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After 1991, the Goals of Russia in the South Caucasus

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Abstract

This study explores Russia's strategic objectives in the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia) following the collapse of the Soviet Union. South Caucasus has an important strategic location during the Soviet Union; it was considered Russian states till 1991. After the independence, Russia lost formal political authority over the region, but it did not diminish Moscow's perception of the region as a vital part of its "near abroad," which is critical to secure its role in the region as guarantor of energy security, access to warm waters, and control of energy corridors. This research highlights how Moscow has sought to maintain monopoly dominance from direct involvement to a strategic influence. Additionally, the fact that regional disputes have remained unresolved demonstrate the weakness of Russia

and may attract the attention of Western countries to the region. On contrary, it is worth mentioning that by stationing military bases in Armenia (as a formal member of Collective Security Treaty Organization) and peacekeeping roles in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia wants to prevent the newly independent states from aligning with the West or joining NATO. The study provides a meaningful insight into the strategic importance of the South Caucasus in international relations and that the United States is intended to unite the countries of this region to get rid of Russian historical influence and, on the other hand, to gain interest from the resources of this region in a way that Iran and Russia have no interests in.

Keywords: Russia, South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and Armenia

Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the South Caucasus emerged as a cluster of newly independent states. These countries occupy a critical geostrategic position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia and border Russia's volatile North Caucasus. This new Geopolitical landscape created a power vacuum in the South Caucasus. Furthermore, its abundant energy resources and strategic pipelines connecting the Caspian Sea to global markets make, it serve as a focal point for both regional and global powers (Blank, 2023) ^[5]. On the other hand, Energy is an important element to run the global economy and particularly for Western industrialized countries. By the end of the 1950s, the Soviet Union was the world's second-largest oil producer. Therefore, from a realistic perspective, Russia realizes that economic power is a decisive instrument in the international system. That's why, today, energy supplies have become one of the fundamental pillars of foreign policy of Russia and for all countries across the world to maximize the use of energy resources. The past experiences of the Arab oil embargo against the West, the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait demonstrated that if disruptions occur in energy supplies or in the routes through which energy is transported to consumer markets, the progress of the global economy can be seriously challenged (Hashemi, 2005) ^[9].

In this context, after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and this transformation compelled Russia to redefine its foreign and security policies to preserve its influence; therefore, Russia formulated its first energy strategy in 1992, in which the territory of the former Soviet Union, including the South Caucasus, was defined as part of Russia's national security domain. Likewise, to preserve its traditional influence, Russia once again, in its 2020 National Security Strategy, set its objective, aligned carefully with the doctrine of its foreign policy. In this policy, the main part was restoration of Russia's superpower status through the vast utilization of its immense energy resources. In this context, President Putin explicitly declared that Russia's foreign policy orientations would be based on global energy leadership. By adopting this new strategy, Russia adjusted its energy policy with the outlook of safeguarding its position as a leading power (Affairs, 2020) ^[1].

Russia aims to minimize instability in the region and expand its influence through cooperative and interactive policies, conducting multilateral agreements and establishing regional organizations (Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security treaty organization...) with countries of the south Caucasus to keep them its strategic orbit, which plays a significant role in the region for Russia to achieve its economic, military, energy, transport corridors, and defense objectives (Hlosek, 2006) ^[10]. On the other hand, the West, particularly the United States, has sought to strengthen its relations with these newly independent states since the fall of the Soviet Union, when a power vacuum emerged in the region. The West aims to benefit from the strategic location of the South Caucasus and simultaneously prevent these countries from falling back into Russia's sphere of influence. This region is well-named as a key battleground, particularly Azerbaijan, for competing global powers, including the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and Iran, and countering Western and NATO expansion (Melvin, 2024) ^[15].

Consequently, understanding post-1991 objectives of Russia in the South Caucasus provides that a complex geopolitical competition and a combination of political influence, energy security, and regional stability concerns have been followed by Russia in this region. These concerns have placed the South Caucasus at the center of a complex geopolitical competition. One of the key outcomes of the new geopolitical competition between the countries that have mentioned earlier is access to the energy resources, transportation corridors and pursuit of their strategic interests. Russia's assertion of power in the South Caucasus is a response to the Western expansionism led by the United States in Moscow's traditional sphere of influence. Western policymakers fear that if Russia becomes the dominant regional actor, Cold War tensions may be revived. Someone can ask that this context raises serious questions: What are Russia's key objectives and interests in this region that it seeks to achieve? It appears that Russia's strategy in the South Caucasus is twofold: on one hand, to fulfill its economic and defense-related goals, and on the other, to counter the influence of the United States in the region (Olga Brusylovskaya, Yuliia MAISTRENKO, 2024) ^[17].

