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## THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES AND THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF AZERBAIJAN

### Annotation

This article explores recent geopolitical transformations in the South Caucasus and the reshaping of its security architecture. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and between Armenia and Azerbaijan weakened regional stability. The 2020 Second Karabakh War restored Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and revitalized peace efforts. The article analyzes the strategic interests of key actors such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran, with a focus on Azerbaijan's evolving diplomatic role and its regional initiatives. Particular attention is given to energy and transport corridors, and to programs like the "Great Return" that contribute to long-term peace and integration. The study is based on an analytical-descriptive and comparative approach.

**Key words:** South Caucasus, Regional Security, Geopolitical Challenges, Azerbaijan, Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Regional Cooperation.

## ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ АРХИТЕКТУРЫ БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ НА ЮЖНОМ КАВКАЗЕ В КОНТЕКСТЕ НОВЫХ ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИХ РЕАЛИЙ И СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКАЯ РОЛЬ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА

### Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются недавние геополитические преобразования на Южном Кавказе и изменения в архитектуре региональной безопасности. После распада Советского Союза нерешённые конфликты в Абхазии, Южной Осетии и между Арменией и Азербайджаном ослабили стабильность в регионе. Вторая Карабахская война 2020 года восстановила территориальную целостность Азербайджана и активизировала мирные усилия. Анализируются стратегические интересы ключевых акторов, таких как Россия, Турция и Иран, с особым акцентом на дипломатическую роль Азербайджана и его региональные инициативы. Особое внимание уделяется энергетическим и транспортным коридорам, а также программам, таким как «Великое возвращение», способствующим долгосрочному миру и интеграции. Исследование основано на аналитико-описательном и сравнительном подходе.

**Ключевые слова:** Южный Кавказ, региональная безопасность, геополитические вызовы, Азербайджан, постконфликтное восстановление, региональное сотрудничество.

## JANUBIY KAVKAZDA XAVFSIZLIK ARXITEKTURASI YANGI GEOSIYOSIY VOQELIKLAR SHAROITIDA VA OZARBAYJONNING STRATEGIK ROLI

### Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada Janubiy Kavkazdagi so'nggi geosiyosiy o'zgarishlar va mintaqaviy xavfsizlik arxitekturasini tahlil qilinadi. Sovet Ittifoqi qulaganidan so'ng Abxaziya, Janubiy Osetiya va Armaniston-Ozarbayjon mojarolari barqarorlikka putur yetkazdi. 2020-yilgi Ikkinchi Qarabog' urushi Ozarbayjonning hududiy yaxlitligini tikladi va tinchlikka oid sa'y-harakatlarni faollashtirdi. Tadqiqotda Rossiya, Turkiya va Eron kabi asosiy davlatlarning manfaatlari, shuningdek, Ozarbayjonning diplomatik roli va mintaqaviy tashabbuslari o'rganiladi. Energiya va transport yo'laklari, shuningdek, "Buyuk qaytish" kabi uzoq muddatli tinchlik va integratsiyani qo'llab-quvvatlovchi dasturlarga alohida e'tibor qaratilgan. Tadqiqot tahliliy-ta'rifiy va qiyosiy yondashuvga asoslangan.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Janubiy Kavkaz, mintaqaviy xavfsizlik, geosiyosiy muammolar, Ozarbayjon, mojarodan keyingi tiklanish, mintaqaviy hamkorlik.

The Geopolitical and Security Environment of the South Caucasus. First and foremost, it is essential to analyze the key factors influencing the security environment of the South Caucasus. The security context of the region is complex and multifaceted,

shaped by a combination of internal and external dynamics. Among the primary determinants are historical conflicts, ethnic diversity, the intersection of competing geopolitical interests, the struggle over

energy resources, and the involvement of international actors.

In the late Soviet period, tendencies toward ethnic separatism intensified in several former republics. In 1988, Armenian separatism escalated in Azerbaijan's Karabakh region, leading to rising tensions. Simultaneously, separatist movements gained momentum in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions [8, p. 99]. Alongside the Baltic republics, national-territorial and political-status-based conflicts in the Caucasus intensified between 1989 and 1991, further destabilizing the USSR in its final phase. Following the restoration of independence, some of these tensions turned into open military confrontations. The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, as well as the confrontations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, resulted in tens of thousands of casualties and displaced hundreds of thousands. In the conflict arising from Armenia's military aggression against Azerbaijan, over 20,000 people were killed and nearly 800,000 became refugees or internally displaced persons [7, p. 3].

The foreign policy orientations of the regional states also have a direct impact on the security dynamics. Georgia has pursued Euro-Atlantic integration and cooperates actively on energy and transport corridor projects (UNDP Azerbaijan). Armenia, on the other hand, maintains a strategic alliance with Russia and is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). These divergent foreign policy trajectories often hinder regional cooperation and instead reinforce antagonistic dynamics.

