2025: "Yusif Jabbarov: The New Phase of the Digital Silk Way Project Will Connect Europe and Asia", https://www.neqsolholding.com/news-and-media/yusif-jabbarov-the-new-phase-of-the-digital-silk-way-project-will-connect-europe-and-asia/?l=EN.

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), 2025: "Cyber/ICT security", https://www.osce.org/field-of-work/Cyber-ICT-security.

Report News Agency, October 17, 2019: "Port of Baku becomes first Green Port in the Caspian region", https://report.az/en/infrastructure/port-of-baku-becomes-first-green-port-in-the-caspian-region.

Report News Agency, December 28, 2024: "Azerbaijan Railways introduces single window system for cargo transportation", https://report.az/en/infrastructure/single-window-system-for-cargo-transportation-introduced-in-azerbaijan-railways.

Report News Agency, May 20, 2025: "Azerbaijan to host CICA forum on digital transformation and innovation", https://report.az/en/ict/azerbaijan-to-host-cica-forum-on-digital-transformation-and-innovation.

The Azerbaijan State News Agency, September 11, 2019: "The State Customs Committee has signed a memorandum of intent on cooperation with Huawei Tech Azerbaijan", https://azertag.az/xeber/gomruk_komitesi_ile_huawei_tech_azerbaijan_emekdasliga_dair_niyyet_protokolu_imzalayib-1328380.

The Caspian Post, October 6, 2025: "Azerbaijan's Gabala Hosts 2025 OTS Summit as Turkic Leaders Chart Shared Future", https://caspianpost.com/central-asia/azerbaijan-s-gabala-hosts-2025-ots-summit-as-turkic-leaders-chart-shared-future.

The Organization of Turkic States, 2025: "Cooperation in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)", https://www.turkicstates.org/en/areas-of-cooperation-detail/10-cooperation-in-information-and-communication-technologies-ict.

The Port of Baku, 2026: "Multimodal transportation", https://portofbaku.com/en/page/biznes/multimodal-dasimalar.

The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, April 23, 2025: "Azerbaijan and China signed Joint Statement on Establishment of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", https://president.az/en/articles/ view/68634/.

The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, October 7, 2025: "12th Summit of the Council of Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States commenced in Gabala", https://president.az/en/ articles/view/70283.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, November 6, 2025: "12th China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum", https://eng.sectsco.org/20251106/2049940.html/.

Trend News Agency, January 21, 2019: "AzerTelecom starts cooperation with Azerbaijan Railways within Azerbaijan Digital Hub project", https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/business/3008548.html.

Trend News Agency, July 15, 2022: "'Albayrak' Group of Companies to Operate at the Port of Baku (PHOTO)", https://az.trend.az/business/3621249.html.

Trend News Agency, May 17, 2024: "Baku Int'l Sea Trade Port aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2035", https://www.trend.az/business/transport/3900772.html.

Trend News Agency, February 25, 2025: "Azerbaijan merges Baku International Sea Trade Port with ADY – decree", https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/4010103.html.

Weaponized Information and Ontological Security: Strategies for Armenia

Armine Arzumanyan

Abstract: The phenomenon of weaponized information, characterized by deliberately disseminating misleading or false narratives to shape perceptions, influence public opinion, and achieve geopolitical objectives, has become an integral component of contemporary statecraft. In the digital era, narrative-building is increasingly prevalent in cyberspace and operates by targeting, or appealing to, collective identity. The unprecedented challenges between the years 2020 and 2023 have exacerbated Armenia's vulnerabilities to identity-focused weaponized information. The present chapter defines weaponized information, its impact on ontological security and its prevalence in cyber warfare. It then examines the general patterns in weaponized information dissemination in Armenia with a focus on narratives that target or appeal to collective identity and ontological security. It further addresses the challenges in enforcing intermediate liability in Armenian cyberspace, considering the vital role of social media in weaponized information dissemination. The chapter then provides an overview of state efforts at mitigating weaponized information and offers strategic and policy recommendations to enhance Armenia's defence against such influence operations.

Weaponized Information in Cyber Warfare

Central to modern statecraft and strategic rivalry the construction and dissemination of narratives – coherent, often persuasive accounts of events or issues – that shape the perceptions and behaviors of both domestic and international audiences.[1] The dissemination of weaponized information, has become an integral component of contemporary statecraft. It is characterized by the deliberate dissemination of misleading or false narratives to shape

[1] Zaharna, Rhonda S. "Reassessing whose story wins: The trajectory of identity resilience in narrative contests." International Journal of Communication 10 (2016): 32; De Graaf, Beatrice, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose, eds. Strategic narratives, public opinion and war: Winning domestic support for the Afghan War. Routledge, 2015.

perceptions, influence public opinion, and achieve geopolitical objectives.[2] This kind of information reshapes interstate competition, securitization, and strategic narrative-building, adding a new dimension to the age-old pursuit of strategic advantage.[3]

Weaponized Information and Ontological Security in Cyber Warfare

Perception is a central component of determining how one state chooses to deal with another. Unlike objectively measurable capabilities, perceptions are abstract and often, if not always, transcend materialism.[4] The human mind, including that of policymakers, tends to absorb and conceptualize incoming information in a way that confirms their pre-existing beliefs. Therefore, to understand how conflict and strategic rivalry emerge and progress, it is imperative to piece together several factors: Firstly, the analysis of actors who convincingly frame other actors as opponents and rivals. Secondly, the circumstances within which the rivals are embedded, and the variables affecting the stability of their relationship. Thirdly, the role of individual and collective abstract cognitive processes, and lastly, the narratives and perceptions that fuel these processes.

---

2 Jilani, Sheikh Ghulam. "National Narrative Building: Role of Academia, Think Tanks and Media." ISSRA Papers 12 (2020): 1–14; Darr, Y. (2012). Nation building and war narratives for children: war and militarism in Hebrew 1940s and 1950s children's literature. Paedagogica Historica, 48(4), 601–613; Daiute, Colette, and Maja Turniski. "Young people's stories of conflict and development in Post-war Croatia." Narrative Inquiry 15, no. 2 (2005): 217–239; Freedman, Lawrence. "Networks, culture and narratives." Adelphi Papers 45, no. 379 (2006): 11–26; Voyvodic, Clara. "The fog of war: development, conflict narratives, and civilian victimisation in Colombia." Third World Quarterly (2024): 1–20; Senehi, Jessica. "Building peace: Storytelling to transform conflicts constructively." In Handbook of conflict analysis and resolution. Routledge, 2008: 227–240.

3 Guzzini, Stefano. "Militarizing politics, essentializing identities: Interpretivist process tracing and the power of geopolitics." Cooperation and Conflict 52, no. 3 (2017): 423–445; Pamment, James. "Strategic narratives in US public diplomacy: A critical geopolitics." Popular Communication 12, no. 1 (2014): 48–64.

4 Robert Axelrod, ed., Structure of Decision: The Cognitive Maps of Political Elites, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976; Michael D. Young, "Cognitive Mapping Meets Semantic Networks," Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol. 40, No. 3, September 1996.