Research Objective

The current research examines a comprehensive understanding of Russia's goals in the South Caucasus region and the various means through which it seeks to achieve its economic and security goals. This will help provide a comprehensive and accurate answer to the research question.

Significance of the Study

Studying strategies of regional powers in strategically important areas is of great relevance to students and scholars of political science and international relations. This underscores the fundamental importance of this research.

Research Methodology

This academic research employs a descriptive-analytical research method. The data has been collected through library-based research. The structure of the paper is designed to first explain the geographic and strategic position of the South Caucasus and then analyze Russia's objectives in the region.

Geopolitical Location of the South Caucasus

The South Caucasus is a region situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. It is bordered by Russia to the north, Iran to the south, the Caspian Sea to the east, and Turkey to the west (Ahmadiyan, 2010) ^[2]. This region is rich in oil and natural gas resources, which has drawn significant attention from major regional and global powers. Among these powers, Russia holds a particularly strong interest, viewing itself as a traditional stakeholder in the region. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia continues to consider the South Caucasus part of its sphere of influence (BAGHERI, 2021) ^[4]. The country maintains vital economic, geopolitical, and security interests in this area. To better understand this issue, the topic will be examined through different analytical dimensions in the following sections.

From a geopolitical perspective, the South Caucasus holds significance to the United States and European powers due to its geostrategic position and its energy reserves. Therefore, these countries have adopted in their foreign policy the strategy of alliance, or cooperation with the West, in particular Azerbaijan for the following reasons (Cristescu, 2020) ^[7]:

1. Due to internal challenges and the economic advantages offered by the West;
2. In order to secure their interests in various political, economic, and security domains;
3. Because of Western willingness to transfer the region's energy to Europe through routes other than Russia (such as Georgia, and specifically the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline);
4. Owing to historical concerns and fears of a renewed Russian domination over these states.

Therefore, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, regional and extra-regional powers used multilateral cooperation and diplomatic tools, both bilaterally and multilaterally with the newly independent states of the South Caucasus to expand their influence. On this basis, Russia and Western powers (the U.S. and the European Union), as the two main actors in the region over the past three and a half decades, have each sought to pursue their specific goals by initiating new alliances and organizations (John Lough, 2025) ^[12]. For instance, the U.S. has aimed at expanding its political and economic influence through frameworks such as the Partnership for Peace and NATO's eastward enlargement, while Europe because of its urgent need for energy diversification and for stability and security in its neighborhood, has sought engagement with South Caucasus states through existing institutions such as the OSCE (Hadi Ajili Mohammadreza Bahadorkhani, 2014) ^[8].

Within the framework of geopolitical components, the South Caucasus is considered one of the important geopolitical regions of the world, and control over this region leads to dominance over a significant portion of the world's energy resources (after the Persian Gulf and Siberia). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, this region has strongly attracted the attention of the United States, and in recent decades, the confrontation between the U.S. and Russia in this area has become a matter of considerable significance (Hashemi, 2005) ^[9].

The United States and Russia, gaining access to hydrocarbon resources, managing their extraction and export, as well as expanding influence in this geopolitical region, have been given a special place. To such an extent

that in U.S. energy policies, the issue of energy security and the energy pipeline routes from the South Caucasus region have been formulated with a focus on sidelining Russia. Accordingly, the United States focused its serious attention on the construction of the East-West energy corridor, which resulted in the planning and establishment of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and others. The purpose of this corridor is to bypass and ultimately end dependence on Russia. In this regard, American oil companies have, to a large extent engaged in extensive negotiations with the Republic of Azerbaijan (Poghosyan, 2017) ^[18].

The “orange revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, which took place with Western support, caused the Russians to view Western policies in their surrounding region with greater suspicion than before. On the other hand, the events in Uzbekistan and U.S. involvement under the banner of human rights and attempts to change certain regimes in the region raised concerns about U.S. policies and efforts to maintain its presence (Šmíd, 2013) ^[20]. The current anti-American stance of the Uzbeks, including their request through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for U.S. forces to leave the region, along with the overall international context, although it did not put an end to U.S. activities in the region, has nevertheless slowed down Washington’s progress in this direction (BAGHERI, 2021) ^[4].