**Regional Cooperation and Security Architecture.** The interests of major powers represent one of the key determinants shaping the security architecture in the South Caucasus. Russia seeks to maintain the region within its sphere of influence and strengthens its position through the deployment of military bases [15]. Turkey, on the other hand, increases its political and military support for Azerbaijan and takes the lead in initiatives aimed at ensuring stability in the region. Iran adopts a cautious policy shaped by the presence of a large Azerbaijani population within its own borders and the fragile geopolitical equilibrium. The United States and the European Union have developed their strategic priorities in the South Caucasus around expanding their political and economic influence, ensuring energy security, supporting the development of democratic institutions, and counterbalancing Russian dominance. Their involvement is not only aimed at promoting stability in the region but also at gaining an advantage in the broader geopolitical competition. The South Caucasus energy resources and transit capabilities are among the main factors enhancing the region's strategic importance. Transnational projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) have become essential instruments not only from an economic perspective but also in terms of political stability and security. Over the past three decades, Azerbaijan–Georgia relations have deepened into a strategic partnership based on shared geopolitical

and geoeconomic interests. These energy and transport projects contribute to both bilateral and regional stability and enhance Europe's energy security in accordance with the national security strategies of both countries [7]. However, competition over energy resources can occasionally intensify security risks, especially regarding the protection of transport routes and the stable functioning of energy infrastructure.

**The Role of the Middle Corridor in Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Security**

The Middle Corridor project plays a pivotal role in enhancing regional cooperation and security in the South Caucasus. Through this initiative, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey are achieving greater integration and interdependence in the export of transportation and energy resources. The Middle Corridor is expected to accelerate the region's economic development and contribute positively to geopolitical stability. With the project's sustained development, the transit potential of the South Caucasus will increase, international trade links will expand, and both economic and security-related ties in the region will be strengthened.

President Ilham Aliyev, during his speech at the international conference titled "Along the Middle Corridor: Geopolitics, Security and Economy" held at ADA University on November 25, 2022, specifically emphasized: "In order to implement a large-scale project such as the Middle Corridor, issues of security and economic capacity, of course, had to be discussed. Without security and economic potential, it will not be possible to achieve the goal of fully commissioning the Middle Corridor, which is intended to benefit all countries in the region. Naturally, one of the key elements for the implementation of any large-scale project is stability. Azerbaijan has enjoyed stability for many years, and this has been one of the main factors behind our economic development" [7]. This statement underlines that the Middle Corridor is not merely an economic initiative but also carries strategic significance for ensuring security and stability throughout the region. Thus, the security environment in the South Caucasus is influenced by numerous interrelated factors: ethnic and political conflicts, competing geopolitical interests, the involvement of international actors, and the rivalry over energy resources all represent both opportunities and challenges for the region's stability.

The South Caucasus continues to grapple with both traditional and emerging security threats. While the legacy of unresolved conflicts particularly the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict remains central, the region now faces multidimensional risks that affect internal stability and regional dynamics. Despite Azerbaijan restoring its territorial integrity following the 44-day war in 2020, the absence of a formal peace agreement and ongoing border delimitation and demarcation processes hinder long-term stability. Furthermore, large areas remain contaminated with landmines and unexploded ordnance, delaying the return of displaced persons and causing civilian casualties [1]. Environmental and climate-related risks are also on the rise. Reduced water resources, soil degradation, and extreme weather events

negatively impact agriculture and food security, potentially leading to social unrest [6]. In addition, the increasing role of information warfare through disinformation, cyber threats, and media manipulation undermines national unity and security. These threats highlight the need to adapt to non-traditional dimensions of warfare. Moreover, global geopolitical shifts, including the U.S.- China rivalry, EU and NATO expansion, and the aftershocks of the Russia-Ukraine war, place the South Caucasus in a vulnerable position. Regional states attempt to balance between major powers, creating both strategic opportunities and risks.

Security in the South Caucasus today transcends military concerns. It is shaped by a combination of historical, environmental, technological, and geopolitical factors. Therefore, a comprehensive approach—embracing human security, sustainable development, and regional cooperation—is essential for long-term stability.

Perspectives of Regional Cooperation and the Renewal of Geopolitical Orientations. The South Caucasus' complex security environment highlights the critical role of expanding regional cooperation for sustainable stability. Developing cooperation models helps reduce conflict risks, restore mutual trust, and protect shared economic interests. The strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Georgia exemplifies this through joint energy, transport, and trade projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, which deepen economic interdependence and regional stability [12].