In the digital era, the creation of narratives is becoming increasingly prevalent in cyberspace and can be used as a weapon of cyber warfare. Cyber warfare refers to the use of information and communication technologies to gain an advantage in political, military, and social contexts.[5] NATO recognizes that modern conflicts extend beyond traditional kinetic warfare and often involve manipulating information in the cognitive domain. As per NATO, cyber warfare is multifaceted and encompasses a spectrum of activities to influence public opinion, shape narratives, and achieve strategic objectives. This includes electromagnetic spectrum operations, hard cyber operations, disinformation and propaganda, psychological operations (PsyOps), media manipulation, and their countermeasures.[6] The latter three employ weaponized information as a key strategic tool.

---

5 Nestoras, Antonios. "Political Warfare: Competition in the Cyber Era." In 2018 IEEE International Conference on Big Data (Big Data). IEEE, 2018; Lei, Hanci. "Modern information warfare: analysis and policy recommendations." foresight 21, no. 4 (2019): 508–522; Valuch, Jozef, Tomáš Gábriš, and Ondrej Hamuľák. "Cyber attacks, information attacks, and postmodern warfare." Baltic Journal of Law & Politics 10, no. 1 (2017): 63–89.

6 NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE). "Strategic Communications and the Emerging Battlespace." April 2020. https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/strategic-communications-and-the-emerging-battlespace/7; NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE). "Cyber Defence Strategy." 2021. https://ccdcoe.org/library/publications/nato-cyber-defence-strategy/; NATO Science & Technology Organization (STO). "Information Warfare and the Role of Information Technologies in Modern Conflicts." September 2019. https://www.sto.nato.int/publications/information-warfare-role-information-technologies-modern-conflicts/; NATO Defence College. "Information Warfare in the Modern Era: A NATO Perspective." May 2022. https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1621; NATO Review Magazine. "Information Warfare: New Threats to NATO." January 2018. https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2018/01/01/information-warfare-new-threats-to-nato/index.html; NATO Communications and Information Agency (NCIA). "NATO's Role in Information Warfare." June 2023. https://www.ncia.nato.int/ publications/natos-role-in-information-warfare/; NATO Comprehensive Defence Handbook. "Countering Information Warfare: A Comprehensive Approach." August 2023. https://www.nshq.nato.int/Library/DownloadFile/25e65162-e2f3-1d38-dd99-b7574e421d3f.

Psychological operations (PsyOps) utilize psychological tactics to influence target audiences' behavior, emotions, and decision-making.[7] This includes both military and civilian contexts, with objectives ranging from shaping perceptions on the battlefield to influencing political outcomes and public opinion. PsyOps campaigns often employ targeted messaging, disinformation, and perception management techniques. The effectiveness of PsyOps lies in its ability to exploit cognitive biases and psychological vulnerabilities to achieve desired outcomes.[8]

Media manipulation entails the exploitation of media outlets and social platforms to spread narratives, shape public perceptions, and conduct coordinated information campaigns.[9] This can involve using fake news, astroturfing,[10] and social media bots to amplify specific messages or discredit opposing viewpoints. Media manipulation is often used with other forms of information warfare to create a favorable narrative or undermine adversaries' credibility.[11]

---

7 Rothstein, Hy S. "Strategy and psychological operations." In Information Strategy and Warfare. Routledge, 2007: 176-202; Bakir, Vian. "Psychological operations in digital political campaigns: Assessing Cambridge Analytica's psychographic profiling and targeting." Frontiers in Communication 5 (2020): 67.

8 U.S. Army. Psychological Operations: Principles and Case Studies. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2003.

9 Caled, Danielle, and Mário J. Silva. "Digital media and misinformation: An outlook on multidisciplinary strategies against manipulation." Journal of Computational Social Science 5, no. 1 (2022): 123–159; Bradshaw, Samantha, and Philip N. Howard. "Challenging truth and trust: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation." The computational propaganda project 1 (2018): 1–26; Marwick, Alice, and Rebecca Lewis. "Media manipulation and disinformation online." New York: Data & Society Research Institute (2017): 7–19.

10 Astroturfing refers to "an organized activity that is intended to create a false impression of a widespread, spontaneously arising, grassroots movement in support of or in opposition to something (such as a political policy) but that is in reality initiated and controlled by a concealed group or organization (such as a corporation)" as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

11 Bienvenue, Emily. "Computational propaganda: political parties, politicians, and political manipulation on social media." (2020): 525–527; Prier, Jarred. "Commanding the trend: Social media as information warfare." In Information warfare in the age of cyber conflict. Routledge, 2020: 88-113; Lei, Hanci. "Modern information warfare: analysis and policy recommendations." foresight 21, no. 4 (2019): 508–522; Levitskaya, Anastasia, and Alexander Fedorov. "Typology and mechanisms of media manipulation." International Journal of Media and Information Literacy 5, no. 1 (2020): 69–78.

Disinformation and propaganda involve deliberately disseminating false or misleading information to manipulate perceptions, influence public opinion, sow discord, or achieve specific political or military objectives.[12] Various actors have employed this tactic throughout history, from state-sponsored entities to non-state actors and extremist groups. According to a report by the RAND Corporation, disinformation and propaganda campaigns have become increasingly prevalent in the digital age, facilitated by the widespread use of social media platforms and the internet.[13] In this context, the differences between disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation are crucial.[14] Disinformation is the deliberate spread of false information intending to deceive or manipulate. It is typically created and disseminated with a specific agenda or goal, such as influencing public opinion, destabilizing an adversary, or advancing a particular narrative. Disinformation is a form of information warfare often associated with state actors, political campaigns, or malicious actors seeking to achieve strategic objectives. Misinformation refers to disseminating false or misleading information without intent to deceive.[15] Misinformation can be spread inadvertently, often due to mistakes, misunderstandings, or the lack of fact-checking. It is not necessarily malicious, and those sharing the information may genuinely believe it to be true. Malinformation is the dissemination of true information used to harm, defame, or damage the reputation of individuals, organizations, or entities.[16]

---

12 Battista, Daniele. "Disinformation as a danger to international security: An exploration of the implications in the Italian context." Geopolitical, Social Security and Freedom Journal 6, no. 1–2 (2023): 1–19; O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas. "From disinformation to fake news: Forwards into the past." The SAGE handbook of propaganda (2020): 55–70.

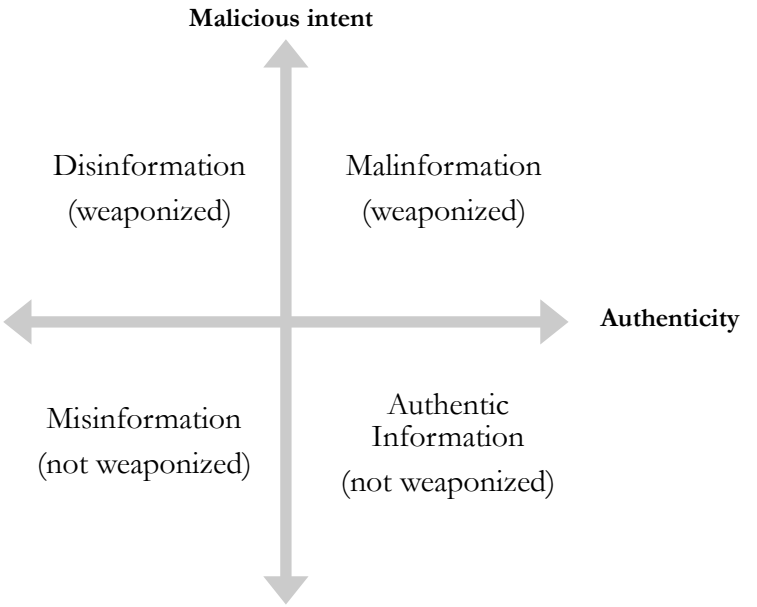
13 Rich, Michael D. Truth decay: An initial exploration of the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life. Rand Corporation, 2018.