Russia’s Economic Objectives in the South Caucasus

The South Caucasus holds significant economic importance for Russia. Among the countries in the region, Azerbaijan is particularly notable, as it was a major supplier of oil to the former Soviet Union (Cristescu, 2020) ^[7]. From an economic perspective, Russia’s economic interest in the region can be examined from following perspectives:

1. Integration of Russian oil infrastructure with the region: Russia’s oil infrastructure and interests are closely linked to the South Caucasus, making the region strategically significant. Russia aims to exploit oil from the South Caucasus resources primarily for its own benefit.
2. Economic organizations: Russia aims to integrate South Caucasus countries economic organizations led by Russia such as Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), where Armenia is a member, to foster economic dependence and political alignment.
3. Foreign companies: If other international actors or companies seek to access the region’s oil, Russia strives to ensure it has a role or share in such ventures.
4. Role of oil in Russia’s South Caucasus strategy: Russia seeks to control or at least influence the routes through which oil is exported from the South Caucasus to other parts of the world (Ahmadiyan, 2010) ^[2].
5. Presence of foreign actors in exploration and extraction: Foreign involvement—particularly in Azerbaijan—affects Russia’s economic and strategic interests. A portion of Azerbaijan’s oil reserves lies along the Caspian Sea coast, and Russia is especially sensitive to Western companies’ participation in extraction through bilateral agreements between Azerbaijan and these firms.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has continuously sought to utilize the South Caucasus region in much the same way as it did during the Soviet era. Aware of the steadily rising global prices of oil, as global oil prices

continue to rise, Russia is increasingly motivated to strengthen its influence over the South Caucasus in order to enhance its leverage in the international energy market; therefore, Russia recognizes the strategic and economic value of maintaining influence over the region’s energy resources. Consequently, Russia is making every possible effort to assert control over this region. By doing so, it seeks to limit the influence of the United States and the West (BAGHERI, 2021) ^[4].

Given the diverse oil and gas reserves among the countries of the South Caucasus, Russia has adopted a differentiated policy toward each state based on their respective energy capacities. Azerbaijan, which possesses significant oil and gas resources, is of particular interest to Russia (Hlosek, 2006) ^[10]. Moscow seeks to ensure that Azerbaijani oil and gas are transported to international markets via Russian-controlled routes. Armenia, on the other hand, lacks such energy resources. As a result, Russia’s strategy focuses on keeping Armenia within its sphere of influence and discouraging it from moving closer to the West (Mostafa Ghaderi Hajat, Hamidreza Nosrati, 2010) ^[16].

Georgia has limited energy resources that are insufficient to meet its domestic needs, leading it to rely on energy imports from Russia. Thus, it can be concluded that this would enable Russia to use the energy factor as a strategic tool to exert political influence and control over the South Caucasus countries (Blank, 2023) ^[5].

Hydro politics of Russia in the South Caucasus

It should not be forgotten that any analysis of foreign policy of Russia in the South Caucasus cannot be analyzed without addressing the role of the Black and Caspian Seas (the only maritime route that enable Russia to have access to international waters; therefore Russia does not want to lose) (Hlosek, 2006) ^[10]. From very early times, hydro politics and access to warm water have had a special place in Russia’s foreign policy, as Peter Said, “A ruler who only uses land force he has one hand, but who has a navy, has both.” Therefore, it is being considered Russia’s driving factor in building relations with regional and international partners, due to most of the year, Russia’s northern sea ports are frozen and it is hard to be used for commercial and military purposes, such condition cut much of its efficiency, so that’s why Russia focuses on accessing in southern (black and Caspian Sea) seaports (Lancaster, 2023) ^[14].

Russia’s Security Objectives in the South Caucasus

In addition to its economic interests, Russia also has significant security objectives in the South Caucasus. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia redefined its strategic perception of the region. According to this new definition, Russia considers the South Caucasus as vital to its survival and refers to it as part of its “Near Abroad.” Historically part of the Soviet sphere of influence, Russia now seeks to reassert its control over the region (Hashemi, 2005) ^[9].

The South Caucasus holds a central place in Russia’s foreign policy and is regarded as crucial to the unity and stability of the Russian Federation itself. The presence of NATO and the United States in the South Caucasus represents a major security concern for Russia. Consequently, Russia strives to counter and obstruct the expansion of Western, particularly American and NATO, military influence in the region (Poghosyan, 2017) ^[18].