Turkey's 2009 initiative, the "Platform for Peace and Cooperation in the Caucasus," was an early effort in this direction, but significant cooperation opportunities emerged only after the 2020 Second Karabakh War. The recent "3+3" format (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia + Russia, Turkey, Iran) proposes new dialogue prospects; however, Georgia's refusal to participate due to tensions with Russia [9] and Armenia's unconstructive stance limit its practical impact. Despite this, the format remains a potential alternative for trust-building, requiring more balanced international support, as the OSCE Minsk Group has proved ineffective.

Effective regional cooperation must extend beyond governments to involve public diplomacy, civil society, academia, and media. Reducing stereotypes, enhancing cultural and scientific ties, and developing joint security concepts are essential for long-term peace [9]. Security in the South Caucasus relies not only on military and political factors but also on economic interdependence, mutual trust, dialogue, and humanitarian cooperation.

In 2023-2024, Armenia's foreign policy showed notable shifts. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced Armenia's suspension from the CSTO and intentions to withdraw unless the bloc respects its sovereignty [13]. While signaling a possible Westward shift, Armenia's long-term strategic direction remains unclear, maintaining regional uncertainty.

Currently, Azerbaijan actively promotes regional stability, emphasizing peace treaty signing and

reopening transport links as priorities. Armenia's mutual recognition and participation are key for lasting peace.

Georgia plays a neutral, stabilizing role, offering diplomatic mediation between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Statements from Georgian leaders in late 2023 and early 2025 affirm Tbilisi's commitment to fostering dialogue and supporting regional agreements [3].

In conclusion, South Caucasus security architecture requires rebuilding through diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian mechanisms alongside military aspects.

The ECO Summit and Azerbaijan's Emerging Geopolitical Role. Azerbaijan's active policy aimed at fostering cooperation and ensuring stability in the region was internationally acknowledged during the 17th Summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), held in July 2025. The event, convened on July 4, 2025, in the city of Khankendi, held particular significance as a symbolic recognition at the international level of the new geopolitical realities shaped by Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus. Beyond its diplomatic weight, the summit functioned as a legitimate international platform affirming the post-conflict policies and strategic initiatives implemented by Azerbaijan [5]. In his address, President Ilham Aliyev of the Republic of Azerbaijan presented the emerging geopolitical order with concrete examples in political, economic, and security terms. As the President emphasized: "Azerbaijan is hosting the ECO Summit for the third time... The fact that today's Summit is being held in Karabakh, in Khankendi, carries a special significance" [5]. This statement reflects not merely a diplomatic gesture, but a symbolic affirmation of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty in the international arena. Although Azerbaijan's territorial integrity was recognized by the international community in 1991, the holding of the Summit in Khankendi was viewed as a practical and political reinforcement of this status. President Aliyev also underscored that the large-scale reconstruction and restoration efforts in the liberated territories are of strategic importance, both in terms of internal economic development and regional stability and security: "Now Azerbaijan is building new cities and villages on the lands destroyed by Armenia... The Great Return Program is being implemented" [5]. This illustrates Azerbaijan's proactive approach in the humanitarian and social spheres, as well as its contribution to the construction of a lasting peace model in the post-conflict period. During the Summit, President Aliyev also drew attention to the grave consequences of Armenia's occupation policy. As he stated: "Out of 67 mosques, 65 were completely destroyed by Armenia... This is an act of disrespect and insult against Islam and the entire Muslim world" [5]. This highlights the need to consider not only military and political dimensions but also cultural and religious aspects in the discourse on regional security. Furthermore, President Aliyev emphasized Azerbaijan's strategic role in regional energy security: "Today, Azerbaijan ensures the energy security of many countries and exports natural gas to 12 countries via

various pipeline routes” [5]. The invitation and participation of heads of state from Iran, Pakistan, and other member countries demonstrated that regional powers are beginning to adapt to the new security environment shaped by Azerbaijan. In conclusion, the ECO Summit held in Khankendi showcased Azerbaijan's strategic capacity to reshape the regional political architecture in the post-conflict era.

**Conclusion.** The South Caucasus holds strategic importance due to its geopolitical complexity, ethno-cultural diversity, and role as a transit hub for energy and transport. The region's security is shaped by both internal conflicts and external power rivalries. The Second Karabakh War marked a turning point, with

Azerbaijan's territorial restoration creating new geopolitical dynamics. Azerbaijan has since strengthened its position through strategic partnerships, especially with Türkiye, and initiatives such as the Middle Corridor and renewable energy projects. Lasting peace requires adherence to international law, including sovereignty and territorial integrity. Azerbaijan's regional initiatives in energy, transport, and diplomacy not only support its national goals but also enhance regional and global stability. Continued commitment to pragmatic, cooperative policies will be essential for long-term peace and development in the South Caucasus.

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