14 Baines, Darrin, and Robert JR Elliott. "Defining misinformation, disinformation and malinformation: An urgent need for clarity during the COVID-19 infodemic." Discussion papers 20, no. 06 (2020): 20.

15 Pérez Escolar, Marta, Darren Lilleker, and Alejandro José Tapia Frade. "A systematic literature review of the phenomenon of disinformation and misinformation." (2023); Armitage, Rachel, and Cristian Vaccari. "Misinformation and disinformation." In The Routledge companion to media disinformation and populism. Routledge, 2021: 38–48; Rubin, Victoria L. "Disinformation and misinformation triangle: A conceptual model for "fake news" epidemic, causal factors and interventions." Journal of documentation 75, no. 5 (2019): 1013–1034.

16 Baines, Darrin, and Robert JR Elliott. "Defining misinformation, disinformation and malinformation: An urgent need for clarity during the COVID-19 infodemic." Discussion papers 20, no. 06 (2020); Carmi, Elinor, Simeon J. Yates, Eleanor Lockley, and

Unlike disinformation, malinformation is based on accurate information but is often selectively shared to create a negative impression or harm the target. It is intended to inflict harm or cause damage rather than deceive in the traditional sense. In summary, disinformation is false or misleading information spread with the intent to deceive, while misinformation is false information spread without necessarily malicious intent. Malinformation, on the other hand, involves using truthful information in misleading ways. Hence, dis- and malinformation are weaponized information due to their intentional nature, unlike misinformation, which is unintentional. The distinction of these terms becomes clear in the following Graph 1, where the X-axis stands for information authenticity and the Y-axis stands for malicious intent.



Graph 1: Information classification per authenticity and malicious intent

Alicja Pawluczuk. "Data citizenship: Rethinking data literacy in the age of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation." Internet Policy Review 9, no. 2 (2020): 1–22; Grimes, David Robert, and David H. Gorski. "Malinformation – an emergent problem for medical journals and scientific communication." (2022).Verrall, Neil. "COVID-19 Disinformation, misinformation and malinformation during the pandemic infodemic: a view from the United Kingdom." In COVID-19 disinformation: a multinational, whole of society perspective. Springer International Publishing, 2022: 81–112.

Prevalence of Weaponized Information

NATO defines security as the state in which systems or individuals operate as intended, free from threats or disruptions. Conversely, insecurity arises when systems or individuals fail to function as intended. This insecurity can stem from various sources that NATO categorizes into four types: incomplete or flawed systems, natural events, accidents resulting from human or technical errors without malicious intent, and malicious acts or attacks intended to disrupt operations.[17] The actors responsible for designing malicious attacks are referred to as malicious actors. This can include states, non-state actors, intra-state and cross-border organizations, groups, or individuals seeking to exploit vulnerabilities. NATO recognizes weaponized information as a type of malicious attack. Furthermore, NATO assesses the likelihood of each category of security disruptions. As shown below, in Table 1, NATO estimates weaponized information as the most likely type of malicious attack in modern conflict. This type of attack is the only item in the overall estimations to score the maximum 5 points on likelihood.[18]

Category	Event	Likelihood (1-5)	Consequences
Malicious Attacks	Terrorist Attack on Critical Infrastructure (transportation, communication, health, industrial)	2	– Same physical impact as natural or accidental event – Social, psychological, and political considerations beyond those associated with damage caused by natural or accidental event
	Cyber Attack on Infrastructure	3	– Critical systems fail (water, electric, communications) – Physical damage resulting from failure – Widespread fear, panic – Misdirected response resulting from misattribution

17 NATO Special Operations Headquarter. Comprehensive Defense Handbook. Vol I, 2020: 131.

18 NATO Special Operations Headquarter. Comprehensive Defense Handbook. Vol I, 2020: 133.

Malicious Attacks	Small-scale CBRN	3	– Widespread fear, panic – Substantial expenditure of resources
	Cyber Attack: Data Confidentiality	3	
	Weaponized Information	5	– Undermine social cohesion and national pride – Undermine public trust in government – Influence political decisions – Influence political elections – Cause nation and population to expend resources unnecessarily – Spread fear
	Terrorist Attack on Crowded Public Place	3	– Disrupt tourism (economic impact) – Influence political elections – Cause nation and population to expend resources unnecessarily – Widespread fear, panic – Undermine trust in government

Table 1: Malicious Attack Likelihood per Category

Identity-Focused Weaponized Information in Armenian Cyberspace

The unprecedented challenges between the years 2020 and 2023 have exacerbated Armenia's vulnerabilities to disinformation. False and distorted narratives actively affected Armenians' experience of the critical events of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Second Artsakh War in 2020, and the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh in 2023. This section examines the general patterns in weaponized information dissemination in Armenia, with a focus on narratives that target or appeal to collective identity and ontological security. It further addresses the challenges in enforcing intermediate liability in Armenian cyberspace, considering the vital role of social media in weaponized information dissemination.

General Patterns in Weaponized Information Dissemination

In Armenia, the actors predominantly disseminating weaponized information are media outlets affiliated with political and ideological groups, as well as Russian state propaganda.[19] More specifically, weaponized information is increasingly disseminated through social media influencers, groups, and channels, the so-called "mushroom media." These are semi-entertaining and semi-informative websites that typically "recycle" weaponized narratives instead of creating original content.[20] Armenian news outlets, most often rely on Russian media outlets, including state media, as primary sources. As they republish Russian media content, they propagate false or distorted news.[21] A "nesting doll" effect is also observed, where online outlets copy news from Russian websites, then other supporting local media outlets republish this information. While citing each other, they amplify the original message.[22]

In news coverage, a focal point in identity-focused weaponized information has been the portrayal of Armenia's military losses in the second Artsakh war as well as the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh, as direct consequences of attempting a democratic transformation. According to this narrative, democracy is not compatible with Armenia's survival and culture and is often used in conjunction with the so-called 'Sorosian' conspiracy theory.[23] Primarily disseminated by members of the former regime and Russia-affiliated news outlets,

---

19 Freedom House. Freedom of the Net: Armenia. 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-net/2024, and "Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia: Confronting the Power of False Narratives." 2021, Disinformation-in-Armenia_En-v3.pdf; Media Initiatives Center. The Patterns of Disseminating Disinformation in the Armenian Online Media. 2021, https://media.am/en/laboratory/2021/03/12/26670/; USAID. Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment, 2024.

20 Media Initiatives Center. The Patterns of Disseminating Disinformation in the Armenian Online Media. 2021, https://media.am/en/laboratory/2021/03/12/26670/.