Russia's Ethnic and Community Support in the South Caucasus

The South Caucasus is home to several ethnic communities with ties to Russia, including large Russian minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan, as well as indigenous groups in the North Caucasus with cultural and familial connections across the border. For a long time, Russia and the peoples of the South Caucasus lived under a single state framework. However, following the independence of the South Caucasus countries, this dynamic changed significantly. Russia is deeply concerned about individuals who belong to the Russian ethnic group, and in Russia's regional policy, support for the Russian ethnicity is considered an important factor (Blank, Stephen, 2022) ^[6]. Russia seeks to protect the rights of Russian minorities living in these countries. In this context, Russia positions itself to justify its political and sometimes military involvement in regional affairs. For example, Moscow supports separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions with pro-Russian ethnic populations in Georgia which helps Russia sustain a foothold in the area and limits Georgia's Western integration. Therefore, on the one hand, to strengthen its influence there and, on the other hand, to maintain control so that the residents of the South Caucasus do not unite with the inhabitants of the North Caucasus, which are considered autonomous republics of Russia (Šmíd, 2013) ^[20]. Russia also fears that if non-Russian ethnic groups residing in the South Caucasus establish very close relations with the ethnic groups of the North Caucasus, the North Caucasus republics which are currently regarded as autonomous republics of Russia, it could encourage the North Caucasus republics which are currently regarded as autonomous republics of Russia, to strive for independence (Blank, Stephen, 2022) ^[6].

Preventing United States Influence in the South Caucasus

For the United States, the South Caucasus region holds significant importance from several perspectives. Most importantly, it seeks to ensure that the extraction, export, and control of the region's oil and gas remain under its influence (Poghosyan, 2017) ^[18]. It aims to increase its comprehensive presence in the region, prevent the expansion of Russian and Iranian influence, and create an opportunity for the permanent U.S. military presence in the area. In addition, the United States intends to transport the region's oil and gas to other countries through routes that, on the one hand, exclude Russia, and on the other hand, reduce the European Union's dependence on Russian gas (Vaezi, 2010) ^[21]. In the region, Russia cannot tolerate the above-mentioned U.S. objectives. Russia considers the broad U.S. presence in the South Caucasus a fundamental obstacle to its own influence. Therefore, Russia seeks to prevent the expansion of U.S. influence in the region.

Obstacles to Russia's Objectives in the South Caucasus

One of the fundamental principles in Russia's foreign policy is to maintain its traditional monopoly over energy transit routes from the South Caucasus, a tool that Moscow could use at any moment against the West (John Lough, 2025) ^[12]. In contrast, U.S. energy security policies are based on diversifying energy sources and pipeline routes from the South Caucasus with the aim of excluding Russia. These policies are designed around the concern that Russia could again become an "energy empire" and a serious rival

capable of balancing power against the United States. This dynamic has led to geopolitical and geostrategic competition between Russia and the West, especially the United States, over influence in the region (Ahmadiyan, 2010) ^[2].

Russia faces several obstacles in achieving its goals in the South Caucasus. These challenges can generally be summarized as follows:

Firstly: The U.S. military presence in the South Caucasus aimed at containing Russia, especially following the events of September 11, 2001.

Secondly: Efforts by the United States and NATO countries to support the independence movements in Chechnya.

Thirdly: Strong nationalist movements and anti-Russian sentiment (viewing Russian actions as aggression and occupation, particularly regarding the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) in Georgia and Azerbaijan hinder Moscow's soft power and political leverage.

Fourthly: The formation and strengthening of anti-Russian regional alliances by the United States and neighboring countries, such as the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM), established in 1997 by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, with Uzbekistan joining in 2001. Turkey and Lithuania serve as observer members of the organization (Affairs, 2020) ^[1]. The primary objectives of GUAM include (the promotion of democratic values, efforts toward stable and sustainable development, and the enhancement of international and regional security), the United States places great importance on GUAM, as one of the key organizations in the region, that fosters the development of its allied states and strengthens their mutual relations. Notably, Russia is not a member of GUAM, which further increases the strategic value of the organization for the United States in its regional policy (Affairs, 2020) ^[1].

Fifthly: Pressures on Russia to Withdraw its forces from the Caucasus.

Sixthly: Neglect of ethnic Russians and the Russian language within the region.

Seventhly: Exclusion of Russia from key oil and gas pipeline projects, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, in which Russia holds no stake.