21 Եվրոպական Արժեքների Վարկաբեկման Դրսեվորումները ՉԼՄ-ներում. ամփոփիչ զեկույց ըստ լրատվամիջոցների մոնիտորինգի արդյունքների, Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, June 2020: 16–17. https://khosq.am/monitorings/եվրոպական-արժեքների-վարկաբեկմանդրս-3/.

22 Karine Ghazaryan, "The News Matryoshka Doll: News Is Copied From Russian And Local Sources," Media.am, https://media.am/en/verified/2021/03/17/26818/.

23 Jennifer Ablan, "Russia bans George Soros foundation as state security 'threat,'" Reuters, November 30, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-sorosid

the term Sorosakan[24] (loosely translating to "Sorosian" or "Soros people") gained traction in Armenia after 2017. It has remained popular as an offensive term for public servants allegedly funded by the West. They are perceived as having 'anti-Armenian' intentions and sabotaging Armenia's reliance on and partnership with Russia. Social media posts with the term Sorosakan were not common before 2018. Nevertheless, both the name George Soros and the term Sorosakan gained momentum between 2018 and 2021.[25] Since the late 2020, the term Sorosakan has visibly re-emerged in online news coverage, including on websites that amplify Russia-affiliated narratives.[26]

Interchangeably, the umbrella narrative of 'foreign agents' has unified most ontology-focused discourse campaigns regarding Armenian civil society, and has tried to present civil society as an anti-state element that serves the interests of other countries. The support of the country's civic sector by international donors, has long been the subject of public debate. Although the debate has raised legitimate and important questions, it has often been weaponized in recent years. Particularly, since late 2020, narratives exploiting the connection amongst civil society, democracy, and national security intensified. These narratives claim that such civil society operates through anti-Armenian globalists who are on a mission to distort and assimilate traditional values and practices. Worryingly, between 2020 and 2021, numerous public officials and members of major political parties have amplified false and

---

USL1N13P22Y20151130; Генпрокуратура признала Фонд Сороса нежелательным в России, Ria Novosti, November 30, 2015, https://ria.ru/20151130/1332527547.html; Экс-глава СНБ Армении считает, что фонд Сороса представляет угрозу для страны, Sputnik, November 22, 2019, https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/politics/20191122/21178397/Eks-glava-SNB-Armenii-schitaetchto-fond-Sorosa-predstavlyaet-ugrozu-dlya-Armenii.html;.Сосовские организации, укрепившись в Армении, начинают поход на Карабах, Sputnik, August 28, 2019, https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/politics/20190828/20206796/Sorosovskie-organizatsii ukrepivshis-v-Armenii-nachinayut-pokhod-na-Karabakh-Shakhnazaryan.html; For a more general idea, see Emily Tamkin, The Influence of Soros.

[24] See "Sorosakan," 168.am, https://168.am/page/11?s=սորոսական; "Sorosakan," Hraparak, https://hraparak.am/search?q=սորոսական=3; "Sorosakan," Iravunk, https://www.iravunk.com/?s=սորոսական&paged=4&l=am.

[25] Freedom House. and "Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia: Confronting the Power of False Narratives." 2021, p. 26., https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Disinformation-in-Armenia_En-v3.pdf.

[26] Ibid, p. 27.

harmful narratives blaming civil society for Armenia's military and political losses by labelling them as foreign-funded.[27] One tactic used to disseminate these narratives is mimicking an independent fact-checking platform. For instance, Antifake.am, a website founded by the Civil Consciousness NGO, claims to be impartial, independent, and devoted to uncovering the "lies" of the current government. However, the website regularly publishes unsupported claims or false information. Antifake.am content largely focuses on the afore-mentioned narratives of "Soros agents" and "foreign actors" in Armenia. Local and international independent fact-checking platforms have revealed that the individuals behind this initiative are closely linked to fringe reactionary groups such as VETO and Adekvad.[28] These groups have ties to the former regime and operate a network of outlets and social media accounts to amplify misinformation.[29]

Another major source of weaponized information targeting public perceptions of collective identity and heritage is found in information flows regarding cultural and social issues. Between 2019 and 2023, two Council of Europe conventions have been the subjects of a large number of false narratives – the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women (the Istanbul Convention) and the Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote

---

27 "Lie about Activists and Civil Society from the National Assembly," FIP,, https://fip.am/2043; «Երբ սորոսական մեկը լկտի ու մեր պետական շահերին վնասակար հայտարարություն է անում, ես չեմ զարմանում». Էդուարդ Շարմազանով, Republican Party of Armenia, September 4, 2019, http://www.hhk.am/hy/news/item/2019/09/04/sharmazanov/; «Նիկոլի ու սորոսական խունտայի հերթական մյուզիքլը», 168.am, February 28, 2021, https://168.am/2021/02/28/1471562.html; Վազգեն Մանուկյանն ասաց, թե ինչ է արվելու Սորոսի հիմնադրամի հետ, երբ ինքը դառնա վարչապետ, Analitik, December 14, 2021, https://analitik.am/news/view/689723 ; Սորոսական արժեքները հակասում են տարածաշրջանում Հայաստանի դերին եւ երկիրը տանում են ինքնաոչնչացման. Քոչարյան, News.am, https://news.am/arm/news/631994.html.

28 For example, see Իշխանական քարոզչամեքենայի TOP 10 առասպելները, Adevkvad, June 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwzkqmNSwsk.

29 "Armenia Assailed by Deceptive 'Fact-Checking' Groups, Part 1: The Players," DFR Lab, May 2, 2019, https://medium.com/dfrlab/armenia-assailed-by-deceptive-factchecking-groups-part-i-the-players-2ce03daf2d28.

Convention).[30] Additionally, in 2020, the National Assembly launched discussions of the New Standards for General Education, proposing reforms for public educational institutions.[31] The draft proposed several changes including incorporating the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church, into general Armenian history courses, and introducing a mandatory sex education course in public schools. Previously, the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church was taught as a separate subject. Conservative groups and the Armenian Apostolic Church criticised the draft, accusing the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport of stripping national values from the public education system, which they described as a *"lack of Armenianness"*.[32] In these contexts, weaponized information typically appeals to national existential concerns, claiming that the conventions contradict Armenian values and national identity and threaten the integrity of Armenian families. Such narratives are largely perpetuated by conservative, male-dominated civic groups and political parties that have misrepresented the conventions to fuel public debate about abandoned national values and Armenia's "misguided" future direction.

Social Media Platforms and Limitations in Enforcing Intermediate Liability

Various forms of weaponized information can be observed on, virtually, all media platforms. However, the most egregious examples are generally observed on platforms with the highest viewership, namely, television and social media. In particular, the role of social media influence in Armenia is pivotal. Social media platforms have evolved into vital channels for speech and

---

30 See "Istanbul Convention Action against violence against women and domestic violence," https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home, and "Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse,"https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/lanzarote-convention.

31 «Հայաստանի Հանրապետության կառավարության 2010 թվականի ապրիլի 8-ի N 439-Ն որոշման մեջ փոփոխություններ կատարելու մասին» [On Making Amendments to the Decision N 439-N of the Government of the Republic of Armenia of April 8, 2010], Unified Website for Publishing Draft Legal Acts, https://www.e-draft.am/projects/2560/about?fbclid=IwAR1RlziFJOFrnSnplIdhWFuGUV1PUwVg_QG_IZG4tM7GujoDxbJQwM4jR5g.

32 Dvin Titizian, "Armenia's new education standards under fire for lack of 'Armenianness,'" OC Media, August 19, 2020, https://oc-media.org/features/armenias-new-educationstandards-under-fire-for-lack-of-armenianness/.

political expression. Facebook[33] is the main platform in use across older age groups, and younger demographics are increasingly turning to platforms like Instagram,[34] where content creators frequently discuss diverse topics including politics. Research from Freedom House shows that disinformation is spread through an "ecosystem" of social media accounts – especially Facebook pages and YouTube channels – and websites.[35]

The dissemination of weaponized information on social media platforms presents significant and specific challenges. One of the central issues lies in the enforcement of intermediate liability. Intermediate liability refers to the legal responsibility imposed on online intermediaries, such as social media companies, search engines, and hosting providers, for the content circulating through their platforms.[36] This is the main regulatory mechanism through which states attempt to hold online platforms accountable for harmful or illegal content shared by their users, ensuring that platforms take adequate measures to prevent the spread of unlawful or harmful information, including hate speech, dis- and malinformation, as well as content inciting violence.

In Armenia, the enforcement of intermediate liability faces structural and jurisdictional limitations. Firstly, most major social media platforms operating in the country, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, do not have national headquarters or any formal representation within Armenia. The absence of local presence, significantly constrains the government's ability to engage in regulatory dialogue, issue formal requests for content moderation, or ensure compliance with local laws. Attempts to pursue accountability or initiate legal proceedings against companies with headquarters abroad encounter procedural and diplomatic barriers. As a result, enforcement mechanisms are largely dependent on the goodwill of global corporations, which prioritize their own community standards and international business interests over the national interests of third parties.

---

33 See details at: https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-armenia/2024/03/; https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/armenia.

34 See details at: https://napoleoncat.com/stats/instagram-users-in-armenia/2025/03/.

35 Freedom House. Freedom of the Net: Armenia. 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-net/2024.

36 Riordan, Jaani. The liability of internet intermediaries. Oxford University Press, 2016: 27.

Secondly, Armenia currently lacks comprehensive legislation or structured guidelines for identifying and classifying weaponized information. In the absence of a clear legal definition or standardized procedures for determining what constitutes weaponized or manipulative content, authorities and civil society actors are unable to effectively demand action from social media intermediaries. This legal ambiguity creates a vacuum in which harmful narratives, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and foreign information operations can proliferate unchecked. Furthermore, in the absence of a clear regulatory mandate, platforms themselves are not legally compelled to remove or demote such content, nor can they be held liable for failing to do so.

Both the absence of local platform representation and the lack of national legislation result in a fragmented and ineffective environment for law enforcement.

State Efforts in Mitigating Weaponized Information

The concept of addressing disinformation is relatively new in Armenia. In December 2023, Armenia introduced the Concept and Action Plan for Combating Disinformation covering the period 2024-2026.[37] The primary objective of the concept is to counter disinformation in Armenia. It outlines objectives, strategies, and contemporary approaches and tools to combat disinformation. The concept was developed through collaborative efforts involving local and international CSOs, including the Freedom of Information Center of Armenia, Information and Public Relations Center, and the Center for International Private Enterprise. Experts from the Media Initiatives Center and the International Republican Institute (IRI) contributed to its development.[38] While the concept is new, the outlined measures are in the process of implementation.

---

37 The decision, No. 1319-Լ "On Approval of the 2024-2026 Concept of the Fight Against Disinformation of the Republic of Armenia and the Plan of Action Arising from it".(Հայաստանի Հանրապետության ապատեղեկատվության դեմ պայքարի 2024-2026 թվականների հայեցակարգը և դրանից բխող գործողությունների ծրագիրը հաստատելու մասին ՀՀ կառավարության որոշում). Full text (in Armenian) is available at: https://www.e-gov.am/decrees/item/26645/.

38 "National Concept of the Struggle against Disinformation 2024-2026," Freedom of Information Center, December 28, 2023, https://foi.am/en/news-events/33149.

The Armenian government's counter-disinformation strategies, however, lack a whole-of-society approach and have been fragmentary and corrective, rather than comprehensive and future-oriented. While the 2023 National Strategy Against Disinformation offers a framework for greater government-private sector engagement and improved public resilience through education and media literacy, it lacks a comprehensive whole-of-society approach. It, therefore, fails to develop ways of institutionalizing a comprehensive response to disinformation, and neglects disinformation in the digital sphere. As the extent of disinformation is so vast, it will not be possible to identify and refute it in each instance. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a bottom-up approach to build the public's capacity to recognize disinformation through media literacy and educational activities.[39]

No less importantly, systemic attempts to combat weaponized information may resemble censorship and content moderation. The proposed amendments to the Law of the Republic of Armenia "On the Legal Regime of Martial Law" in December 2022[40] are a prime example of this. These amendments included provisions that would allow the government to regulate television and internet broadcasting to ensure that content aligned with military-patriotic themes. Civil Society Organisations published an announcement voicing concerns and calling for the withdrawal of the draft legal act, emphasizing the importance of subjecting the proposed measures to international scrutiny while also advocating for the establishment of mechanisms for public oversight.[41]

---

39 https://socioscope.am/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Research_30.12_2024_Eng_20.01.25.pdf.

40 "On Amendments and Amendments to the Law on the Legal Regime of Martial Status, On Amendments To The Law On Defense, Amendments To The Law On Military Service And The Status Of Armed Servants And On 'Making An Amendment To The Law On The Fundamentals Of Administration And Administrative Procedure' On Draft Laws", Unified site for the Publication of Draft Legal Acts, n.d., https://www.e-draft.am/projects/5186/digest.

41 "About the state of freedom of speech in Armenia and violations of the rights of journalists and mass media in 2023. third quarter report," Khosq, https://khosq.am/reports/հայաստանում-խոսքի-ազատության-վիճակի-35; https://khosq.am/en/2023/01/12/statement-100/.

Legislators made several attempts to confront information issues through laws, including through changes to the criminal code. A bill adopted in March 2021 aimed to triple the maximum penalties for insult and defamation to 3 and 6 million Armenian drams (approximately $5,700 and $11,400), respectively. Domestic and international media watchdogs, including Freedom House, criticized the legislation for endangering freedom of expression and the financial viability of media, urging authorities to be wary of efforts to create a healthy information space by policing and fining speech.[42] Former President Armen Sarkissian did not sign the bill, forwarding it to the Constitutional Court for review.[43]

Another bill, discussed in February 2021, proposed forbidding media from citing "unidentifiable social media sources," with the justification that this would counter fake social media channels and stop disinformation from being amplified by outlets.[44] Media rights groups have been highly critical of these measures, calling the sanctions a "baton against independent media."[45] This criticism raised an important point: indiscriminate legislation like this can be a blunt instrument, and can be easily used to target legitimate free speech and journalistic activity under the auspices of confronting false information. Such measures are also fragmented and often ineffective in the rapidly changing online media landscape. They fail to differentiate among types of problematic behaviour, treating issues like defamation and disinformation with the same approach.[46]

---

42 "Armenia: New Amendments Threaten to Stifle Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression," Freedom House, March 26, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/article/armenia-new-amendments-threaten-stifle-mediafreedom-and-freedom-expression.