Eighthly: Border disputes between Russia and Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Ninthly: Intelligence operations conducted by the United States and NATO within the South Caucasus.

Russia's rapprochement with the South Caucasus countries is not something the United States can tolerate. Nevertheless, Russia, based on a special cooperation triangle (Russia, Iran and Armenia), seeks to bring itself closer to the South Caucasus states (John Lough, 2025) ^[12]. However, the United States has not remained silent in this regard; in addition to creating the aforementioned obstacles for Russia, it has also established its own special triangle (United States, Israel and Azerbaijan), which can be considered not only a threat to Russia's influence in the region but also a major obstacle to the expansion of relations between Iran and the Caucasus countries (Ali Abbas Ahmadi & Sakshi Venkatraman, 2025) ^[3].

Although for more than a century Russia has played the role of a power broker and peace mediator, acting as the main facilitator to end the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus, it has not succeeded (Cristescu, 2020) ^[7]. On Friday, August 17, 2015, at the White House, an agreement aimed at ending

decades of conflict was signed as the two (Azerbaijan and Armenia) countries were hosted by President Donald Trump (Kintsurashvili, 2025) ^[13]. The peace agreement not only put an end to the ongoing conflict but also opened a new chapter in establishing diplomatic relations between them. On Friday, Trump said, "Armenia and Azerbaijan have promised to stop all fighting forever, as well as open up travel, business, and diplomatic relations." The agreement also reopened some key transport routes (known as the Trump Route) between the two countries, which will automatically increase U.S. influence in the region (Ali Abbas Ahmadi & Sakshi Venkatraman, 2025) ^[3].

Conclusion

Until 1991, the countries of the South Caucasus were considered Soviet republics under the control of the Soviet Union. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, these states gained their independence, and emerged as a key arena for geopolitical competition, with Russia striving to maintain its influence amid the growing presence of the United States and European powers. Russia's strategic goals in the region have been shaped by a combination of political, economic, and security considerations, with energy resources and pipeline routes playing a central role in its policies. By pursuing a realist approach, Moscow has sought to preserve its traditional dominance, counter Western expansion, and reassert itself as a major power in Eurasia. Therefore, the South Caucasus holds a significant importance for Russia. On one hand, they share a common border with Russia, which provides Moscow with strategic access to the Middle East and European countries. On the other hand, these countries share ethnic, religious, and racial ties with Russia. Moscow sought to act as the primary mediator in regional conflicts while fostering economic dependence on Russian-led organizations, ensuring the South Caucasus remained within its strategic sphere of influence.

The analysis demonstrates that beyond its economic significance, the South Caucasus region also holds considerable military and security importance for Russia. By controlling the politics of this region, Russia can strengthen its economy and regional security. However, in pursuing these objectives, Russia faces certain obstacles, the most important of which is the significant attention the United States has given to this region, drawing the focus of these countries toward itself. Currently, the South Caucasus states are seeking to expand their relations with the West and with the United States in order to reduce Russian influence in the future and completely free the region from Moscow's dominance. The United States, for its part, seeks to limit Russian influence in the region and aims to use its military presence in the region as a means to bring both Russia and Iran under control. At the same time, the competition over the South Caucasus with Western powers has introduced new dynamics, compelling Russia to adapt its policies to global interests.

Recommendations

The consolidation of Russia's position in the South Caucasus could be more effectively achieved through the promotion of economic cooperation, infrastructural development, and trade integration. A focus on economic interdependence would reduce the securitization of Russian policy and contribute to greater stability in the region.

Looking to the growing involvement of the U.S., European Union, Turkey, and Iran Russia should continue to engage with countries of the South Caucasus through a balanced approach that ensures regional stability, rather than zero-sum policy, to safeguard its strategic interests. Favoring inclusive multilateral cooperation over unilateral actions can reduce tensions with Western powers.

Given the central role of energy in the region, Russia should strengthen its energy diplomacy, including infrastructure investments and strategic partnerships, to maintain influence over Caspian energy resources and transportation corridors. Russia's long-term objectives would be better sustained by active institutionalized participation in regional conflict resolution and security frameworks (e.g., OSCE, CIS mechanisms), which can help Russia prevent escalation of local disputes and promote long-term stability in the South Caucasus.

Considering the dynamics of the geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus, Russia should adopt a flexible foreign policy, to manage Western engagement, particularly U.S. and EU projects, through diplomatic and economic tools, aiming to maintain a strategic equilibrium without direct confrontation.

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