43 "Sarkissian refuses to sign into law 'explicitly problematic' bill envisaging higher fines for defamation," Armenpress, April 15, 2021, https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1049088.html.

44 Հայաստանի Հանրապետության Օրենքը. «Զանգվածային Լրատվության Մասին» Հայաստանի Հանրապետության Օրենքում Փոփոխություններ Եվ Լրացումներ Կատարելու Մասին, February 2021, http://www.parliament.am/drafts.php?sel=showdraft&DraftID=60991.

45 "Հայաստանում խոսքի ազատության վիճակի և լրագրողների ու ԶԼՄ-ների իրավունքների խախտումների մասին 2020թ. տարեկան զեկույց," CPFE, January 26, 2021, https://khosq.am/reports/հայաստանում-խոսքիազատության-վիճակի-24.

46 Լրատվամիջոցներին կարգելվի՞ հղում կատարել անանուն աղբյուրներին, 1Lurer, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=fn_IVsygNP4.

Similarly, the National Security Service's (NSS) attempts to act as cyber troops to identify and penalize people behind weaponized information have been ambiguous.[47] At least three cases were observed in the past three years in which the NSS detained individuals behind Facebook accounts on the grounds of inciting violence, spreading hate speech, or threatening national security. Considering the lack of publicly available legislation or guidelines on the matter, it remains unclear how the NSS assesses threat or criminality in these cases, calling the competencies and legality of cyber troops-style activity into question.

More recently, in April 2024, the Standing Committee on Science, Education, Culture, Diaspora, Youth and Sport of the National Assembly introduced amendments to the Law on Mass Media and the Civil Code that outline a voluntary self-regulation system for media outlets, including those operating online.[48] The initiative is acceptable to the executive and the legislative bodies, as well as the civil society.

Strategic and Policy Recommendations

Develop Mechanisms for Timely and Accurate Information Provision in Crises

The government struggles with communication challenges, such as delays in providing timely and accurate information to the public. This, in turn, amplifies the spread of weaponized information. Enhancing state communication capabilities, particularly during crises through training and technical assistance to government agencies responsible for disseminating information to the public, is a timely venue for cooperation with transatlantic partners. The EU crisis response mechanism[49] that supports rapid and coordinated decision-making for political crises, natural disasters, manmade emergencies,

---

47 Joshua Kucera, "Pashinyan takes on 'fake news,'" Eurasianet, April 9, 2019, https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-takes-on-fake-news.

48 National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, "It is proposed to reform legislation regulating media sphere," April 29, 2024. http://www.parliament.am/news.php?cat_id=2&NewsID=20501&year=2024&month=04&day=29&lang=eng.

49 "How the EU responds to crises and builds resilience," Council of the European Union, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-crisis-response-resilience/#emergencies.

health crises, and complex crises such as acts of terrorism, is a promising model for localization in Armenia.

Facilitate Free, Age-Appropriate Media Literacy Education for the General Public

Armenians are exposed to increasing volumes of weaponized information through social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, and blogs. Given Armenia's media consumption habits and the decrease in trust in traditional news sources and institutions, media literacy education has become imperative. Initiatives aimed at enhancing media literacy through targeted training for each affected age group (from pre-school children to the elderly) could contribute to combating weaponized information and strengthening democratic processes. A national edutainment platform in Osvita (Ukraine)[50] offers a replicable model for this. Training for the elderly will most likely require in-person sessions instead of virtual engagement. As part of media literacy education, the introduction of a more nuanced vocabulary in the Armenian language is needed to improve the local understanding of various types of weaponized information. As of 2025, in literary and spoken Armenian alike, disinformation, malinformation, and misinformation are not linguistically differentiated, and an umbrella term 'apateghekatvu'tyun' (ապատեղեկատվություն) is used. This illustrates that gaps in media literacy run as deep as the Armenian language lacking the minimal necessary vocabulary to address the issue.

Encourage Media Outlets to Collaborate and Connect with Verified Fact-Checking Organizations

Media outlets in Armenia often lack the capacity for fact-checking mechanisms. Transatlantic partners can support media outlets and local fact-checking organizations in expanding their operations via knowledge and technology transfer. This measure can also help identify and prevent quasi-fact-checking platforms from disseminating weaponized information. State-affiliated and civil-society media professionals can benefit from enhancing their understanding of fact-checking methodologies, tools, and best practices. For

[50] See https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/.

this end, opportunities to collaborate with reputable international fact-checking organizations, e.g. FactCheck.org,[51] a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, or Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN),[52] can be a solid cooperation channel.

Establish Legislation and Direct Communication Channels with Social Media Headquarters to Enforce Intermediate Liability

Armenia must adopt legislation specifying guidelines for weaponized information identification as well as due diligence and transparency obligations for social media platforms operating within its jurisdiction. Such obligations may include requirements for prompt removal or flagging of verified dis-, mis-, and malinformation, regular publication of transparency reports on content moderation, and cooperation with national authorities during investigations. These measures can align Armenia's regulatory environment with European standards such as the EU's Digital Services Act.[53] The Armenian government could also pursue diplomatic and policy efforts to encourage major platforms, such as Meta, Google,[54] and TikTok, to establish local or regional liaison offices, or at least designate official representatives responsible for compliance with Armenian law. This would enhance communication channels between regulators and platforms, enabling faster responses to harmful content and greater participation in national digital policy dialogues. The existing legislation is either vague or assumes voluntary self-regulation only.

Strengthening National Cyber Capabilities and Mandates

It is important to enhance the currently ambiguous operational and analytical capacities of national cyber troops, as well as the legality of their activities, in order to counter weaponized information. When equipped with clear legal

51 FactCheck.org, https://www.factcheck.org/.

52 "Empowering fact-checkers worldwide," International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), n.d., https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/.

53 See: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act_en.

54 Google has sent delegations to Armenia to meet with government officials and discuss potential areas for cooperation, with a recent visit in September 2024 focusing on AI and cloud services. Whether intermediate liability is included on the agenda is unknown.

mandates and oversight mechanisms, such units can monitor, attribute, and respond to coordinated information operations more effectively. Integrating cyber defense with information integrity functions, such as identifying inauthentic online behavior tracing the origins of disinformation campaigns, and cooperating with both domestic and transatlantic partners, enables cyber troops to provide an early-warning and rapid-response capacity within the broader national security framework. Ensuring that these activities are grounded in transparent mandates and respect for human rights is essential to maintain public trust and prevent potential misuse of state cyber capabilities.

PART IV: Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

Selected Recommendations

- All stakeholders and regional governments should promote a technology agnostic regulatory approach that does not create legislative frameworks for particular technologies but follows principles of good governance.
- The South Caucasus republics should establish a research grant on the topic of "AI for Peacebuilding in South Caucasus" to explore how AI can support peacebuilding through multinational, interdisciplinary, and cross-sectional collaboration.
- Armenia and Azerbaijan should establish joint centres for peace studies, memory research, and social psychology, to ensure fairness and transparency.
- EU and member states should adopt a more pragmatic engagement with the Georgian government through maintaining an issue-focused engagement, while preserving the EU accession talks frozen.

Overview of Political and Security Situation in South Caucasus

The escalating volatility of the South Caucasus region following from Russia's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine, Iran's military setbacks in its conflict with Israel, and Türkiye's deepening involvement in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq), has been a consistent element of strategic continuity. Georgia's ongoing geopolitical shift away from its European and Euro-Atlantic priorities has also continued. However, recent South Caucasus events, including the Abu Dhabi bilateral summit (July 2025) and the Washington summit Joint Declaration (August 2025) have been significant steps towards peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, while highlighting the importance of connectivity once again. Despite the apparent proximity of a resolution to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the ongoing peace process remains susceptible to political, socio-economic, and geopolitical disruptions.

Dangers of Persistent Ontological Insecurities

Ontological security, seen as the need for continuity of collective selfhood rather than mere physical survival, is showing how identities are stabilized through routinized narratives – often conflict-centred. In the South Caucasus, post-Soviet identity formation in Armenia and Azerbaijan became anchored in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, producing durable, but toxic routines of enmity. Armenia's heroism–victimhood narrative and Azerbaijan's injustice–restoration narrative generated predictability at the cost of reconciliation. The 2020 war disrupted this equilibrium asymmetrically, delivering ontological reassurance through victory for Azerbaijan while precipitating identity shock and uncertainty in Armenia. Post-war discourse indicates that peace itself can be destabilizing when conflict underwrites identity continuity, leaving elites reliant on enemy images and marginalizing alternative societal voices. Therefore, achieving sustainable reconciliation requires new routines that secure identity without perpetuating hostility.

Artificial Intelligence: More than a Tool

In this context, Artificial Intelligence (AI) was presented as a non-neutral force that increasingly mediates ontological security by shaping narrative production, recognition, and legitimacy. While one first thinks about AI as a tool, AI governance itself is a defining act of ontological security. Governments deploy AI policy vocabularies – such as "trustworthy AI" or "digital sovereignty" – to perform coherent self-images, even as AI-enabled disinformation and deepfakes undermine those same identities. Russia exemplifies this duality through the use of Large Language Models to consolidate domestic narratives while eroding trust abroad, whereas Ukraine's alignment with European AI norms operates as a performance of European identity. In the South Caucasus, AI offers tools for narrative mapping, discourse analysis, and hate-speech monitoring that can expose how identities are continually reconstructed and open space for dialogue. However, AI is not a silver bullet: its constructive use depends on governance that prioritizes trust-building, institutional capacity, and AI literacy. The core challenge, therefore, is to govern not only technologies but the narrative environments through which societies maintain ontological security without defaulting to conflict.

Georgia's Continued Drift Away from European and Euro-Atlantic Integration

Georgia has experienced a protracted, profound and consequential political crisis that has caused a shift in its foreign and security policy towards Türkiye, Azerbaijan, China and, albeit indirectly, Russia. The Georgian Dream (GD) government has sought to expand its economic options through increased trade and investment ties with Türkiye, in addition to the newly established strategic partnership with China. Despite the absence of any substantive progress in the resumption of formal political and diplomatic relations, there has been a gradual resumption of economic cooperation with Russia. The imposition of sanctions against high-level GD officials by EU member states and the US had a negligible impact on Tbilisi's policies. Meanwhile, the political and administrative pressures against the so-called "foreign agents" have intensified.

Western Policy on Georgia: Continuity or Pragmatism?

Some have argued that the West should continue to encourage the Georgian government leaders to return to the democratic path and to resume progress toward EU membership. In this view, the European Union should develop a "security vision on the South Caucasus" and expand its economic and connectivity presence in Georgia and the wider region. The existing "carrot and stick" approach should be applied more effectively by imposing a greater number of sanctions on individuals and businesses associated with the GD.

Others advocated for the EU to adopt a more pragmatic approach in its engagement with the GD government, while maintaining the *status quo* regarding the frozen EU membership talks. Several regional participants have expressed frustration with the current EU sanctions against GD officials, as they risk undermining trilateral cooperation in the South Caucasus. This position did not imply the abandonment of the Georgian opposition, nor did it condone the political and administrative harassment of the pro-European civil society. On the contrary, the EU and the US should explore more effective means and strategies to counter such abuses, while maintaining an issue-focused dialogue with the Georgian government.

TRIPP: Between Opportunities and Uncertainties

The "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP)" initiative has been proposed as a means of facilitating an "unimpeded" passage between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan via the Syunik region of Armenia through a long-term "exclusive partnership" between Armenia and the United States. For the past few years, the status of this route has constituted one of the principal obstacles to the conclusion and ratification of a peace accord between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is projected that the TRIPP initiative will accelerate the development of the Middle Corridor, which is a proposed transportation and trade route connecting China to Europe via Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye. The implementation of this initiative is expected to enhance Armenia's regional standing and provide economic opportunities, thereby benefiting the Armenian economy. It has also the potential to encourage trilateral cooperation between the South Caucasus countries.

Nevertheless, considerable uncertainties continue to surround the TRIPP. Firstly, there is a lack of clarity regarding how the "unimpeded passage" of Azerbaijani goods and people could be accommodated with Armenian sovereignty over its territory. Secondly, Russia, Iran and China have expressed significant reservations regarding the United States' involvement in the regulation of the international transit across the TRIPP. These nations may obstruct the initiative or exert pressure on the Armenian government to align its actions with their own interests. Thirdly, considerable Armenian political and societal discontent with TRIPP has been observed, which could potentially result in its collapse if Prime Minister N. Pashinyan were to lose the forthcoming Parliamentarian elections scheduled for June 2026.

Recommendations:

To All Stakeholders – Governments, Civil Society, International Organizations, Academia, and the Private Sector:

- **Enhance AI-mediated ontological security.** To enhance AI-mediated ontological security, first and foremost support capacity-building on how AI works and its usage. Multilingual AI tools could be

used to detect inflammatory rhetoric online. The findings of this monitoring and analysis should be regularly disseminated to relevant international organisations and research centres in order to support their efforts in tracking, assessing, and mitigating negative trends. The success of this endeavour depends on feeding fact-checked information to these tools. In addition, train NGOs, teachers, and youth leaders how to use generative AI to co-create visual stories, animations, or stories of coexistence connecting conflict-affected communities on all levels.

- **Promote a technology agnostic regulatory approach** that does not create legislative frameworks for particular technologies but follows principles of good governance. Resist to regulate specific technologies or sectors (e.g. Large Language Models, Social Media or specific companies) as developments in technology are faster than regulatory policies are adopted.

To Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia:

- **Establish a Platform for Dialogue on Regional Stability in the South Caucasus** to facilitate regular, high-level dialogue among Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, with key external actors in a SC3+ format. This forum should address pivotal and even controversial regional geopolitical and connectivity issues (energy, transport, trade, digital, environmental, etc.), in order to avert misinterpretation and misunderstandings while fostering confidence-building and promoting mutual economic benefits.
- **Establish National Public-Private Cyber Defence Platforms** to enable regular joint training, information exchange, and surge capacity during crises. This initiative would enhance national readiness as a significant proportion of the technical expertise is concentrated in the private sector. Public-private cooperation could reduce response-times during cyber incidents and foster mutual trust and shared responsibility between the sectors.
- **Establish a South Caucasus Cyber Partnership** by incorporating a cyber-security task force and a civil society alliance, involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, with the provision of technical support from the EU and/or NATO (e.g. through the Cooperative

Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence). This partnership would lead to the establishment of mechanisms for joint responses to incidents, serve as a platform for exchange and should be promoting inclusive cyber governance, media literacy, and cross-border peacebuilding.

- **Establish a research grant on the topic of "AI for Peacebuilding in South Caucasus"** to explore how AI can support peacebuilding through multinational, interdisciplinary, and cross-sectional collaboration. Start by funding and implementing projects at the local/national level to facilitate the establishment of regional teams of experts with the objective of proposing joint regional projects aimed at strengthening stability and promoting peace in the South Caucasus. Potential funding opportunities for such a grant could be found within the framework of the EU or the OSCE.
- **Develop a South Caucasus Charter on AI Ethics for Peacebuilding** to delineate principles for transparency, fairness, and inclusivity in the usage of AI applications. This Charter would provide a framework to promoting AI tools in educational settings that encourage shared understanding and peacebuilding rather than conflict, with the support of international collaborations.
- **Develop a regional initiative on Fact checking and Awareness Raising** especially in the context of disinformation and cognitive warfare, which target perceptions, identity, and morale – the human dimension of security. Since 2016, Georgia has engaged wounded veterans in awareness-raising campaigns to counter false narratives. The initiative has been proven to be successful. Its expansion into a regional, volunteer-based programme, engaging veterans, experts and civil society representatives from Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in fact checking and awareness-raising campaigns, has the potential to enhance cross-border resilience and public confidence.

To Armenia's and Azerbaijan's Governments, Civil Society and Academia:

- **Establish a "Joint Armenian-Azerbaijani Economic and Infrastructure Council"** to coordinate infrastructure, energy, and logistics projects in both countries that could potentially include neutral observers such as representatives of the World Bank or other international governmental organisations.

- **Establish Armenian-Azerbaijani joint centres for peace studies, memory research, and social psychology** to ensure fairness and transparency. They could be co-hosted by universities in both countries and supported by neutral international partners (e.g., academic institutions from interested European states).

To Armenia's, Azerbaijan's, and Türkiye's Governments, Businesses and Academia:

- **Establish a Cross-Border Economic Development Program** to promote inclusive, sustainable economic growth and regional stability through cross-border cooperation among border communities in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Türkiye (e.g., joint industrial and agricultural zones, common policies for water, land, and biodiversity management, support for women and youth entrepreneurs, harmonizing customs procedures, reduction of tariffs for small traders, border markets).
- **Foster education cooperation for development and reducing prejudices,** e.g. through the establishment of an Erasmus-type programme for cross-border educational exchange programmes, trilateral educational materials that highlight shared histories, adopting online learning networks connecting schools and universities to share resources and promote joint learning projects; exchanges between vocational institutes specialising in agriculture, environmental management, crafts, and small business development.

To Armenia's Government, Media, Civil Society and Academia:

- **Strengthen national cyber capabilities and legislation** to enhance the operational and analytical capacities of national cyber troops, as well as the legality of their activities, in their efforts to effectively counter weaponised information.
- **Establish proper legislation and direct communication channels with social media headquarters** for the enforcement of intermediate liability and transparency. Adopt framework legislation for the identification of weaponised information.

- **Develop mechanisms for timely and accurate information sharing in crises management** for the timely and accurate dissemination of information. Enhance state communication capabilities, particularly during crises, through training and technical assistance to government agencies responsible for disseminating information to the public, with the potential for assistance from European and Transatlantic partners.
- **Facilitate free, age-appropriate education on media literacy for the general public.** Initiatives that are designed to enhance media literacy through targeted training for each affected age group (from pre-school children to the elderly) would contribute to a resilient society and to the strengthening of democratic processes.

To the European Union and the EU Member States:

- **Adopt a more pragmatic engagement with the Georgian government** through maintaining an issue-focused engagement with the government**,** while preserving the EU accession talks frozen**.** Keep reevaluating this policy so that it still facilitates progress and reforms in Georgia in areas of common interest that will be relevant after a restart of the accession talks.
- **Develop a common European framework to support Georgian experts, academics and civil society representatives**, in particular for those who have been subject to political and administrative abuses from the Government.
- **Ensure the inclusion of Georgian officials in regional cooperation meetings.**

List of Abbreviations

ABL	Administrative Border Line
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADY	Azerbaijan Railways
ASAN	Azerbaijani Service and Assessment Network
ASR	Automatic Speech Recognition
AZAL	Azerbaijan Airlines
AZTV	Azerbaijan Television
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BOP	Balance of Power
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BTK	Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation
CBM	Confidence-Building Measures
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CJSC	Closed Joint-Stock Company
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSP	Common Security Policy
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
DDoS	Distributed Denial of Service
DSR	Digital Silk Road
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EAP	Eastern Partnership
eCIM/SMGS	Digital Railway Consignment System
ESDP	European Security and Defence Policy
EU	European Union
EUMM	European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia
e-CMR	Electronic Consignment Note
e-TIR	Electronic TIR Transit System
FSB	Federal Security Service (Russian Federation)
GD	Georgian Dream
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate (Russian Federation)

GWP	Global War Party
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IFCN	International Fact-Checking Network
IMEC	India-Middle East-Europe Corridor
INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
IO	International Organisation
IR	International Relations
IRI	International Republican Institute
ISP	Internet Service Provider
JF-17	Pakistan-China joint fighter project
KGB	Committee for State Security (Russian Federation)
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
LLM	Large-Language Model
MCI	Middle Corridor Initiative
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NEQSOL	NEQSOL Holding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSS	National Security Service
OCR	Optical Character Recognition
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OTS	Organization of Turkic States
PM	Prime Minister
PsyOps	Psychological Operations
RAND	RAND Corporation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SC3/SC3+	South Caucasus Trio
SMEs	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
SVR	Foreign Intelligence Service (Russian Federation)
TITR	Trans-Caspian International Transport Route
TRIPP	Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity
UN	United Nations

UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIDIR	United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research
ZTE	Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment

List of Authors and Editors

Armine ARZUMANYAN, American University of Armenia, Yerevan

Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

Shalva DZEBISASHVILI, University of Georgia, Tbilisi

Andro GOTSIRIDZE, Cybersecurity Research & Education Centre (CY-SEC), Tbilisi

Vusal GULIYEV, Center of Analysis of International Relations, Baku

Levon HOVSEPYAN, National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan

Vasif HUSEYNOV, Center of Analysis of International Relations, Baku

Boris KUZNETSOV, Centre for International and Regional Policy, St. Petersburg

Gulkhanim MAMMADOVA, Topchubashov Center, Baku

Elena MANDALENAKIS, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

Anna NADIBAIDZE, University of South Denmark, Odense

George Vlad NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

Band 7 / 2026

Ongoing geopolitical shifts transform the South Caucasus and leave Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan confronted with major strategic choices. How are various geopolitical actors, namely Russia, the US, Iran and Türkiye, reshaping the strategic and political environment? Beyond geopolitics, experts examine how Artificial Intelligence is influencing identity narratives and ontological security, as well as shaping perceptions of conflict and peace. Furthermore, the contributions in this volume address strategies and vulnerabilities in the cyber domain, including disinformation and cognitive warfare.

ISBN: 978-3-903548-32-9

30th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group
"Regional Stability in the South Caucasus"